

*The*  
**DEATH**  
*of the*

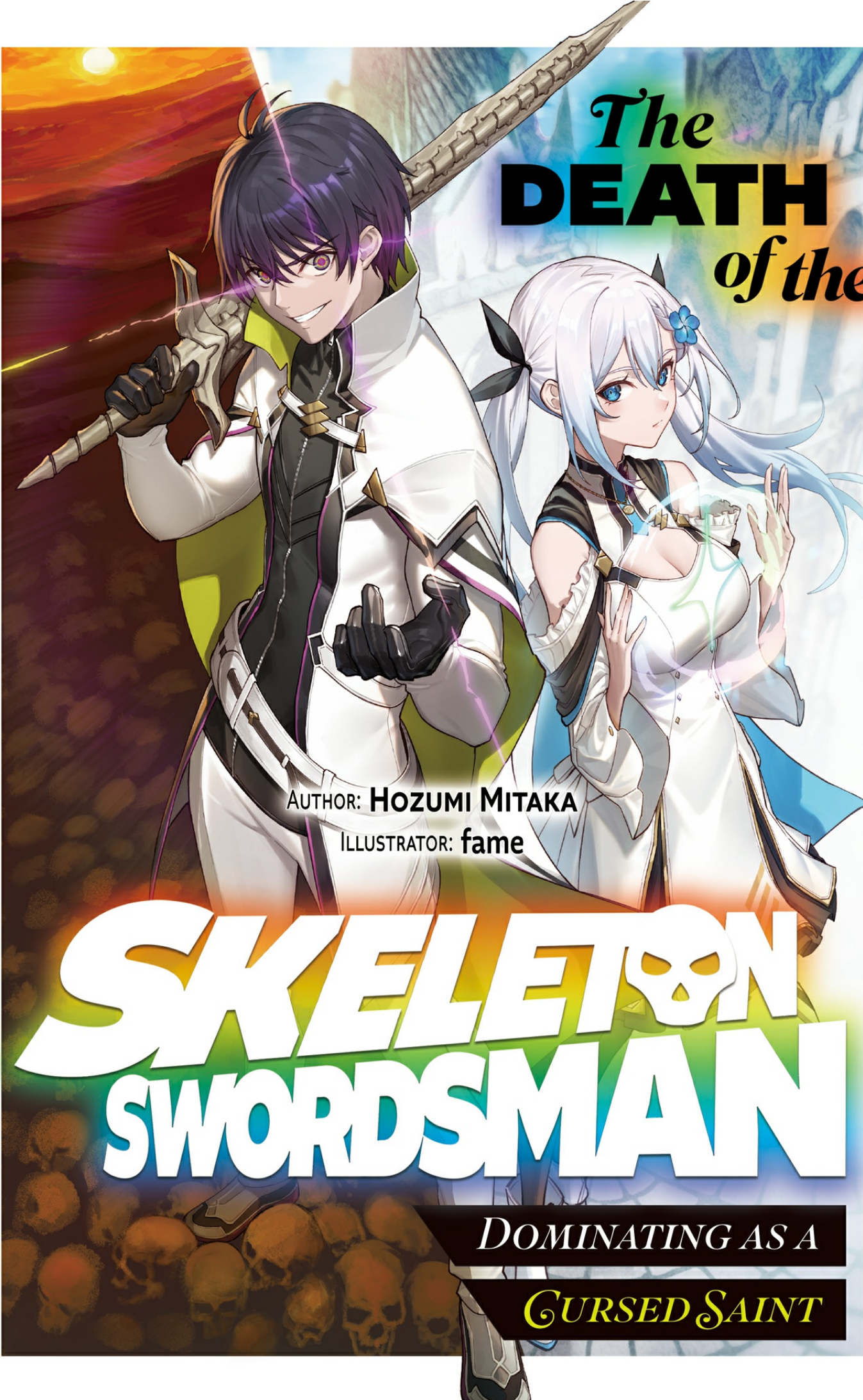
AUTHOR: **HOZUMI MITAKA**

ILLUSTRATOR: **fame**

# **SKELETON SWORDSMAN**

*DOMINATING AS A  
CURSED SAINT*





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"We  
promised  
to fight  
together!"

Fleet-Footed  
Holy Knight  
**Cuphea**

"I pray that you  
reach adulthood  
in your next life."

Eternal Witch's  
Descendant  
**Astrantia**

"Sorry, but  
you've all  
gotta die. It's  
my duty as a  
holy knight."

Skeleton  
Sword Saint  
**Albert**





Shy Holy  
Woman  
**Linum**

“Y-You  
don’t have  
to go quite  
that far.”

“Got it. No  
more talking  
about your  
bookshelves.”

Loyal Holy  
Knight  
**Myra**

“I have but  
one request for  
all you new  
students—  
don’t get in  
my way.”

Holy Woman  
of Black  
**Orlaya**



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# Prologue

## A Blessing and a Curse

Do you know why the undead bite people? Because it's a blessing. I'm undead myself, so I would know.



The story began back when I was alive.

"Oh, did I wake you, Holy Knight? I'm sorry."

As the warmth surrounding me faded away, I opened my eyes to see the one who had just apologized to me. She was a red-haired woman who had just gotten out of bed and placed her feet on the ground. When we'd first met the night before, she'd told me her name was Tory. She was thin, but that was primarily due to the village's food situation rather than deliberate self-restraint.

Sitting up, I finally responded. "It's fine."

"Do you want breakfast?"

"Sorry for making you do all this for me."

"What are you talking about? If anything, I'm not doing enough."

The night before, there had still been some distance between us after I'd saved her from a monster. But it seemed that overnight, she'd relaxed a bit and lowered her guard as she was starting to open up. My squad had been dispatched to a village when I'd heard about a young woman who hadn't returned from gathering herbs, so I'd rushed ahead on my own and managed to rescue her before it was too late.

After I'd linked back up with my squad, we had confirmed that the monster was dead and secured the area. Then I'd had an idea. Tory had entered the forest alone because of the village's need for food, and what kind of man ignored a woman in need? I had to get them something decent to eat. The



problem was, the meat from the monster that had attacked Tory wasn't really edible.

There existed a mysterious power in this world called mana. Certain individuals could utilize mana to perform miraculous techniques known as magic, and creatures that had been heavily affected by mana were known as monsters and couldn't be eaten. So I had gone to hunt an ordinary bear instead. And to ensure she wasn't the target of the other villagers' envy, I'd decided to treat the entire village.

In the end, the villagers had gotten full stomachs and the peace of mind knowing they didn't have to worry about monsters anymore. Everything had worked out perfectly. On top of that, I had earned the gratitude of the beautiful Tory and spent the night with her. I seemed to recall my commander complaining to me about something, but I had a habit of letting anything a man said go in one ear and out the other. So, oh well. It probably wasn't important.

"Holy Knight?" Tory looked at me quizzically.

I had been so lost in thought that I'd completely forgotten to respond. "All right, guess I'll take you up on that." I scanned the room as I answered, and found my clothes on the floor. As I was getting dressed, I noticed a mirror in Tory's room and saw my own sleepy face reflected in it—black hair, black eyes, a toned body, but with only a minimal amount of muscle. I was covered from head to toe in countless scars, but that wasn't really unusual. Most had come from missions and training, but a good number of them dated back to when I'd been young too.

As an orphan, I had no clue what my parents looked like, but according to the old man who'd raised me in the slums, my mom had been a prostitute, and the guy who had gotten her pregnant had been a foreign traveler. My hair color, the color of my eyes, and even my unimpressive physique were probably all from my dad. Because of that, I'd had my fair share of issues growing up. Bigger kids always beat the crap out of me in fights. If my dad had been tall, handsome, blond-haired, and blue-eyed, life probably would've been easier, but it is what it is. No use worrying about what you don't have. You've just gotta make do with what you've got.



Once I finished getting dressed, I realized I couldn't find my weapon. "Hey, have you seen my sword?" I called out to Tory, who had gone to the kitchen.

"Your sword? I don't know... Oh, did you check under the bed?"

"Under the bed..." I checked, and sure enough, there it was. I couldn't remember how it got there. It was possible I'd just thrown it on the floor and one of us had accidentally kicked it under the bed, but who could say. Some people care a lot about their swords, but I wasn't one of them. To me, they were just tools.

Obsessing over a sword would just make you get pointlessly attached to it. As far as I was concerned, it didn't matter if you had the world's most powerful holy sword. If the job requires it, you should be ready to discard it at all times. There was once a guy who had gotten so bent out of shape in the middle of battle because the sword his father had given him broke that he'd ended up getting himself killed. If he hadn't obsessed over it so much, he might still be alive. Maintenance was important, but at the end of the day, you had to remember that tool was a tool. That was the trick to surviving as a holy knight—a soldier who mainly dealt in slaying monsters. I picked up my sword, hung it at my hip, and headed to the living room.

"Come to think of it, what happened to the other holy knights?" Tory asked.

"Uh, I think I heard they were staying at the village chief's place."

Be they monsters, undead, golems, or dragons, those known as holy knights were dispatched to deal with anything out of the ordinary. I was one of them. Our five-person squad, including my adoptive father and adoptive brother, had taken on this mission the day before. I vaguely remembered my brother saying something about staying at the village chief's house before Tory had invited me to stay with her, but I didn't really care.

"Is there anything I can help with?" I called out to Tory from behind her. Being a holy knight meant camping outside was a pretty regular occurrence, so I knew a thing or two about chopping, cooking, and boiling.

"It's fine, it's fine." She turned me down. Tory probably felt like she still hadn't repaid the favor.



I didn't have an issue watching her cook, but I was kinda bored.

"No problem. Guess I'll do some practice swings outside."

"You're going to train after just dealing with that huge bear last night? Holy knights really are something."

"It's not that impressive. Just a force of habit." Even though I knew she was praising me, I couldn't help but feel like she was saying, "I'm amazed you're still breathing." I had a hard time accepting such a thing at face value, and a melancholic look crept onto my face unintentionally. Thankfully, she didn't see it.

"By the way, how old are you?"

"Hmm, eighteen." To be honest, I had no idea how old I really was, so I kinda winged it.

"You're so young!" Tory cried out in surprise. She'd told me that she was twenty the day before, so she was probably in awe that someone younger than her could kill a bear. She was so stunned her hands froze and she momentarily stopped cooking.

I just responded with a fake laugh and exited through the wooden door.

It wasn't a bad morning. I had successfully completed a mission the day before and had woken up next to a beautiful woman. Actually, it was a good morning. The village was fairly small and about two days' distance on horseback from the city where I lived. As I was doing my practice swings, my mind drifted back to my favorite horse.

Given I had spent all that time with Tory, said horse was probably in a foul mood. Slightly panicked, I hurried off to go see my partner. There were villagers working the fields and children running around first thing in the morning. I gave them all half-hearted greetings and made my way to the village chief's house.

When I reached the stable, I found my partner tied up with the rest of my squadmates' horses. I recognized the beautiful black coat instantly. "Hey, partner." I greeted her with a smile, but all I received in return was a snort as she turned away from me. Yes, my beloved horse Viola was a mare.



Her animal instincts must've clued her in that I'd spent the night with a woman, and now she was jealous. This was a frequent thing between us, so I wasn't discouraged. I approached Viola and started to gently pet her head. "No need to sulk. You're the only partner for me."

Viola snorted and swung her tail as though to say, "I'm not so sure about that!" Viola's speed, stamina, and courage made her the perfect horse, and she had the pride to match. The holy knights had purchased her because she possessed those traits, but nobody had been able to ride her. That was until I'd managed to win her over.

"I mean it. C'mon, why don't you let me brush your coat?" She was reluctant, but eventually she accepted my earnest request. I spent a while gently brushing her hair.

As I did, I couldn't help but get lost in my thoughts a bit. I was in a pretty good spot now. The one thing I'd wanted ever since I was a kid was now in my possession: strength. If you were strong, you didn't have to be subjected to the violence of others. You could avoid being kicked for getting in the way, getting punched for being annoying, being made fun of for coughing up blood, and having your food or possessions stolen. You didn't have to let others trample over you. When you were strong, nothing could be taken from you.

The old man who'd raised me had been beaten up just for being "filthy." He'd suffered for a few days before finally passing away. His very life had been taken from him just because he was weak. One day before he passed, he had told me something that stuck with me: "A man's happiness is bedding a good woman and protecting the ones he loves." Love wasn't something I really understood, but I wanted to find out for myself what he'd meant by happiness.

My worthless upbringing had afforded me one thing and one thing only—perseverance. The violence I'd endured growing up had given me a knack for training. It didn't matter how hard it was, I could withstand it. It was nothing compared to what I'd been through. The more someone trained, the stronger they became. How wonderful a thing it was.

When my adoptive father took me in, I had been behind the bars of a jail cell. The ones who had beaten up the old man were "filthy" as well, so by their logic,

it was okay for me to resort to violence against them as well. And resort to violence I had. But apparently I had gone a little too far, so the guards had gotten involved. A holy knight had come to visit me in jail, and long story short, he'd ended up taking me under his wing and raising me. He'd told me that "strength is for protecting others," much like the old man had said. Though it'd sounded a lot more preachy when the holy knight said it.

Who even were these "others"? That question had kept running through my head at the time, but now I knew. Strength was for saving the women of the world. The hardship I'd experienced living in a dump was all gone now. I was strong. And I'd get even stronger. I'd use that strength to defeat my enemies and to save any women in harm's way. Then I'd use that opportunity to get intimately acquainted with them. That had to be the happiness the old man had been talking about. To be honest, it was actually pretty fulfilling. Though I did still feel like something was missing on occasion.



After that, I enjoyed Tory's cooking. It had taken a surprisingly long time to cheer Viola up, so my training would have to wait until I returned home.

"You're leaving already?" Tory asked as she cleaned up the table.

"Yeah. Monsters are popping up all over the place, so I'm sure we'll get another mission soon."

"You must fight those awful creatures a lot."

"Sure do." Even an ordinary bear was more than capable of killing a person. Once one transformed into a monster, normal blades and average skills were pretty much useless against their fur. Of course, my skills were far from average, so it was no problem for me.

"Aren't you afraid? I was so scared I couldn't even move yesterday..."

I had seen plenty of people freeze up when faced with imminent danger. "Well, it's a holy knight's job to exterminate anything that brings harm to the people." I chose to dodge the question by using a phrase I'd heard repeated over and over. I'd never once been afraid. The only two things that were ever on my mind were how to survive and how to bring down the enemy.



“Heh heh.” Tory chuckled to herself.

“What’s so funny?”

“That’s a nice line, but it didn’t sound like your heart was in it.”

“Sorry, I’m not much of an actor.” I shrugged.

Tory approached me and put her hand on my cheek. “Still, you were dashing yesterday, Holy Knight.”

I placed my hand over hers and smiled. “I’m honored you think so.” I met Tory’s passionate gaze head-on. We brought our faces closer together, and then —

“Hey! Al!”

—I heard a voice yelling from outside the house. It was a very familiar deep voice. And of course it was familiar, considering it was the voice of my squad’s commander.

“I know you’re in there! It’s time to go! Get out here already! I have a lecture prepared for the trip back, so I hope you’re ready!”

Sighing deeply, I slowly got out of my chair. “Sorry, sounds like I gotta go.” I grabbed the sword I had left leaning against the wall while I ate, and I hung it from the sword belt at my hip.

“See you later, Holy Knight.”

“I’ll come running the moment any monsters show up again.”

“I can rest easy knowing that.”

I never did meet Tory again. Because that was the day I died.



“I can’t believe you!”

I spent the trip back to town on Viola’s back, getting scolded by the middle-aged man who was our squad’s commander. He had blond hair and blue eyes, but his scary face made him anything but inviting. His muscular body was a clear display of his training. That man’s name was Dan. He was both my adoptive father and my commanding officer.

“Calm down, father. Brother did a great thing yesterday.” The one trying to calm Dan was his actual son, Robert. He was my adoptive brother. He had inherited his father’s hair and eye color, but he got his mother’s gentle looks, making for an irritatingly handsome young man. On top of that, he was kind, righteous, smart, strong, and extremely popular. The guy even genuinely respected me. He was flawless in every sense of the word—the ideal holy knight. It pissed me off.

“Robert! You’re too soft on Al!” Even now, he was incurring dad’s wrath by defending me.

“I respect brother as a holy knight. His accomplishments are just as impressive as the Twelve Knights in the capital.” The Twelve Knights were a select group of some of the best holy knights from all over the country, but the exact criteria by which they were chosen was unknown. They were probably just chosen based on the whims of the bigwigs who ran things in the capital.

Among them were people like the “Invincible Shield,” a knight said to have never once been injured, and the “Thunder Blade,” a knight who specialized in both swordsmanship and lightning magic. It was clear they weren’t chosen solely for strength alone. When it came to the total number of monsters slain, I was every bit their equal.

“I’m aware of that! But Robert, he’s been nominated as a candidate for the Twelve Knights three times now, and all three times he wasn’t chosen! There’s an issue here, and it isn’t his accomplishments!”

“S-Still, father, there are great heroes who aren’t part of the Twelve Knights. Like the Dragon Knight of Luzarigue, the Giant of Trislimigante, the Archangel of Navael, and the World Tree’s Spirit King! If you just think of brother as being like one of them, then...”

“They were all approached to join the Twelve Knights, and they all turned it down. Their cases are nothing like Albert’s.”

*Don’t lose your resolve, Robert! Keep defending your brother! He’s gonna chew my ear off if you don’t.*

“Do you know what makes me the most angry about this situation? Their reasoning for not choosing him! All three times it was because they had issues



with his conduct! A knight should have a certain level of dignity, and that's something he sorely lacks!"

He sure did know how to shout. Even the birds were scattering from the trees because he scared the crap out of them. The other two members of our squad were used to this, and they were doing everything in their power to blend into the background to avoid getting dragged into the argument.

"We're not even real knights; we're holy knights. You're the weird one for demanding dignity from a glorified exterminator." Holy knights were different from the knights who provided military strength to influential people. Rather than serving one master, we served the people. A knight's job was to protect his lord, while a holy knight's job was to eliminate any potential threats to the people—usually monsters.

Originally, some knights did kill monsters—which was why people who killed monsters started calling themselves knights in the first place—but truth be told, most modern holy knights were just ordinary civilians. Some legitimate knights and nobles did involve themselves in the activities of holy knights, but they were few and far between. As a result, the dignity Dan spoke of really didn't apply.

"It's our duty to follow the will of the original holy knight who served the kingdom, and to do that we must selflessly protect the people!" He just went on and on.

"It's not like I tell them they have to let me sleep with them just because I saved them. They just do it to repay the favor. If that's so wrong, then what about you taking up their offer to spend the night in the village? Isn't that also against your idea of selflessness? If accepting rewards goes against what it means to be a knight, shouldn't you have camped outside?"

"Enough of your nitpicking!" Dan was getting even more pissed off.

Well, I was sure he just wanted his adopted son to get his act together—to be like his perfect son Robert. But that just wasn't possible. My love for women was a part of who I was, and that wasn't going anywhere. Plus, I saw zero reason to keep up appearances around men. The only thing I wanted—and the only thing that made me useful to Dan—was my skill with a sword.

It was all I had, and I was glad I had it. Without it, I never would have found a way to repay the man who had taken me in and raised me when I'd thought I was destined to forever rot away in the slums. Him finding some reason to lecture me after a mission was just our thing. Thanks to my talent for tuning out uninteresting conversations, it wasn't a big deal. I said my piece, and then the rest of Dan's rambling went in one ear and out the other.

"At any rate, brother." Robert was used to it too, and he brought his horse up next to mine during Dan's lecture so he could speak to me.

"What is it, golden boy?" I retorted.

"Father is proud of you too, you know."

"He is? I was just kidding anyway."

"Well, I was serious."

"That's why I can't stand you."

Robert gave a sparkling smile in response to my glare. He really pissed me off. At some point, this sort of back-and-forth had become our routine.

"So, what do you want?"

"I was just thinking that your swordsmanship is getting really good."

"Flattery will get you nowhere." I took a copper coin out of my pocket and tossed it to Robert, who caught it with a smile.

"It got me a copper coin."

"That's all the pocket change I have. You're not getting anything else."

Robert suddenly grew serious, his smile disappearing from his face. "Are you really not interested in the Twelve Knights? Like father said, they embody the holy knights. It's the highest position you can get."

"No interest whatsoever."

"Brother." Robert shot me a look that said, "Enough joking around."

"The capital is the safest place in the country. Besides the Twelve Knights, it's the headquarters of the entire holy knight order. They have more fighting power than they know what to do with. You know, they say the Twelve Knights



barely even do any fighting.” Even with all those important people around, if there was no work to be done, I’d probably die of boredom.

“That’s true. But the Twelve Knights are the ones they dispatch when a monster the holy knights can’t handle appears. That means you would get the right to fight some of the strongest monsters out there.”

“It’s more like an obligation than a right.”

“Doesn’t fighting all the weak monsters around here bore you?”

“That monster bear I fought yesterday was all right.”

“Just ‘all right’? Besides the talk of recent undead outbreaks, there hasn’t been much else of note. You’re going to lose your touch at this rate.”

“What’s with you? Trying to drive your beloved brother out of town?”

“I just—”

“Robert. I don’t care about the Twelve Knights. Got it?” This time I made sure he understood I was ending the conversation.

Robert looked sad and mumbled one final thing. “I hope you don’t regret your decision.”

Robert was right. Fighting the monsters on holy knight missions wouldn’t be enough to keep my skills sharp. But if I wanted to get stronger, I would need to put myself in a position to fight stronger opponents. He seemed to think that something was holding me back and keeping me in the city. I did want strength, obviously. I wanted enough strength so that nobody could take anything from me ever again and to protect the women of the world.

Still, I couldn’t ignore the debt I owed to the holy knight who’d bothered to raise an orphan from the slums. Until I had paid that back, I couldn’t go anywhere. Robert probably saw right through that and was telling me to go. He was telling me I had already paid back Dan and his family. But Robert didn’t get it.

That debt couldn’t be repaid just by being a holy knight for a few years. In the end, I was never able to repay it at all. The nightmare was just about to begin. It started when we got back to town.



After another two-day trip, we arrived back at the walled-off city that was our home just past noon. As we passed through the gates, the citizens who noticed our return cheered. Most of their attention was directed at my father, Dan.

“Oh! Sir Dan has returned!”

“The city’s hero!”

“He must have taken down more monsters.”

“It’s all thanks to the holy knights that we can live in peace.”

“Ha ha ha! Thank you, everyone, but this time it was my son who took down the monster!” Dan rode his horse over to me and patted my shoulder.

“So it was Sir Al!”

“They say his skill with the blade has already surpassed Sir Dan’s.”

“Sir Dan must be happy to have two outstanding sons.” The townspeople just said whatever came to mind.

“Oh, Sir Al, huh...”

“I’m sure he’s strong, but...”

“To be honest, compared to Sir Robert, he’s...”

“That black hair is a little...” Some of the women whispered rude things about me, but I wasn’t going to let that discourage me. Even with a bad first impression, all I needed to do was earn enough favor to turn things around.

“Pay them no mind, brother.” Robert tried to reassure me.

“Pay what no mind? I’m busy thinking of ways to make them fall for me. Quit interrupting. Don’t even look at me with that sparkling smile. It hurts my eyes.”

“A-Aha ha ha. That’s just like you, brother.” Robert laughed awkwardly for some reason, but I didn’t really care.

As I was talking with my annoying brother, another set of voices reached my ears.

“Who’s he calling his son? Al’s an orphan.”



“Leave it to the town’s hero to take in a filthy brat from the slums.”

“Wish he’d bother helping us if he has the time to play saint of the trash heap.”

Dan was known as the city’s hero because that was a title he’d earned. But that didn’t mean everyone mindlessly worshipped him. People who made snide remarks like that were everywhere—probably even in Heaven. There was no point in letting it get to you. I just made sure to remember their faces...just in case I needed to pay them a visit later.

“Gah!”

But that didn’t end up being necessary. A series of pebbles hit them in their faces so hard that they got knocked out before they realized what was going on. My hands were clean, this time. My trusty steed Viola, on the other hand, had skillfully kicked a bunch of rocks at them as she walked.

“Ha ha ha! Thanks, Viola.” Viola snorted back at me as though to say, “What an annoying bunch!” I patted her head in an attempt to calm her down.

“You know, Viola might have been a human in her past life.” Robert’s statement caught me off guard.

“Whatever she is, she’s the best partner I could ask for.”

Suddenly, Viola came to a stop.

A few steps ahead, Dan’s horse had also stopped moving. “Huh?”

From the looks of it, a girl around five years old had jumped into the middle of the road. That was a close one. She might’ve just been a kid, but a girl’s life was still precious. Give her another fifteen years and she’d grow into a fine lady. By that same token, an old woman had once been a beautiful flower. They were all to be treasured. The lives that didn’t matter belonged to annoying brats and dirty old guys—in other words, men.

“What are her parents doing?” I wondered aloud. “Shouldn’t they be worried about a kid her age wandering around alone?” Even at her age, she should know better than to run into the middle of a busy street. Thankfully we were used to that kind of thing, so nothing bad happened.

Dan got down off his horse and picked up the little girl. “Are you all right, young lady? It’s dangerous to run in front of horses.” It was hard for me to get a good look at her with Dan in the way, but I got a glimpse of the girl’s face. Something was off. It made me feel uneasy. And then it happened.

The girl started struggling in Dan’s arms, jumped at him, and then bit him. Although Dan immediately pulled her off, blood was dripping from his ear. “My goodness, what a rambunctious young lady.”

“Hey! Something’s wrong with that girl!” I shouted.

“Father! You’re bleeding!” Robert sounded worried.

The girl’s eyes were devoid of life, yet her mouth was moving vigorously. She was trying to bite at Dan, paying no mind to the drool dripping from her mouth. She swung her arms wildly, almost like she was trying to scratch at the sky. It was readily apparent that she wasn’t okay.

“I-I’m so sorry!” A man who seemed to be the girl’s father rushed over.

“It’s quite all right. Kids will be kids. Though I must ask, is she well? She seems to be—”

Before Dan could even finish speaking, the man interrupted him and snatched up the girl. “I’ll make sure she behaves!” Leaving only those words, he hurried off like he was fleeing the scene of a crime.

“Hey! Take your daughter to the church if you really care about her!” I called out after the man, but he didn’t even bother acknowledging if he heard me. Even in her father’s arms, the girl was still flailing just as she had been before. “Tch...” I clicked my tongue. “You should head to the church too, old man.” I spoke to Dan from horseback as Robert dismounted to inspect his wound.

“No need to worry, you two. It’s only a minor injury.”

“I’ll make the report. Get to the church already. And I’m not just saying that because I’m worried about the wound.” Churches were home to holy women, people who were capable of using healing magic. Ordinary magic required an innate talent and few people were capable of using it, but the magic used by holy women was granted through faith in a certain god. That meant there were quite a few of them. I’d heard that holy women were even capable of exorcising

curses—not healing them, just exorcising.

“What, you think I’m cursed? You think that girl was an undead or something? She felt warm when I picked her up, and her body wasn’t rotting away. Besides, holy women only have magic capable of returning the undead to death, not curing someone who’s been bitten. If that girl really was an undead, I’m already done for. Ha ha.” Dan brushed me off.

*Undead.* Also known as walking dead or living dead—it all meant the same thing. The cause was unknown, but there were cases where someone who should’ve been dead would come back to life. However, it wasn’t a complete resurrection. They hungered for the blood of the living, even as their flesh rotted and their bones shattered.

All it took was a bite from an undead for someone to become an undead themselves. It was currently treated as a type of curse. Only holy women could break the curse by using magic to turn the living dead back into the unliving dead. Which was to say that there was no way of saving the infected. There was no stopping the infection. That being the case—

“If it’s too late for you, then go get examined just to be sure. Then let the holy women put you down. I’m gonna have to do it myself if you go on a rampage. I’m serious—don’t put this off.” I glared at Dan, and finally he resignedly nodded his head.

“All right, all right. You volunteering for extra work tells me you’re serious about this. I’ll head to the church right now. You guys handle the rest.”

The remaining two members of our squad nodded. Dan got back on his horse and bid us farewell. The surrounding townspeople looked at us nervously, but I didn’t have time for them.

“Brother, is something bothering you?” Robert got back on his horse, a concerned look on his face.

Maybe I was overreacting. It wasn’t very likely that the girl was cursed. Like Dan had said, I’d never heard of an undead that wasn’t cold and rotting. Common sense would dictate that the girl was alive. But I had a bad feeling I just couldn’t shake. “Something was off about that girl.”



“Off how?”

“There was a warm feeling to her. The sort of feeling a kind and loving person would have.” I didn’t claim to be able to read minds or anything, but that was the sort of vibe I got from her. It was like how you could tell that someone was an asshole hiding behind a fake smile or that someone wanted to be alone. Anyone could pick up on that kind of thing. I just happened to be a little more attuned to it than most.

“Isn’t that a good thing? I’m sure her parents love her dearly.”

“But on top of biting our old man, she kept struggling even when her dad picked her up.”

“Now that you mention it, that is unusual.”

“That whole time, the feeling I got from her was just as warm as ever.”

Robert’s face changed like he had just heard a ghost story. “What are you getting at? Are you saying she bites people out of love? She causes a scene in public out of affection?”

“Exactly. It’s weird.”

“B-But brother, we’ve fought undead in the past and you’ve never said anything like this. Not even once.”

“Yeah, I never felt any trace of humanity from the undead we fought before.” It was possible the girl wasn’t an undead but something else entirely. If she was just some freaky human lashing out as an expression of love, then she could still be saved. The problem was—

“Worst-case scenario, she might be afflicted by some sort of illness or curse—so that’s why you sent father to the church!”

I gave a slight nod in response. If it was just a disease or a curse besides undeath, the church could potentially cure it. “The girl’s dad took off though. Hopefully I’m just getting worked up over nothing.”

“Actually, brother, I think I should look for that girl.” Robert had a serious look on his face.

“You sure? This is all just a gut feeling, y’know?”

“I trust your gut. That gut has saved us on countless missions. Besides, I think this may be related to the spike in undead outbreak cases lately.”

“You really are a brother I can be proud of.”

“As are you.”

“I wasn’t being serious, by the way.”

“I was.”

“I can’t stand you.”

We decided to split up, but before I left, I said one last thing. “And Robert.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t get bitten. That’s the one thing you need to look out for. No matter what.”

“Right. Will you be heading to the church after making the report? We can meet back up there.”

“Sure.” What a pain in the ass the whole situation had become. All because my old man just had to get careless around a kid. The other two holy knights and I headed to the city’s holy knight office. After leaving Viola in the stable, I filled out some really annoying paperwork. I made an excuse for why Dan couldn’t come himself, then got back on Viola and returned to the streets.

My destination was the church. It was a stone building with a sort of sacred atmosphere about it. It wasn’t my first time there, so I knew where everything was. I took Viola to the stable, then went inside.

When I opened the door, I saw a holy woman collapse onto the wooden floor. Everyone around her was frozen, as though they were in disbelief as to what had just happened. And then I saw Dan, blood dripping from his mouth. Blood gushed from the collapsed woman’s neck as she lay there motionless.

No. I knew the moment I saw it happen. The woman on the ground was dead.

“What the hell are you doing, old man? Attacking a woman is a little more than just an accident. If Milna sees this, a divorce will be the last of your worries—she’ll kill you.” Milna was Dan’s wife, Robert’s mother, and my adoptive

mother. She was probably at home, waiting for us all to get back. “Hurry up and apologize to the holy woman. Beg for her forgiveness. I don’t wanna see you ruin your marriage, so this’ll be our secret.”

Suddenly, I completely understood how that girl’s father felt when he had run away. The truth is right before your eyes, but you just want to escape and avoid reality. Who would’ve thought I was that type of person too?

“Say something, old man.”

Dan’s eyes were vacant. His teeth were chattering. Yet I got that same warm feeling from him. It was like a parent embracing his beloved child. How could he attack someone with that feeling in his heart? I didn’t understand it at all. Then, Dan started walking towards me. He was going to bite me.

He had attacked one of the very people he had sworn to protect. Should I arrest him? No, given the incident with the girl, I had to assume my hunch was correct. This was a new type of undead. Which meant that as a holy knight, it was my duty to exterminate it. I had to kill him.

*Pull out your sword. Swing.* An enemy was just a few steps away. An enemy who looked just like Dan. I had to kill it.

“Ah, damn it!” I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t even place my hand on the handle of my sword. Dan bit right into my neck. Alongside the pain of my flesh being ripped off, I could feel something flowing into me.



By the way, do you know why the undead bite people? Because it’s a blessing. I’m undead myself, so I would know.



# Chapter 1

## Killing a Hero and Three Hundred Years

Eight years earlier, I had been thrown in a cell. I had used the same logic as the guys who'd killed the old man who'd looked after me, and I beat them to a pulp. That had ended up causing more of a commotion than I'd anticipated and resulted in me getting arrested.

Then, for some reason, a holy knight had come to visit me. From what I was told later, he had apparently taken an interest in me after hearing about a ten-year-old kid beating up three adults.

"I see, so you were getting revenge for that old man. That's a lot of effort to put in on someone else's behalf." The expression on the face of the holy knight leaning over in a chair across from me wasn't that of sympathy—it was something more complex.

"Didja not hear me, asshole? I said I just wanted to beat the shit outta them usin' their own logic. They can't complain if it's their own words being used against 'em." You should be able to back up the logic you force onto others. There was nothing wrong with that. Whatever happened as a result of the rules you believed in, you just had to accept it.

"I understand your feelings. Anyone would hate the people who took a loved one from them. Wanting to kill them is a natural emotion."

"The hell is love? You lost me. Also, I didn't kill them." I had just done to them what they had done to the old man. That was all.

"Hmm..." The man placed his hand on his chin and after a moment of uncertainty, he said, "All right, I've decided! Become my son."

"Huh?" I gave him a blank stare.

"That tiny body of yours has the strength to take down three grown men! It'd be a shame to let that go to waste. You'll make a fine holy knight one day!"

“Oh, I get it. You’re messed up in the head.” Nothing he said made a lick of sense. Nobody who came to see a dirty criminal in prison and then invited them to their home could be sane.

“Would you prefer to remain here in a cell? If so, I think that would make you the one who’s messed up in the head.”

“If you’re serious, then get me outta here.” If the bizarre man meant what he said, then that’d be a big help to me. All I had to do was run away after he got me out.

After that, the man really did get me out of prison. However, my escape was a complete failure. I let myself get persuaded by him and went to his house, where he welcomed me into his family alongside his beautiful wife and capable son.

At first, I was just confused and assumed he must have had some sort of ulterior motive, but if they were gonna give me food, clothes, and a place to sleep, I figured I might as well make use of it. Then before I knew it, I had gotten attached to them. As my heart calmed, I decided to pursue what the old man had called a “man’s happiness” in my own way.

It wasn’t a bad feeling. I wasn’t interested in being a holy knight, but the training made me stronger, and that part I did like. Swordplay was surprisingly complex, and it would take a few years before I could ever beat Dan. But I did. That’s right, I became stronger than Dan.

Which meant I could force my way out and run away. But by then, I didn’t really feel like doing that anymore. At some point, I really had become part of his family, and I felt like I had to repay that debt. It wasn’t like me at all. Just stupid attachment.

I had seen my comrades lose their lives because of it countless times, but it turns out people don’t learn from example quite that easily. There was an undead right before my eyes and I couldn’t kill him. I ended up getting bitten, all because I owed him a debt—because he was my adoptive father. It really was stupid.



“Ahh...” Huh? What had I been thinking about? I looked up and saw the ceiling of the church. Oh, right. This was where I had received the blessing.

I slowly stood up. My body felt kinda funny, but after stumbling a few steps I got the hang of it. The way I moved my body seemed to have changed. Oh well, it wasn't a big deal. Looking around, I found that the church was empty.

The holy woman Dan had bitten before me had probably already transformed and was now out distributing the blessing. There should've been several nasty magic users in the church capable of eliminating the transformed, but there was no sign of any of them. They had likely already been turned into allies.

What a wonderful feeling it was. I hadn't known the feeling for very long, but this had to be what “happiness” really meant! I no longer breathed. My blood didn't circulate through my body. And yet I wasn't dead. It was more of an evolution than a transformation.

Suddenly, it all made sense. The undead went around kissing people in order to share the blessing within them. But humans were ignorant as to how wonderful the blessing truly was and tried to fight or run away, and when one wasn't yet used to their new body, it felt oddly light and the senses were imprecise. These factors tended to result in biting. Then there was the difficulty of administering the blessing.

Now that I had turned, I understood that a deep connection was necessary for a deep injection. In the case of a kiss, it would need to be an intense, passionate kiss like one between lovers. That was difficult to accomplish when the other party was fleeing in terror, therefore a deep bite was the alternative.

Wait, no. Even as an undead, I was still me. I didn't want to kiss any men. I'd have to make do with a different part of the body.

So this was why I had felt such a warm feeling from the girl and Dan as they were biting people! We were blessed! We had obtained eternal life! Eating, sleeping, breathing, and even shitting were things of the past. We had been freed from the shackles of our flesh and had obtained a means of allowing our souls to live on forever.

It didn't matter if my flesh rotted away! So long as I had this blessing, I could continue on as bones and nothing more! Ah, how wonderful it was! Truly

wonderful! I had to share this blessing with everyone!

That being the case, there was no reason for me to remain in a place with nobody around. I left the church and found that it was still light outside. There was probably a bit of time left before the evening. I heard the groans of my brethren coming from the city and the shrieks of the pitiful lambs who had not yet experienced the blessing.

There was no need to grieve. No need to flee. It was a blessing. We had conquered the fear of death. We had conquered the need to part from those we were close to. Wasn't that what everyone wanted deep down?

After a brief scan of the area, I determined that there was no role for me to play. I'd have to go somewhere else. Then I remembered something—my beloved horse. Surely this blessing could be shared with animals as well. I could feel it. Then Viola would be able to remain my partner until the end of time.

I set off for the stable at once. Her beautiful black coat and flesh would all rot away in a few months' time, but it didn't matter. Viola was Viola. I couldn't stop my teeth from chattering with excitement—I wanted to share the blessing with her as soon as possible.

I approached Viola, bringing my face close to hers. And then she headbutted me. I went flying backwards, my head slamming against the ground. "Ow! What the hell are you doing, Viola?!" Holding my head, I immediately stood back up and yelled at her.

She snorted at me as if to say, "That's my line!" Then I realized something. All my thoughts had been hijacked by some disgusting feeling until just a moment ago.

A feeling of revulsion crawled all the way up to my chest, turning into nausea that I then vomited all over the ground. "Bleeeh..."

What the hell had I been thinking until a second ago? Blessing? This load of garbage? No way. Viola's blow seemed to have brought me back to my senses, but who knew when I'd get swallowed up by the blessing again.

There was a lingering voice in my head clamoring for the blessing even now. Did the curse have some sort of mind-control magic built into it? I'd heard of



magic that could drive people and animals berserk, so it was probably something like that. It made people overjoyed to have been turned into the undead so they'd willingly spread their blessing to others.

I had never gotten this feeling from normal undead, so it was likely that somebody had tampered with the curse. I didn't even need to ask if that was really possible. I was experiencing it for myself.

It was bullshit. I had plenty to be mad about, but the thing that pissed me off the most was that "happiness" had been forced onto me. Happiness was something I was supposed to find for myself, not something given to me by some unknown mage.

"Sorry about that, Viola." I stood up and slowly approached her. When I reached out, she let me touch her head without avoiding me this time. "As I'm sure you can tell, I'm already dead. Everyone in this city is probably gonna be dead soon. Animals too, I bet." Viola silently listened. "To be honest, I should let you escape on your own. Thing is, there's something I've gotta do."

I had to stop Dan. At this very moment, he was out there killing the people he had sworn to protect, convinced he had to share eternal life with them. He was doing this while completely unaware that his thoughts had been usurped by the curse.

"I'll kill all the other undead. We're still holy knights, after all." If possible, I wanted to kill the person responsible for this curse too, but now wasn't the time. I needed to do what I should have done earlier.

Because I hadn't cut him down on the spot, Dan had gone on to commit even greater sins. I had to put a stop to it. "Are you with me, partner?"

Viola gave me a snort that said, "Of course!"

"Thanks."

Leading Viola out of the stable, I mounted her and drew my sword. "Just run at a decent pace. That's all I need." If what I was about to do was remembered in the future, I wondered if I'd be regarded as a murderer or a holy knight carrying out his duty. Not that it really mattered either way.

As I rode out of the church grounds, I saw what could only be described as a

depiction of Hell. Screams could be heard all over. Blood was splattered along the walls as far as I could see, the road filled with bodies. All of them had likely been bitten somewhere and would soon turn.

“Dear! Dear!” My gaze drawn in by her voice, I saw a woman rushing over to a man who had collapsed. I assumed she was his wife, given how she was referring to him. The man’s clothes were stained with blood and it looked like he had been bitten on the shoulder. His face was rapidly losing its color.

Though he had no chance of survival, the woman continued shaking and calling out to him. I steered Viola towards her and got the woman’s attention. “Ma’am, you need to get out of here.”

“That uniform! You’re a holy knight! Thank goodness! Please, save my husband!” The woman looked at me, her eyes full of hope. Normally that wouldn’t have bothered me, but given the circumstances...

“I can’t. Your husband is dead.” All I could do was tell her the truth. Nonetheless, the woman’s face grew red with anger.

“Y-You don’t know that!”

“More importantly, ma’am, you need to run. Get on my horse and... Shit.” Her husband’s transformation seemed to have completed as we were talking. Once a man who appeared to be in his thirties, he was now an undead, groaning as he stood back up.

“Ah, dear! Thank goodness!” There was nothing good about it, but despite her husband’s deathly pale face, the woman’s relief won out over her concern. His teeth chattering and his eyes vacant, he grabbed the woman. “Y-You’ll be okay, dear, we just need to get you to a doctor! No, if we go to a holy woman, then...” The nearest church was already deserted thanks to Dan, and doctors couldn’t cure the dead. It was clear the woman was in denial about the reality before her eyes, though I could hardly blame her.

I brought my horse over to the man and kicked him in the head.

“Wha—?! How could you?!”

I ignored the woman. “Hey. You back to normal?” Viola’s headbutt had worked for me, so I was hoping I could knock some sense into him.

Unfortunately, his only reply was the same old groan. He was every bit as dead as before. “Figures that wouldn’t do it.”

If there really was a mastermind behind the chaos enveloping the city, it was ridiculous to think they would’ve overlooked something as simple as blunt trauma undoing their mind-control curse. I had to assume there was something at play beyond a simple blow to the head that had brought me back to my senses.

The man stood back up and, undeterred, rushed at the woman once again. But this time I lopped his head clean off. Blood doesn’t circulate for the undead, so there was no gush of red when it went flying. His head rolled along the ground and his body fell over, the blood that remained inside dribbling out.

“Ma’am, your husband turned into an undead. He was trying to turn you as well. Take a look around and I’m sure you’ll understand. Now, you need to get —”

“M-Murderer!” The woman’s face was full of shock, hatred, and fear, all directed at me.

“Whatever, that’s fine too. Anyway, you need to run.” I offered her a ride on my horse once again, but the woman just looked at me like I was crazy and ran off. She wouldn’t last long, but I wasn’t about to chase after her and protect her. All I could do now was to kill any undead I crossed paths with and help any living person get out of this mess.

“Gotta say, her spiteful glare kinda hurt.”

Viola neighed in response to my comment. It sounded to me like she was saying, “There’s no use worrying about it.”

“You’re always on my side. Thanks, partner.”

I petted her head, then looked down at the man’s body in the street. “Sorry for kicking you in front of your wife.” There was probably a more civil way I could have handled the situation, though who knows if that would’ve been the right call. At least I had stopped the corpse in front of me from killing anybody. But maybe that was a self-serving way of looking at it. Shaking my head and clearing my thoughts, I raced through the city atop Viola.



Heads rained from the sky. As Viola raced by, my sword cleanly severed undead heads from their bodies, sending them dancing through the air. Blood trickled from their necks, and by the time the bodies hit the ground, we were already gone.

The fruit seller my adoptive mother often bought from—sometimes I would go with her, and he'd flash me a smile and throw in an extra. The skewered-meat salesman—his rambling was always annoying, but I frequently visited his cart because of how cheap and delicious his food was. The blacksmith—he was a man of few words and very hard to read, but he was good at his job if nothing else. The bar owner—he and Dan went way back, so we always went to his bar after wrapping up a holy knight mission. His ale was cheap and perfect for getting drunk.

Every acquaintance I cut down caused a memory to flash in my mind, whether I liked it or not. It was as though my blade was cleaving through the memories themselves. But that was no reason for me to stop.





Friend or stranger, I beheaded every undead that I saw. Between Viola's speed and my skill with a sword, it was light work. Since they had already turned, they were legitimate targets for holy knight extermination. Saving them was impossible. Man or woman, they all had to die. I wasn't ignorant to that fact, but killing women would never feel easy. I steeled myself and at least tried to end their blessing as painlessly as possible.

"Still, I gotta say..." The infection was spreading too quickly. Even if I assumed the girl hadn't been the first to be infected and the spread had already been underway, the situation was still hopeless. The time from infection to transformation was too short. The way things were going, the city wouldn't even last a day.

Although I killed all the undead in the vicinity of any survivors I came across, I couldn't keep protecting them. I had lopped off hundreds of heads since leaving the church, yet the chaos showed no signs of improving. The undead were increasing faster than I could kill them. If any guards or holy knights were still around, they were likely closing the city gates and sealing all the undead inside.

No, I couldn't bet on that, and I didn't have time to close all four gates myself. I had to find Dan before he escaped the city. Searching for someone who could be anywhere in the world was significantly more difficult than searching for them within the confines of a city. The only saving grace, if it could even be called that, was that the undead retained some of their former self—that meant I could assume Dan wouldn't immediately leave the city. He loved this place. He wouldn't move on until everyone here had been given the blessing.

"What's that?" Off in the distance, the undead were congregating. It was like spectators crowding around a circus. They were surrounding something. "There's gotta be a survivor." Whoever it was, they had to possess some skill to avoid being blessed by the dozens of undead surrounding them.

I looked towards the center of the group of undead and saw a familiar face atop a horse—my adoptive brother, Robert. Our mother Milna was on the back of the horse behind him. He had managed to rescue her despite the circumstances. "Ha, leave it my perfect little brother." As for his older brother, he hadn't been able to kill his father and had been turned into an undead,

resulting in this whole mess.

“Viola.” The moment I called her name, my trusty steed charged straight towards the enemy. Viola was smart. She knew I was already dead, she knew what the undead were, and she knew what would happen if she got bit. But despite all that, she stuck with me. “You really are the best partner I could ask for.”

Viola was moving so fast the faces of all the undead were a blur. Then she made a sharp left. Bracing myself with my right leg so I didn’t go flying, I let the inertia do the work for me. My arm lashed out like a whip, and we carved a semicircle out of the group of undead, sending heads twirling through the air, cleaving approximately three attractive young men in half and, unfortunately, killing several women in the process.

Of course, they were already dead, but that didn’t make me feel any better. Each time I killed one, it felt like some invisible mud-like substance was building up inside me.

The pieces from the undead I dismembered slammed into the others, causing a chain reaction and knocking them over. It didn’t take long for a decent number of them to be completely focused on me. No, it was probably Viola they were after. Either way, my brother would recognize the opportunity. “Now!”

“Brother?! R-Right!”

I stopped for a few seconds, cutting down any undead that got in the way. Robert soon arrived, and Viola raced after him once he passed.

“Al! Thank goodness you’re okay!” Milna probably hadn’t fully grasped what was going on, but she sounded genuinely relieved. As was to be expected of Robert’s mother, she was a beautiful woman with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Now, how was I going to explain things to her? “Hey, Milna. I wouldn’t exactly say I’m okay.”

“A-Al?” Milna looked worried.

Robert, on the other hand, immediately understood what I was getting at. “Brother, is that wound what I think it is?”

“Yeah. I’ve been bitten.” They were at a loss for words. As I cut down an undead that jumped out into the road at us, I shouted at Robert. “Hey, don’t get distracted! Who’s gonna protect Milna if you don’t do your part?”

Robert immediately composed himself and cleared the way. He really was Dan’s son.

“No... It can’t be!” Distraught, Milna covered her face with her hands.

I felt like crap making her suffer like that, but I needed to break the news to her one way or another. There was no way we would be able to escape together.

“I’m sorry, brother.” Robert suddenly apologized.

“Huh?”

“I should’ve gone to the church immediately!” According to Robert, while he had been searching for the girl, he came across her father who had turned. Understanding the severity of the situation, he cut the man down on the spot and immediately ran to protect Milna. Then they were planning on heading to the holy knight office.

Prioritizing your family during a crisis might disqualify you as a holy knight, but as a man, it was the right call. If it weren’t for his decisive action, Milna probably would’ve been pale in the face and attacking people right about now, like so many others were.

Yet Robert regretted the decision. He thought that once he had determined the girl was undead, he should’ve immediately gone to deal with Dan.

“Even if you had, it wouldn’t have changed much,” I said. Killing Dan back at the church would’ve just been a drop in the bucket given how far the curse had spread. This was no ordinary infection. Someone had deliberately altered the curse, and they had likely released it shortly before we’d returned. The city had already been in checkmate the moment we’d arrived.

“Hold on, Al. Wh-Who was it that bit you?” Milna’s voice was shaky. Leave it to a holy knight’s wife to be just as sharp as ever, even in this situation. I was impressed.

“Well, I just kinda let my guard down.”

“There’s only one person you would let your guard down around—”

My attempt to brush off her question had failed miserably. “Anyway, you two have a horse, so you should get out of here. I’ll try to handle things here.” They still thought that I had been bitten and was just waiting to turn—that I would soon become a zombie. It was easier to explain that way, so I was in no hurry to correct them.

“N-No! I’m not leaving my son behind! There might still be a way to save you!”

Obviously that wasn’t going to happen, but I appreciated the sentiment. She had treated some orphan her husband had picked up like her own son. I didn’t have a clue what love meant, but I was certain what she felt for me and the rest of her family was love. It was a shame I hadn’t lived long enough to discover those feelings myself.

“Thanks, Milna, but it’s too late. I may look like Al, but he’s already dead.”

“No...” Milna sobbed like a baby, tears streaming from her eyes.

“And somebody’s gotta do something about our old man.” As we were talking, the city gate came into view. “All right, Robert, take care of Milna. I’ll hunt you down and bite you if you don’t protect her.” I’d already become one, so it felt fitting to make an undead joke. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a hit. The path of comedy was treacherous indeed.

“Brother...” Robert looked at me, his irritatingly handsome face warped with sadness.

“What is it? You know I’m proud of you.”

“I-I’m proud of you too, brother...”

“Oh yeah? I was just kidding.”

“Well, I was serious.”

“That’s what I can’t stand about you, right to the very end.”

“Ha ha ha...” It was our regular routine, but Robert’s face was covered with



tears instead of his usual smile.

“Robert.”

“Yes, brother?”

“I wasn’t actually kidding.”

“I know. I always have.” Robert broke out into a childish grin, mucus and tears ruining his good looks. Even though it annoyed me so much I wanted to take back what I said, I didn’t want to spoil my final farewell by bad-mouthing him.

“Viola, you should go with them.”

Viola shook her head as though to say she refused, and I stroked the back of her neck.

“Please. I need you to protect my mom and brother.”

In response to my uncharacteristically serious plea, she finally nodded her head in agreement.

“Thanks.”

She hadn’t liked me much at first, but with enough perseverance and consistent compliments about her coat every time we crossed paths, she had gradually opened up to me. In the end, we had become partners second to none. Just before we passed through the gate, I got off Viola’s back.

“Good luck, brother!” Robert shouted.

“Al, please, put him to rest,” said Milna.

My back already to them, I raised an arm and waved goodbye. My gaze was focused on what was before me—townspeople forced to become walking corpses spreading their curse to all mankind with kindness in their hearts.

“Normally, I’d try to look cool and say, ‘The only way you’re getting through this gate is over my dead body,’ but I’m already dead.” Nobody laughed at my second undead joke either. “Don’t you think you guys are being a little cold? To be fair, I guess you don’t really have a choice.” If my second joke didn’t land, why not try a third? Alas, all I got in return was a few groans.

It was actually kinda frustrating. One day I’d make somebody laugh with one

of my undead jokes. But before that, I had something I needed to do. “Sorry to cut it short, but your eternity ends today.” I had to free them all from this nightmare.



When you became an undead, it wasn't possible to move your body intuitively like when you were alive. Rather than your brain giving the orders, it was more like your soul was controlling your body. Most undead were unable to adapt to that change, which was why they were stuck in the unenviable position of only being able to move sluggishly and groan. As for why they walked with their arms stuck out in front of them, that was because they were trying to embrace whomever they were chasing after. It all stemmed from their desire to spread the blessing.

A mass of undead—man and woman, adult and child—all came shambling towards me. Maybe they had decided that I hadn't been blessed enough. Whatever the reason, it was fine by me.

I swung my sword horizontally and lopped off the head of an undead right in front of me, then, using that force, I spun around and swung low, chopping off three pairs of legs. While the group in front of me was temporarily weakened, I focused on the undead to my sides.

I thrust my sword at an undead to my right, piercing straight through its head and into the skull of another undead behind it. With that single thrust, I took down two undead. Letting go of my sword, I turned to my left and roundhouse kicked a middle-aged man. He was blown backwards, sending him and several of the surrounding undead toppling to the ground.

Grabbing my sword out of the first undead's head, I swung at the undead in front of me who had now regrouped. I could sense the smell of blood and guts flying everywhere, but it didn't bother me. This wasn't due to my experience as a holy knight—my undead body was simply incapable of processing smells. I just knew they were there. I didn't even breathe anymore, so I couldn't expect to smell things like I had when I was alive.

By becoming undead, you were granted a limited form of immortality. In the sense that you could live forever without eating or drinking, it was the same,

but if your head was ever removed from your body, you would cease to be. Not only would that warm desire to spread the blessing to others disappear, but your consciousness itself would be lost. In other words, it was complete and total death.

*How does that even work? Your flesh rotting away is fine, but if you lose your head that's it?* It was like the soul was housed in the bones, and if they took too much damage they couldn't contain it anymore. But then again, cutting off an undead's arms and legs didn't kill them. Cut their body in half horizontally and they could keep going, but cut them in half vertically, through the head, and they died on the spot. Whatever the logic, it was clear that the head was important. That was all I needed to know.

The mountain of corpses—unmoving corpses, specifically—slowed the already sluggish advancing undead. They had to walk over their dead brethren filling the road. Utterly lacking in compassion, they walked over the bodies without hesitation. The stone paving was covered in blood, guts, and fat, making it as perilous and slippery as a mountain road in the middle of a rainstorm. Many of the undead stumbled before ever reaching me, allowing me to relieve them of their heads like I was an executioner.

I appreciated not having to hunt them down, but I had to wonder when it would all end. If the curse had spread through the entire city, then I would have to massacre the entire population single-handedly.

The horde grew ever larger. Swinging my sword from left to right, I found three undead perfectly lined up and sent their heads flying. However, there was another one that had been too short for my sword to strike. He was just a kid, probably no more than ten years old. And he was somebody I knew. His name was Bill, or maybe Billy—I couldn't quite remember. Dan had supported the city orphanage financially, and I'd poked my head in on occasion as well. He was one of the kids there. He knew I had been an orphan too, so his dream had been to become a holy knight just like me.

He had short hair, cheap clothes, and a scar from where one of his previous guardians had injured him. Those things were all still there, but the sparkling eyes he'd had when he'd talked about his dreams were gone. His vacant pupils were directed at me as he approached, fully intent on sinking his teeth into me.

For some reason, my sword froze for a second. But only for a second—the boy's head went flying a moment later. I was surprised at myself. I had already exterminated hundreds of undead. Why was I suddenly hesitating?

Because I had recognized the boy, I ended up looking at the faces of the other undead approaching me. There was Sheila, the florist's daughter. She had long, beige hair, tied up in a ponytail. There was always a smile on her face. I went to the flower shop pretty often just to see her, which is how I had ended up learning all the flowers they had. And then I killed her.

Estella was a prostitute. We'd gotten to know each other after I'd saved her from an abusive customer she'd gotten involved with. She had a foul mouth, but she'd told me she was only in that line of work to raise money for her sick mother. Then I killed her.

Carol was the poster girl for a used bookstore run by an old lady. She was the owner's granddaughter, but, to be frank, she wasn't really cut out for interacting with customers. After talking about some romance novels she loved, she had started opening up to me. She had even started smiling during our conversations recently. Then I killed her.

It felt like my sword had become twice as heavy, but I continued swinging nonetheless. *Why am I even doing this?* The thought suddenly crept into my mind. My life was much better now than it had ever been when I'd been a child, yet here I was, cutting up everything I'd worked for.

However, I soon shook my head. No, it was the opposite. I was simply carrying out my only remaining duty as a holy knight. It wasn't over yet. This wasn't enough to repay the debt I owed.

"Tch..." I clicked my tongue. After killing over a hundred undead in front of the gate, my sword finally broke in half. It was to be expected. A sword could only cut through flesh and bone so many times. As I forced my now half a sword through the necks of two undead, three more appeared to take their place and attempted to grapple me. Fortunately for me, they were all women. It was kinda like a harem.

"A shame we didn't do this when I was alive." I thrust my broken sword into one's mouth, twisted the neck of another, and grabbed the last one off my back

and threw her onto the ground before stomping on her head. Checking my arms and shoulders, I saw more bites. Then the blessing flowed into me.

We had obtained eternal life. Even after our flesh rotted away, we could continue living. So long as nobody killed us, we could enjoy life until the end of time. That blessing had to be shared with everyone. I knew that. I knew it well. And how was I to share it? By kissing! The deeper, the better. The harder, the better. That was the fastest way to make others like me.

*Damn it!* I hit myself on the head, reclaiming my sanity. Getting careless would allow the blessing to consume my entire being. My head was full of joy and affection, and I wanted to share the blessing so badly I couldn't stand it. This was no simple curse.

Somebody had analyzed the curse of undeath, altered it, and spread it. I still didn't know how I had regained my sanity. After the first man, I had tried hitting the undead on their heads several times, but it hadn't knocked any sense into them. I didn't think I was special or anything, but there was clearly more to it than just physical trauma to the head.

Although I killed another thirty or so undead after losing my sword, it was a struggle. I crushed necks, twisted heads off, and stomped skulls, but without a weapon, I had to get up close and personal to do any damage. As a result, I was bitten several times. The blessing poured into me.

Finally, I encountered an undead with a sword and saw the opportunity to turn things around. "Oh... They got you too, huh?" It was one of my squadmates who had accompanied me to Tory's village. We'd parted ways after visiting the holy knight office, and now he had become an undead as well.

I didn't care about his name and couldn't be bothered to remember it, but I did recall that he was married. I was pretty sure he'd said something about having a child on the way. What happened to the baby when a pregnant woman became an undead? If the baby came out as an undead, that meant it would never be able to grow up.

"And you're still happy despite that, aren't you?" All I received in response was a groan. It seemed like he couldn't even draw his sword anymore. I grabbed his wrist as he reached out for me, turned on the spot, then hurled him



over my shoulder and slammed him against the ground.

“Sorry, but I need this.” Taking his sword from his hip, I stabbed him in the throat. It was about time I had a sword again. I had been blessed so many times that I was now missing a lot of flesh.

After that, I killed another hundred or so undead before my sword broke again, but by that point I had already secured more. I even started wielding two swords at once. Dual-wielding was far from my forte and an expert would easily be able to take me down, but against mindless undead it was more than sufficient.

Even having lost my human sense of smell, I had no doubt the wind was carrying the stench of blood. The source of that bloody wind was the mountain of corpses made by a single holy knight. My tireless undead body had actually come in handy, and before I knew it, a considerable amount of time had passed.

The evening sun began to set over the ghastly spectacle. I wondered if Robert, Milna, and Viola had managed to get away. Since I was blocking the gate they had left from, it was unlikely any ordinary undead would catch up to them. Granted, the undead themselves weren’t exactly ordinary. Even reaching another city didn’t guarantee their safety.

“Ah, I thought it was you.” I heard a voice. An undead capable of speaking had appeared, and it was the man who had first bitten me—the city’s hero and my adoptive father, the holy knight Dan.

His face was pale, and he smiled cheerfully—a smile full of warmth. “I’m glad to see you’ve been blessed. And you’ve already regained your skill with the sword so soon after turning. You adapted to your evolution just as quickly as I’d expect. I’m proud to call you my son.”

Dan was clearly different from the other undead. He said I’d adapted to my evolution. To move as freely as I could, you needed a certain degree of proficiency. You had to get used to your new body. Once you did, you could speak and move as you had in life. That was my hypothesis, anyway, and Dan seemed to prove it.

“Just to be sure, your sanity hasn’t returned, has it?” I asked.

“Sanity? I’m as sane as can be, Al. You’re the one being driven by madness,” Dan said, drawing his sword. The other undead who’d had swords hadn’t wielded them. It must have been because they hadn’t adapted to their evolution. But Dan had. And like the other undead, he was biting people with kindness in his heart.

“That voice in your head talking about the blessing doesn’t belong to you. It’s something planted there by whoever created the curse. Wake up, would ya?”

“Ha ha ha, that’s what I should be saying, my foolish son. What do you think you’re doing laying your hands on the very people you’re supposed to protect?”

“And that’s what I should be saying, old man. Men, women, children—you’re turning everyone you can find into an undead. How many people do you think I’ve had to kill cleaning up after your mess?”

“You’re such a jokester, Al. Don’t worry, I’ll make up for your sins alongside you. When you return to your senses, we will bless the entire world as your atonement.” The pitying gaze he directed at me filled me with hopelessness.

“Forget it. I see now that you’re not the Dan I knew.”

“I’ve simply accepted the blessing. You know its joy. Why do you resist?”

A moment later, Dan’s sword came flying at my right shoulder. I braced one of my swords diagonally, directing his strike into the ground.

Although I had successfully redirected his blow, that brief impact was enough to shatter the sword in my left hand. Dan’s sword slammed into the ground, sending flesh and stone pavement flying. Tiny blade fragments scattered all around us. His strength and speed were clearly on a different level than when he had been alive. I stepped on the tip of his blade as it was lodged in the ground, then used the pommel of the sword in my right hand to bash him in the head.

“Come on, Al. Why are you holding back?”

It was a stupid thing to do and I knew it. I just hoped that maybe he would come back to his senses like I had. I completely wasted my opportunity to smash his skull in. Again with the stupid attachment! Sensing that Dan was about to raise his sword, I immediately retreated. However, all that surrounded

me were piles of corpses. There was nowhere to get a solid footing.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t mastered your new body yet, Al.” Dan was a wreck after his last blow. His skin was shredded, his muscles were torn, his blood vessels had burst, and blood was dripping out of him from all over.

“Y’know, it just wasn’t necessary against all the other undead.” When you were alive, you held back in a lot of ways to protect your body. Your brain would subconsciously put checks in place to prevent you from destroying yourself. Without those checks, even an ordinary housewife could beat a muscular knight to death. However, her arm would break and her muscles would tear as a result. You wouldn’t be able to live your life the next day, so most people limited their own strength.

Undead, on the other hand, didn’t need to worry about that. Even if we lost our fleshy armor, we would be able to continue on the next day without issue. Undead eventually became monsters known as skeletons, and there were cases of fallen knights who had become even stronger than they had been while alive after becoming skeletons—probably for that same reason. That said, seeing it in person was still a shock—and extremely unfortunate for me.

“I see. Given how strong you are, that makes sense. Very well then! As your father, allow me to guide you to greater heights! Forget the worthless limitations of the flesh!”

“Don’t start acting all fatherly now, asshole.”

He had harmed the people he was supposed to protect, destroyed the city he was supposed to protect, and brought ruin to the peace he was supposed to protect. Everything the undead before me did was an affront to Dan’s legacy, and it was my fault for letting it come to pass. If nothing else, I had to at least put an end to it here.

“You never did grow out of your rebellious phase.”

“For an undead, you’re a real pain in the ass, y’know that?”

Still, he had a point. Any hopes of trying to pass as a human were long gone. There was little reason to limit myself to the fighting style I had used while alive. An undead should act like an undead. And as an undead, I had to be strong.

*Think. What do you need to kill the foe in front of you?* I had to discard the sensibilities of the living and grasp the sensibilities of the dead. My goal was simple. And then it hit me.

“All right, I’ve got it.” I didn’t need to put strength into it. All I had to do was decide how I wanted to move and then move that way. I would abandon the limitations of the living, keeping in mind only the physical limits of the bones that supported me. I wouldn’t be able to move anymore if I let those break.

The rest was easy. I stepped forward, ignoring the mountain of corpses. Then I swung my sword, ignoring the limits of my arm’s rotation. Our previous exchange was all I needed to help predict his movements. That was all it took to close the difference in strength between us. I sliced through the asshole who had stolen a holy knight’s body, cutting him in half diagonally. There was nothing difficult about it.

I had closed the distance between us with a powerful step forward, then cut straight through his guard with an overwhelming swing. When there was a significant gap in strength, one-on-one duels were settled in an instant. Even as an undead, that fact remained true.

“My word...” His upper half fell backwards, his lower half following a split second later. His guts spilled out from both halves, and his blood formed a thick puddle.

“What, did you think you’d put up a better fight?” I had surpassed Dan in strength when we were alive. Once we both became accustomed to our undead forms, it only made sense that our difference in strength would remain the same.

“No, I always knew I’d lose.” Dan’s upper half gave me a dry smile.

“You—” I paused. It had finally hit me. Dan was giving off the same warmth as the other undead, but it wasn’t because he had been swallowed up by the blessing. It was simply because of the sense of duty Dan felt as a parent.

“You wouldn’t have been able to kill me if I hadn’t done this, would you?”

I fell to my knees by Dan’s side. “I don’t get it. If you returned to your senses, why didn’t you join me and try to do something about this situation?” Dan was

the perfect model of a holy knight. That was what he should've done. That was why I hadn't for a second even humored the idea that he might have been acting.

"I can't do what you do. There are limits to the adaptation. If you're a perfect hundred percent, then I'm somewhere between thirty and fifty. I keep drifting between sanity and madness." One moment Dan would return to being the man he had been in life, then the next he would be an undead intent on spreading the blessing. His moments of sanity were fleeting before being engulfed by the blessing again. It was torture. Every time he regained his sanity, he would suffer the torment of remembering how many people he had cursed.

"You probably haven't even thought about it, but once you become like this, you can't kill yourself." Dan gave a self-deprecating chuckle.

That meant it would never end unless somebody else killed you. And I was the only person capable of preventing Dan from committing any more sins. "Making your adopted son kill you is a pretty messed-up thing to do."

"No, Al. You're exterminating an undead. That's your duty as a holy knight." Dan was right. It was the duty I should have carried out from the start.

"What if I go crazy next? Who's gonna be the one to kill me?" I asked.

"You'll be fine."

"Don't give me that."

"I'm serious. This is just a hunch, but I think the greater the discrepancy is between your original personality and the happiness the curse imposes on you, the easier it is for you to stay sane."

True enough, I'd been consumed by the curse at first, but I'd felt something when Viola had headbutted me and brought me back to my senses: anger. The blow to the head had only momentarily stopped my thoughts that had been consumed by the curse, allowing that anger to slip through the cracks.

However, for most people, being undead erased their fear of losing their friends, family, and lovers. It erased their own fear of death. The happiness of being able to spend eternity with their loved ones was something to be celebrated. How many people could fight back when their resistance to

becoming undead was taken away and their souls were filled only with the sensation of having obtained immortality?

Not many, which was what had resulted in the current situation. Even a child who hadn't yet grasped the concept of death couldn't resist the idea of being together with their parents and playing with their friends forever. But in Dan's case, something had been off. He had the perfect wife and son, plus he was the city's hero. The only problem was his screwup of an adopted son. It was probably his desire to not leave that fool alone that had kept the curse ever so slightly at bay.

"You haven't found your own happiness yet, and you're not satisfied with what others tell you it is. That's why you haven't given in to the happiness the curse whispers in your ear."

"Don't act like you know how I feel." All I wanted was strength so nobody could take from me, and to get intimate with a bunch of women. Yet my own life and my adoptive father had been taken from me by some stupid curse. "Actually, I'm not gonna be able to hit on any women with this body, am I? Well, maybe I can make it work." The issue was what came after I had wooed them. My flesh was going to rot away, and I was sure it would reek. Nobody liked smelly people. And then what would happen when I was nothing but bones? The smell problem would be gone, but how was I supposed to get intimate with anyone as a skeleton?

"Heh heh... You never change." Dan gave a feeble smile.

"You get it, right? I'm a failure who's not cut out to be a holy knight. So..." *So stop looking at me like you've accepted your death.*

"No, you're a splendid holy knight. You may have a foul mouth, but everyone knows you don't discriminate between men and women when it comes to saving people. I know you're always thinking about how to repay your debt to Milna and me, and I know how much you cherish Robert."

"You can drop the embarrassing misconception about me. It's making me really uncomfortable."

"I can't apologize enough for what I've done to the people of this city and, most of all, to you." Dan was able to speak long after any ordinary person



would have died as an effect of the transformation. I wondered what would happen if I just left him like this. I knew from experience that undead didn't lose their immortality unless you cut off their heads. Which meant once again, I would have to...

"It's not your fault. It's my responsibility for not killing you right from the start."

"I'm sorry, Al. I turned my own son into an undead." Dan's face twisted with sadness in recognition of his sins.

"You bit me, but I cut you in half, so I'd say we're even. Keep crying about it, and I'll chop you up even more." Although it seemed a little forced, Dan actually laughed at my joke. Guess that counted as one of my undead jokes finally landing.

"Al."

"Yeah, I know." Undead from all over were headed this way. They probably wanted to bless me and then escape the city. Some of them had probably already gotten out through the other gates. But even if they had, my duty remained the same. "Oh, I should probably mention that Robert and Milna escaped safely."

"I know," Dan said with a voice so peaceful it was hard to believe he was on the verge of death.

"Huh?"

"I assumed as much given where you were fighting."

"Yeah, guess that makes sense." If your goal was to prevent the undead from escaping the city, there wasn't much use in only defending a single gate. He had probably known at first glance that I was fighting to prevent somebody from being pursued.

"Thank you, Al. For protecting the ones I love. And I think you know it deep down, but you protected the ones you love as well."

The footsteps of undead, their faces filled with happiness, got ever closer. "Haven't you said enough? If you're not gonna die, then get up and lend me a

hand.”

Dan looked up at the sky, but I doubted he could see anything anymore. “I’m glad I took you in that day.”

“And here you are, about to get killed by me as a result.” Pointless memories raced through my head: the day I was forcibly inducted into Dan’s family, Milna’s warm cooking, the adoptive brother who idolized me, and Dan’s rough hand that always patted my head after a day of training. Smiles, warmth, and a healthy amount of strict discipline—they were the ideal family. Most people probably would’ve wished for those days to continue forever. And although I wouldn’t admit it, I did too. But now it was all gone.

“No matter what anyone may say, you’re a splendid holy knight.”

Undead poured onto the main road from the side streets, making it almost look like there was a festival going on.

“Is that right?”

“So please. End it.” Even cut in half, Dan still hadn’t died. If I just left him and went to deal with the other undead, would his lower body reanimate and stand back up? And then would he be consumed by the blessing again? No matter how much I might’ve wanted to, I couldn’t let myself be that stupid.

I stood next to my father and readied my sword. “Later, dad.”

Dan’s vacant eyes opened wide, and he smiled happily. “Goodbye. I love you, s—”

I cut off his head before he could finish his final words. The last thing I wanted to feel was that I’d been forgiven. I didn’t look at his head as it rolled away.

I sighed deeply. “Man, this is the first time I’ve ever felt *this* shitty.” Cutting down the undead that approached me, I resumed construction of my mountain of corpses.

“I’ve made up my mind.” Until now, I had gone through life without any real goals. My work as a holy knight was just a way to repay Dan and utilize my strength. I was serious about my relationships with women, but if you asked me if I’d ever thought about a future with any of them, the answer would be no. I

had only ever thought about what was right in front of me.

For the first time ever, I had found what I could call a purpose. “I’m gonna find whoever’s behind this.” I would find the person responsible for this curse. My experience with the blessing had given me an idea as to what their goal was. They were probably after eternal life and were experimenting to see if undead could be used to obtain it.

“I’m gonna pay you back for everything you took from me.” I didn’t care if they succeeded in obtaining eternal life. In fact, I hoped they did. That would make it all the more satisfying when I extinguished that life with my own two hands.

I didn’t mind pathetically clinging to life to accomplish that goal. Luckily for me, perseverance was my specialty. It didn’t matter how many hundreds or thousands of years it would take. I would survive.



How much time had passed since then? Before I knew it, an unseen wall had blockaded the city, preventing me from leaving. My black hair and eyes, skin, and internal organs had all long since rotted away. I was nothing but bones—I had become a skeleton.

I had exterminated all the city’s undead long ago. There was no more danger. I felt bad leaving them exposed to the elements, so I had spent a long time digging graves for all of them. Yet that work too had been finished long ago. Now I spent my time doing nothing but training. I wanted to leave the city and hunt down the one responsible already.

The city itself had deteriorated as well, and though it retained vestiges of its past, it was considerably damaged. There was nothing remotely interesting to do. That being the case, I spent day after day searching for a way out of the invisible wall. While the wall cut me off from the rest of the world, I was still able to keep track of the time of day using the sunlight that passed through. Right now it was morning.

“Are you the Skeleton Sword Saint?” A girl walked through the invisible wall and asked me a question. To me, it was impenetrable, but for her, it might as well have not even been there. She was a living human.

She had silver hair and blue eyes and seemed to be in her midteens. Her hair was tied up by two long black ribbons, the knots tied such that they resembled a pair of butterfly wings. The left side of her bangs—her left, not mine—was braided. I wondered if she had done that herself. The air she gave off was that of noble birth, so it was possible she'd had a servant or someone else do it for her. At any rate, she was a young girl.

Well, people were considered adults at fifteen where I was from, so marriage at around that age wasn't unusual. Depending on the circumstances, there might only be a fine line between a girl and an adult woman, but suddenly treating somebody who had just been a kid as a grown woman solely because they had passed a certain age didn't sit right with me. That was why I never hit on women who were younger than me.

The moment that thought crossed my mind, I tilted my head in contemplation. *Wait. How many hundreds of years old am I now? Am I gonna be alone forever if I never hit on anyone younger than me?*

I took another look at the girl. Her face still had traces of immaturity, and her figure was dainty and slender with the exception of one specific part. Her chest alone packed an impressive punch. When viewed in isolation, she was undoubtedly a grown woman.

"Skeletons may not have eyes, but I can still tell where you're looking based on the direction your head is pointed," the girl said, glaring at me with reproachful eyes.

"Excuse me. I was just impressed."

"Since I've confirmed that you've retained your humanity, I'll let it slide." That meant determining whether I still had my sanity or not was important to her—so important that she was willing to overlook a little discourtesy.

"Sorry, it's been a long time since I saw a girl in the flesh. I'll keep it under control from now on. Can't let myself get turned on by little girls." Upon further inspection, she was definitely just a girl as far as I was concerned. Still, be it a little girl or an old grandma, a woman was a woman. A man had to be courteous.

"L-Little girl? I'm already fourteen years old!" So she wasn't even an adult yet.

Granted, that's the age when people hate being treated like children.

"All right, I got it. I'm Al. So, how old do I look to you?"

"You look like a skeleton."

I just laughed. She seemed like a straightforward girl. Even though I didn't have a clue who she was, she gave me no reason to believe she had any bad intentions. I'd actually had several visitors pass through the invisible wall, but they had all been clearly hostile, so I'd had no choice but to fight back. I hadn't killed them or anything—I'd just driven them back outside the wall.

This time the situation seemed a little different. She had called me a sword saint, but I had no idea what that meant. It wasn't something I had ever been called when I was alive. At least, I didn't think it was. I had been around for so long that my time alive was in the distant past. My memory of my life was gradually fading away, like a person slowly forgetting their childhood as they grow older. Whatever I could recall was hazy.

"Are you aware that you're a special kind of curion—excuse me, special kind of undead?" Another term I'd never heard before. It was probably a word that had been invented outside the wall.

"Well, I'm certainly not like the other corpses. And by corpses, I mean the walking variety."

Nodding her head, the girl continued. "Do you not hear the blessing inside your head?"

"Nah, I still hear it from time to time. It's kinda like a married couple arguing next door. One of those 'there they go again' type of things."

The girl seemed to immediately understand my example. That kinda surprised me given she looked like she had grown up in a mansion or something. Usually those types couldn't relate to the common folk.

"So you hear the blessing, but you're capable of ignoring it through sheer power of will."

"More or less. You guys in the outside world have the blessing all figured out, I see." It had only occurred to me later, but I probably should've explained

things to Robert. It might have come in handy against the undead. Unfortunately, there hadn't been any time for me to explain my situation back then.

“Yes. It's been 324 years since your city fell.”

“Damn. So that makes me...342, huh? Please don't treat me like an old man. I don't think I could take it.” I had stopped counting the years so long ago that having this knowledge was appreciated.

The girl ignored my joke and spoke with a serious look on her face. “Skeleton Sword Saint. Will you do me the honor of becoming my holy knight?”



# Chapter 2

## The Skeleton Swordsman and the Princess

The girl who had appeared out of nowhere asked me to be her holy knight. “Hmm...” I scratched my jaw with my bony hand. Itchiness was no longer a concern, but some of my human habits were hard to kick.

“I understand it’s very sudden. I’ll make sure to explain everything.”

“Y’know, you should really introduce yourself before you ask somebody for a favor.”

The girl suddenly gasped in realization. “Pardon me. My name is Astrantia.”

“All right. Now I’ve got a question for you, Tia.”

“Tia... No, that’s fine for now. What is it, Sir Al?”

“The holy knights I know don’t serve individuals. What do you mean by becoming your personal holy knight?”

The girl nodded her head, understanding my confusion. “Let me explain from the beginning.”

“Actually, never mind.” I got the feeling it was gonna take a while, so I cut her off.

“Excuse me?”

“People have passed through the invisible wall to come kill me a few times now, and it’s always a combination of a holy woman and a holy knight. I assume that means tag teams of holy women and holy knights go around killing undead these days. And you’re here to ask me to be your partner. That about sum it up?”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right.”

A three-hundred-year history lesson sounded like a pain, so I’d just thrown

out a guess that seemed likely. “Then I’ve got two questions and one request before I decide if I wanna cooperate with you or not.”

“Very well. Go ahead.”

I appreciated how quick on the uptake she was. “Question one: why me?”

“I want to send off all the undead remaining in the world the proper way.”

“You mean you want to kill them for good?”

“Yes. That’s why I require the assistance of a strong holy knight. And above all else, our goals must align. We’re aware that you saved the undead in this city all on your own. Of the twelve Forbidden Cities, only this one has carried out the total salvation of its undead.”

“Very interesting.” I nodded my head in approval—her answer had impressed me. She’d given me valuable insight. Despite having the authority to pass through the invisible wall, she was having difficulty finding a partner. It must have been quite a lot of difficulty if she was going through the trouble of recruiting an undead. In addition, there were eleven other cities surrounded by invisible walls like this one. Maybe some of the undead had escaped the city back then and spread the infection. That, or the same thing had happened all over the place, and they had somehow managed to seal the undead away in twelve places.

Either way, three hundred years had passed and all the undead still hadn’t been killed. Of the twelve locations, only this city had all its undead exterminated. “All right, the next question. How am I supposed to serve you when I’m nothing but bones?” This was the most important question of all. Considering her goal was to wipe them out, it was clear coexisting with the undead was off the table. Undead and skeletons were still presumably targets. Would me leaving the city cause any issues?

I could tell the girl was cautiously considering how to answer my question.

“All I can say is that there is a way.”

“Well, that’s good enough for me.” I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious, but it wasn’t a big deal. “Now for my request: I’ll protect you, so let me do the fighting and just stay out of the way.”

“But...” The girl seemed confused. From my past encounters with them, I had more or less figured out how modern holy women and holy knights fought. I didn’t mind protecting her, but I didn’t need her support.

“I don’t care what kind of undead they are. I’m putting an end to everything that curse started three hundred years ago. I assume that’s okay with you?” My memories from when I was alive felt like the distant past—three hundred years in the past to be exact—but *that* day had been seared into my mind. The day I had turned into an undead. I never lost sight of the goal I had decided then.

“Provided you don’t desire anything from me, I will use my power only to defend myself. Is that acceptable to you?” It seemed like that was the biggest concession she was willing to make. She wouldn’t promise to stay out, but she’d only lend me her power if I asked for it.

“Ha ha ha, that’s fine. You’ve got a deal.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing else you want to ask?” The girl seemed confused, almost like she had expected it to be more difficult.

“Nothing really comes to mind... Oh, actually there is one thing.”

“Certainly.” The girl nodded.

“The one responsible for all of this is still alive, right?” My question caused her eyes to burn with determination.

“Yes. The Eternal Witch still lives somewhere in the world,” the girl answered, so resolute she almost seemed like a different person. She was a witch who had lived for more than three hundred years. I could tell from Astrantia’s demeanor that she was after her too.

“Good.” Just as I was about to reaffirm our deal, I noticed she was staring at me with a serious look in her eyes.

“Before we finalize the contract, there’s something I must tell you.” The emotion in her eyes was just as intense as when she’d told me about the witch, but this time it seemed more like fear than determination. She took a deep breath, steeled herself, and then spoke. “I’m a blood relative of the Eternal Witch.”

So, she was a descendant of the one who'd caused this mess.

"Oh, all right." That was it? I had expected something more important.

After an awkward silence, Astrantia let out a shocked "Huh?"

She might've been a witch that spread the curse of undeath, but she was still human. All humans had relatives. But, for some reason, my lack of concern seemed to only confuse her more. "If that's all you've got to say, can we move on?"

"U-Um..."

"What?"

"I-I just expected you to attack me or something."

I tilted my head—or rather, my skull—in response. "Why? It's not like you're helping develop the curse, right? I don't have any reason to be mad at you."

"Being of the witch's bloodline is reason enough to resent me," Astrantia said with a pained expression on her face. It was an expression I knew well—somebody reminiscing on the struggles of their past.

"Oh, yeah, I guess there are people like that. I don't really care though. You don't have to worry."

She had probably been discriminated against for sharing the witch's blood. Apparently, people who would throw stones at others for things outside their control existed in any time period. Things that couldn't be improved made for appealing targets.

I had memories of the poor treatment I had gotten for growing up in the slums and not actually being related to Dan. The quick and easy solution was to just beat them to a pulp, but some people couldn't do that.

"B-But..."

"Look, being related to a piece of shit doesn't make you a piece of shit. Go back far enough and everyone's related to some criminal or scumbag. Does that mean everybody should just hate each other? The fault lies with the person who actually committed the crime. Their spouse, parents, kids, whatever—none of them have anything to do with it."

She went quiet again, and then I saw tears welling up in her eyes. Young girl or not, making a woman cry was a major blunder.

“Uh, Tia? Did I say something to upset you?” I would’ve tried to pat her on the back to console her, but my skeletal hand probably would’ve had the opposite effect.

“No, I’m sorry. I was just happy to hear that.”

Relieved, I put my hand on my sternum. Tears of joy were fine. “Oh, that’s good. If that’s all it takes, I’ll say it as many times as you want.”

Astrantia giggled as she wiped her eyes. “Heh heh. I appreciate that.” Now she had the sweet smile you’d expect from a girl her age on her face.

“You’re welcome.” If I had any skin left, I probably would’ve had a smile on my face too. Unfortunately, that wasn’t possible with my skeletal body.

“I-I apologize for that unsightly display,” Astrantia said, her cheeks flushing red.

“It was cute.”

“Cute? I-I’m not fond of jokes.”

I wasn’t joking, but correcting her would have only embarrassed her more. Although I did enjoy getting sidetracked when I was talking to women, it was time to get back to business. I stood before her and got down on one knee.

“Sir Al?” she asked hesitantly.

I planted my sword in the ground. “Lady Astrantia, I hereby swear to be your knight, to safeguard you from harm, and to slay all your enemies.” After I spoke, I looked up at her. “Hope that was all right. I’m just a commoner, so I don’t know much about etiquette.”

A soft smile was on her face. “That will do. I’m not in any position to doubt a proud holy knight’s pledge of loyalty. I’m honored to have your service, my knight.”

“Pleased to serve, Princess.” It was a little sloppy, but our oath was complete. I grabbed my sword and slowly stood back up.

“Princess...”

“Can’t really go around calling my master ‘Tia,’ can I? Formalities aren’t really my thing, so I think that’s a decent compromise. That said, when push comes to shove, I can get my act together.” Even I understood that there were certain times when you had to behave yourself.

“Very well.” The princess didn’t seem thrilled, but she accepted it. All the thoughts that were running through her mind were written all over her face. She really was a child. Actually, since she had ignored her emotions and answered with logic, maybe that made her an adult.

“Anyway, Princess. What are you gonna have your knight do?”

“There are currently twelve cities sealed off by barriers. They’re known as Forbidden Cities, and this city is one of them.”

“Yeah, I get the idea.” Barriers were a type of magic. They separated what was inside from the outside world and prevented certain things from passing through. In the case of the Forbidden Cities, it was likely that they were preventing the undead from escaping. However, only elite mages could cast such powerful magic, and even then, barriers were usually only used by royalty or nobility to protect their homes—it shouldn’t have been able to enclose an entire city.

“Even after three hundred years, total purification has yet to be achieved in any of the Forbidden Cities.”

“Which means all of them still have undead roaming around. In this city’s case, me.” It sounded like the city would remain sealed up until every last undead was killed. Astrantia had said that the undead of this city had obtained salvation, but as far as the rest of the world was concerned, the city wasn’t safe as long as I was still kicking. My presence meant the threat of infection remained, so it was understandable.

“Correct. And aside from you, I’ve never heard of any undead massacring their own kind.” Which meant the other Forbidden Cities were probably still crawling with them, and not just eleven other undead like me.

“So, you want me to accompany you to the other cities to exterminate all the

undead?”

“Eventually, yes. Every Forbidden City is home to a single unique undead, the likes of which even the Twelve Saints struggle to handle.”

“Am I right in assuming the Twelve Saints are duos with exceptional power?”

“Correct. I’m told they are the successors to a group once called the Twelve Knights.”

“Oh, I remember them. I’m pretty sure I was selected as a candidate to become one.” But in the end, I hadn’t been chosen. There had probably been a reason for that, but I couldn’t quite recall what it was. Well, it had happened three hundred years ago. That was to be expected.

“Yes, I’m aware you were an exceptional holy knight.”

Something about that didn’t sit right with me. “You’re aware? I can’t imagine the name of some random candidate three hundred years ago was recorded in the history books.”

“No, it’s... I’ll explain everything at a later date.” Astrantia mumbled and her voice trailed off, but she did seem apologetic.

“Well, whatever. So our goal is to kill the undead even the Twelve Saints struggle with and, in doing so, liberate all the Forbidden Cities?”

“Precisely.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll kill all twelve of those special undead.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

“How come?”

“Because you’re one of them.”

“Oh, right.” Whoops. Those turned by the witch’s curse couldn’t take their own lives.

“The special undead have all been given names. You’re known as the Skeleton Sword Saint.” Which meant there were eleven more of those weird nicknames. I wasn’t confident I would remember them all, though I was certain I’d never forget a woman’s name.



“Sword Saint, huh?” They’d given me a pretty impressive title.

“The area surrounding this city suffered surprisingly little damage compared to other infected zones. Some are aware that this was your doing.” That made me wonder what details had remained from that day. Had there been witness testimony from any survivors? Even if there had been, I seemed to recall the few survivors looking at me in horror as I killed their fellow townspeople, no questions asked. Though it wasn’t like undead could have answered any questions.

“And yet they still come to kill me.”

“My apologies. Even within my own family, opinions are split on how to deal with you.” Killing me would mean they could reclaim the city. It was no wonder there were people who just wanted the matter to be dealt with. Those who considered me a holy knight, like the princess, were probably in the minority.

“Anyway, I get the idea. First step is getting me outta here, yeah?”

“Yes. I’ll be restoring your human form.”

“Huh?”

“Then you will accompany me as my holy knight to an academy that specializes in training saints.”

“Academy?”

“I’m sure you will experience a lot of hardship at my side, but do try to put up with it.”

“Hey.”

“Oh, but there’s still another six months before the entrance exam, so in the meantime, I’ll teach you about the current state of the world.”

“...”

“Sir Al?”

My empty skull wasn’t capable of getting a headache, but I still pressed my hand against my forehead. “So, uh, I get that you’re gonna get me out of here, but what’s the deal with the academy stuff? You expect me to be a student?”

Wasn't the whole point of recruiting me to skip over all that crap and team up with somebody strong?

"Well, I called it an academy for training saints, but the student body is entirely composed of holy women."

"So holy knights are just there to accompany the holy women as guards?"

"Yes. But at the same time, saints are pairs of holy women and holy knights, so holy women without knights aren't permitted to take the entrance exam." Holy knights had to be strong, but even with the magic granted to them through their faith, holy women tended to be noncombatant healers. It sounded like an academy for rearing people capable of killing the undead in the Forbidden Cities.

Even three hundred years ago, holy women had possessed magic capable of killing undead...permanently. That explained why they were there. They probably had them link up with holy knights early on, so they could continue their activities after graduation uninterrupted.

"So we're starting from square one then? You want me to come with you because you need a holy knight to graduate from the academy and become a saint?"

"Exactly."

Only those with the qualifications to graduate from the academy were able to enter the Forbidden Cities. Which meant a holy knight couldn't enter unless they teamed up with a holy woman with said qualifications. I looked up at the sky as I realized my revenge was a ways off.

"U-Um, is there a problem?" Astrantia asked with a worried look on her face.

"Nah, it's nothing. Your wish is my command. I'm your knight now." It would probably take around three years to graduate from the academy. I had died over three hundred years ago—I could wait another three.

At any rate, it was decided that I would regain my human form and accompany Astrantia to the academy as her guard. They say you never know what might happen in life, but apparently you never know what might happen in death either.



After I made my contract with the princess, she went outside the barrier and later returned with several attendants in tow. They were wary of me, but they seemed to be here to carry luggage, not fight. Setting a large wooden box on the ground, they pulled out something wrapped in a fancy-looking cloth. Inside was a warped, almost sky-blue crystal with something glowing squirming inside it.

“You’re gonna use this thing to make me human again?”

The princess nodded in response. “Yes. For generations, my family has poured mana into this manastone. With it, we can negate part of the Eternal Witch’s curse and restore your flesh.”

“Manastones are items used by mages for storing mana, right?” It was in the distant past now, but I remembered something like that when I had fought a criminal mage once.

“Correct. They’re rare ores capable of storing mana. The ones used by mages are generally small enough to be carried on their persons.”

“Yeah, the one I saw before was small enough to hide in your fist.” They were a means of saving up mana. So even when you exhausted all of your mana, with a manastone on hand, you could continue casting spells. They were also used for casting spells of a larger scale than was ordinarily possible. That was its purpose in this instance.

“Then one this big must have a bunch of mana in it. No wonder you said it took generations.” That made sense. Even if a spell to return the undead to life existed, if the requirement was a manastone so big it needed a supply of mana from generations of talented mages, it would be near impossible to utilize on a regular basis.

That meant it was practically useless in terms of trying to save all the undead in the world. It was only good for returning a select few back to life. However, I still had a concern. “The magic of the holy women I knew turned the undead back into, well, just dead. How can we be sure your magic won’t do the same thing? I’d rather not turn into a regular old skeleton after all this time.”

I didn't think she was trying to deceive me, but there was a chance that she herself was being deceived. She might have genuinely wanted to revive me, but there could've been someone out there who wanted me dead for real and had convinced her to use this method.

"No need to worry. All mages, holy women included, understand the full effects of the magic they have learned. I can guarantee that this spell won't cause you to lose your life. Of course, that does require you to have faith in me."

"Losing your life doesn't mean a whole lot when you're already dead."

"U-Um... Well..." The princess was flustered and seemed to be at a loss for words. Making undead jokes was pretty hard.

"I was just kidding. I believe you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I can tell you aren't trying to trick me."

"I heard you had the ability to sense others' intentions..."

"Huh?"

She muttered something so quietly I wasn't able to catch what she'd said. Even without ears, I was able to pick up sounds just like I had in life. But if something was really quiet, it took a lot of focusing to try to hear it.

"It's nothing. Do you have any questions or concerns?"

"Not really. I assume you're only negating part of the curse because I'd die if you removed it completely, right? In order to get me outside, you just have to ensure I'm unable to spread the curse. Which means removing its infectious properties. On top of that, you'll restore my flesh." It still hadn't sunk in that I'd be getting my body back. I'd spent far more time as bones than I had covered in flesh.

"You really are quick on the uptake."

"You think? It just isn't in my nature to sweat the small stuff." That said, I wasn't interested in dying, so I was at least going to do the bare minimum of due diligence. Granted, I was already dead, but I didn't wanna die for real.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, undead turned by the witch’s curse are different from ordinary undead in several ways.”

“I figured. Oh, is that why you called me something else earlier?”

“Correct. Normal undead and skeletons still appear, so a new word was invented to differentiate you—curion.” A curion’s defining characteristic was that they could hear the voice of the blessing in their head—the voice that ate away at their mind.

They retained their individual consciousness, but their mind would be swayed to the idea that transforming into an undead was a blessing. Though they remained the same person, the curse was now their top priority. And there was one other peculiar thing about them—their flesh would rot away, but their bones would never crumble. In fact, their bones would regenerate even if cracked or broken. Decapitation was the sole exception and the only way to truly kill them.

“The characteristics of a curion are split into three categories—the Witch’s Gospel, the Skeleton’s Grace, and the Embodiment of the Spirit.”

“You sure have figured out a lot.”

“It *has* been three hundred years. I assume these things are already known to you.”

Well, I was a curion myself. Although it was my first time hearing the terms, I had some idea what they were referring to. “The gospel is the voice in my head, right?”

“Correct.”

“And the Skeleton’s Grace is the fact that our bones regenerate.”

“Correct again. The leading theory is that it’s a procedure to keep the undead alive, as imitating immortality through the curse of undeath requires the cessation of all vital functions.”

“So, in the end, it really is just like an altered version of the curse of undeath.” Since it was based on the curse of undeath, the flesh rotting away couldn’t be changed. Instead, the skeleton that remained was modified to not decay. But if

the witch had gone to such lengths for that, why couldn't she have fixed the weakness to decapitation? Or was there another variable that made that not possible? I would have to ask the princess about it later. "So what's this Embodiment of the Spirit?"

"Certain curions awaken unique abilities. The nature of those abilities varies, but they seem to be influenced by the individual's mind and spirit. These abilities are one of the primary reasons as to why the twelve unique undead haven't been cleansed yet."

"Oh, so I'm not the only one who can do this." I patted the sword at my hip. It was made of bones. At some point my powers had given me the ability to create swords.

"That bone sword is your ability?"

"Oh, right, I guess no living humans have seen my ability in action." According to the holy women and holy knights who had fought me, my power was still unknown. Which meant the princess had deemed me worthy based on my swordsmanship and other qualities rather than my special ability.

"Is that sword special?"

"Beats me. I'm not picky about my weapons, so I'll throw it out if you tell me to."

"No, I don't mind it. Just...refrain from using your ability in front of people."

"Got it." I just considered it a bonus. I'd use it if I could, but it wasn't a big deal if I wasn't allowed to.

"Thank you."

"Anyway, what were we talking about...? Oh, yeah. I know I said I was done asking questions, but there was something on my mind regarding this spell. Who exactly was it meant to be used on?"

Astrantia's face tensed up. "An understandable question."

It seemed natural that any survivors would desire a spell that could undo the curse and revive the undead, but assuming this spell was something that her family—the witch's family—had devised, then they had gone to great lengths to

revive somebody. The question was, who?

“My family planned to use it on you from the start. I became the one to carry it out due to both my mana and personal circumstances...” She readily revealed the “who” part, but I still wasn’t satisfied. Now the question was, why?

Oh well. She clearly wasn’t ready to tell me everything, and I didn’t sense any ill will from her.

“Your reasons for doubting me are understandable, but please believe me when I say—”

“I got it, I got it. Anyway, could you get on with the spell?”

“I’ve never met someone who gets to the point as quickly as you.” The princess seemed taken aback, but her expression quickly changed to something more conflicted. She was genuinely concerned, and I just kept brushing her off, so I understood why she felt that way.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She let out a small sigh, then continued the conversation. “I need to explain something before we start. This spell is a combination of both healing magic and curse-removal magic.”

“Healing magic, huh? So it’ll determine that my rotted flesh is an injury and heal it?” A person who had died of their injuries couldn’t be healed, but an undead who had sustained fatal injuries could be? I’d never heard of anything like that. It was probably the combination with the curse removal that made it work.

“The spell reproduces information about the body that was stored in the soul. Essentially, it will restore your body to the state it was in just before you died. There’s no need to worry about it aging you three hundred years.”

I slumped my shoulders—or rather, my scapulae—upon receiving that disappointing news. “And here I thought this was my chance to become a blond-haired, blue-eyed hunk.”

“Unless that’s how you looked before, I’m afraid it’s impossible.”

“Actually, I feel like that *was* how I looked.”

“Unfortunately, your feelings can’t influence the spell.”

“Tch.” I’d go back to being a black-haired, black-eyed, moderately muscular young man. Well, it was better than nothing. Being nothing but bones didn’t matter much when it came to fighting, but it made it impossible to chat up women.

“Additionally, as you said yourself, part of your curion abilities will be sealed away. Specifically, the Witch’s Gospel.” That meant I’d be losing the ability to spread the infection by biting people.

“You don’t wanna seal my other powers? You *did* just tell me not to use them in front of other people.”

“No, those abilities will be useful in bringing salvation to the other curion.”

“Gotcha. I think I’m starting to get why you chose me.” If she really wanted to kill all the curion in the world, she needed a strong, reliable partner. She might have had a holy woman’s healing magic, but even that had its limits. As long as I didn’t lose my head, any damage to my bones would heal up on its own. In addition, so long as it was kept hidden, I could use my curion powers. Obtaining a knight that fulfilled these conditions was worth a little risk. It was worth expending all the mana her family had saved up. Of course, unless she was confident, I would agree about the risk vs reward. But it was still a gamble. And I suspected there was a reason she had been willing to make that gamble.

“I have high hopes for your swordsmanship as well, of course.”

“Aha ha ha, thanks.” Despite running out of enemies pretty quickly, I had spent the last three hundred years polishing my skills. I fought like an undead, so my style would probably have to change once I had flesh again, but I was sure some of those skills would carry over.

“Let me ask you one last time. Are you truly sure about this?”

“What about you? I could just run away the moment we leave the city, y’know?”

“I don’t think you’d do that.”

“What makes you so sure?”



“Because utilizing me puts you one step closer to achieving your goal.”

“Fair enough.”

She understood both my goal and the value she provided. I couldn't really argue with that. At the very least, there was no reason for me to ditch her the moment we got outside. Honestly, I didn't have much to complain about. Becoming her holy knight would let me access the other Forbidden Cities via official channels to kill all the undead, and that would inevitably lead me to the witch who had started this whole mess.

“If I have your agreement, then please stand in front of the manastone.” Astrantia closed her eyes and clasped her hands in front of her chest like she was praying.

I approached the stone, and she started chanting a spell, amplifying the light flickering inside it. The light then spread outwards and soon engulfed my body.

When the light faded away, I was back to being human Al. I could see with my eyes, hear with my ears, smell with my nose, feel with my skin, and taste with my tongue. All of my senses had returned. “Whoa! My body! I'm actually alive again!”

I touched every inch of my body. Although I'd been healed, the scars I'd had in life remained. It felt like an electric current was running through me. Had touching always felt so intense? My vision made my head spin, my own voice rang in my ears, the smell of the wind was overwhelming, and I could even taste the air itself.

I had hair, I had skin, and most important of all, my manhood was back. “Your magic is amazing, Princess! I can't believe it!” Astrantia looked at me, then her pretty face hardened like stone. “What's the matter? Is something wrong?” It wasn't perfect by any means, but I didn't think my body was repulsive or anything.

“Eek!”

“Eek?”

“Eeeeeeeek!” Astrantia screamed, covering her face with her hands and crouching on the ground.

“What’s wrong with you— Oh.” Then it hit me. “Right, you’re at the age where seeing a man’s body is embarrassing. My bad.” I covered myself with my hands. I felt like I looked ridiculous, but I wasn’t some exhibitionist who got off on flashing little girls.

“N-No, it’s my fault! I can’t believe I forgot about something as basic as clothes!”

I didn’t wanna stand around naked forever, so I looked around for anything I could use and noticed the cloth that had been covering the manastone. “This’ll do for now.” I wrapped it around my waist and successfully covered my lower half.

“I-I’m so sorry. I’ll get you some clothes as soon as we get outside.”

“Nah, I’m sorry for showing you something you weren’t comfortable with.”

“P-Please don’t remind me.” Her face was so red it looked liable to burst into flames.

“Right. I won’t mention it again.”

“Thanks.” An awkward silence filled the air.

“Uh, so I guess all that’s left is to head outside.” At times like this, it was best to change the subject.

“Yes. Ah, but one more thing before we do.”

“What is it?” Astrantia held out her hand, her palm facing down. I tilted my head, trying to figure out what she was up to. “Oh, is this the part where I’m supposed to kiss the back of your hand?”

“N-No!” Her face turning bright red once again, Astrantia cleared her throat and regained her composure. “Ahem. I want you to bite me.”

“Now I get it. You’re pretty brave.”

“I need to confirm that it’s safe to take you outside. This is my responsibility to bear.” She wanted to confirm if the Witch’s Gospel, and the ability to spread the infection that it provided, had truly been sealed.

She had said that she knew how her magic worked, and if it had indeed

succeeded, then there was nothing to worry about. That said, nothing in life was guaranteed. I couldn't help but hesitate a bit at the possibility of turning her into an undead, but I wouldn't be able to leave unless we tested it. She and I both gathered our resolve. It would be disgraceful for a knight to falter when his master had made up her mind.

I gently took her pale hand and brought it up to my mouth. Her nervousness was written all over her face. Then I bit down on her finger.



“Ow!”

“Sorry, did that hurt?”

“I’m fine... Let’s wait here for a bit just to be safe. Is that all right with you?”

“I don’t mind.”

Time passed, and Astrantia never transformed. My ability to spread the infection had been sealed, which meant we could safely exit the barrier. And I could safely get intimate with ladies on the outside. My heart jumped with joy.

# Chapter 3

## A Reunion and a Copper Coin

I was in Heaven. Silky sheets, a soft bed, and a pillow filled with the aroma of the outdoors. The light shining through the curtains announced that it was morning.

To my right, a slender girl with short green hair was sleeping. To my left, there was a more plump woman with long blue hair. I had a beautiful woman in each arm.

As I sat up in bed, the green-haired Ulri opened her eyes. “G-Good morning, Sir Al.” Embarrassed, she pulled up the covers to hide her exposed skin.

“Morning, Ulri.” As I greeted her, I felt a warm touch on my left arm.

“Now, don’t just look at Ulri.” The blue-haired Ilum pouted and wrapped her arms around me.

“I would never. You also have my attention, Ilum.” It had been three hundred years since I’d died and become a skeleton, but I was finally back in the flesh. And with it, the joy of being a man had returned. That I could enjoy life on this radiant morning was all thanks to my princess, Astrantia.

After escaping the barrier, I had started living in her mansion. I’d learned about how much the world had changed during my three hundred years of isolation, reacclimated my body to having flesh, and flirted with some ladies, and now three months had passed. In that time, I’d managed to get quite intimate with most of the mansion’s maids, and on this fine morning, I was planning on getting even closer to Ilum and Ulri when—

“Sir Al, I’d like you to come with me...today...and...” The bedroom door opened, and a silver-haired, blue-eyed girl entered—the princess. She possessed both cuteness and beauty, and her chest was very promising, but frankly, she wasn’t even a potential target. Maybe in three years or so, but until

she shed her innocence and grew into womanhood, I wasn't interested.

Of course, I would never say something so rude to my master, so I kept it to myself.

"Good morning, Lady Astrantia. A really good morning at that," I greeted the princess.

"Lady Astrantia?!"

"M-My lady!"

Illum and Ulri were two of the mansion's maids, their underwear and uniforms still spread out on top of the bed. I always made sure I was more polite to the princess in front of the maids. I was pretty proud of myself for that.

However, the princess's face was stern—stern and bright red. "Wh-Wh-What is wrong with you?!" It was immediately clear that she was quite embarrassed. Since she had entered without knocking, she had been witness to bare flesh. Despite it being the second time in three months, she didn't handle it any better than the first.

This time, however, it was through no fault of my own. Not that I was going to mention that. "Huh? Oh, pardon me. I'll get dressed right away. It'll only take a moment." Even if your master barged in without knocking, as a servant, you had to respond humbly. Society truly was difficult to navigate. If I had been serving a man I probably would've been mad, but since it was the princess, I just laughed it off.

"Do you have any idea how many people you've done this with in the last three months?!" The princess's shrill voice reverberated through the room. The maids seemed incredibly uncomfortable. They probably wished they could just disappear after getting caught waking up with their master's knight.

"Lady Astrantia, please, have some faith in me. I'm not the sort of man to forget about a woman after a single night. If you wish to know how many women I've gotten intimate with since you took me in, I will gladly tell you—"

"That's not what I mean!"

"Naturally I remember all their names as well."

“That is *so* not the point!”

“Then what is your point? I neither force myself on them nor conceal my relationships with other women. I treat everyone with the respect they deserve and give my utmost to establish a proper bond.”

“Ugh... That’s not...” The princess was at a loss for words. Then her maids backed me up.

“That’s right, Lady Astrantia! Sir Al hasn’t done anything wrong. In fact, he risked his life for the family of a lowly maid like me!” Ilum had told me that monsters had been sighted in the forest near the village she’d grown up in. According to a letter from her family, some of the villagers had been injured or even eaten while hunting and gathering herbs in the forest. Worried for them, she had been working with a gloomy look on her face.

Unable to ignore the sadness of a woman, I had raced off to the village and dealt with the monsters. Ilum had been deeply moved, and we’d gone from there.

“Sir Al saved my younger sister too! I was in a state of shock when the doctor told me the only way to deal with her curse was to get a flower from a mountain dense with mana. Sir Al saw my worries and worked himself to the bone to get one of the flowers!” Areas dense with mana were inevitably crawling with monsters. That was because places that naturally accumulated mana turned all the animals in the vicinity into monsters. A flower growing in such a place could only be gathered by a competent holy knight.

Unable to sit back and watch as Ulri’s sister was fated to die, I had gone to find one. Her sister had been saved, and although she was just a child, I was satisfied knowing I had prevented the world from losing a woman. Ulri had been deeply moved as well, and just like with Ilum, we had grown closer as a result.

“True, I’ve heard about you helping men and women alike within our territory.” The princess nodded as she listened to her maids’ passionate speeches. Unfortunately, holy knights had to protect all their citizens, men included. I couldn’t sleep at night if I abandoned a person in need. “But that doesn’t make it okay for you to have relations with every woman you meet!”



the princess shouted.

“Oh? Why not?” I understood that nobles had inheritance to worry about, and having too many heirs could destroy a family, but why shouldn’t commoners be able to love freely?

“J-Just think about it for a second! It’s common sense!”

“Do forgive me. Your knight is unfortunately lacking in common sense.”

“Sir Al!” The princess had a way of being uptight. Or maybe it was just her innocence.

“Rest assured, I would never do anything so disrespectful as to set my sights on you, Lady Astrantia.” As far as I was concerned, being fourteen meant she was still a child.

“Th-That’s not what I’m worried about! Ugh, I’m going to curse you!” The moment the words left the princess’s mouth, both maids froze up. It was only for a split second, but I could see the terror on their faces.

It took everything in my power to stop myself from replying with “I’m already cursed though.” My condition was a secret except to a select few, so I couldn’t go around carelessly telling people. Perhaps realizing that, the princess’s face went pale.

“Oh no, what did I just say...?”

“Lady Astrantia?”

“I-I’m so sorry!” Astrantia yelled, racing out of the room.

“What just happened?” I looked at Ilum and Ulri. They seemed dejected, as though regretting their reactions. “Sorry, I feel like I’m missing something here. You two mind clueing me in?” In short, this is what they told me.

Because she was related to the Eternal Witch, the princess had been scorned from a young age. Some stupid brats had been bullying her, and to get back at them, she’d said she would cast the Eternal Witch’s curse on them. The effect had been immediate. Not only children but adults too had been afraid and kept their distance from her. From then on, it had become something of a protective charm for her. She had even shortened it to just “I’ll curse you!”

The idea seemed pretty clever to me. But as she'd grown up and come to realize the amount of suffering the Eternal Witch's curse had caused, she'd come to deeply regret it. As such, she had sealed away her old protective charm. Yet its effects lingered, and even now, there were still people who feared her. That, or they just dug up her past as an excuse to call her a witch.

"Everyone who works here is told this story by the head maid."

"Our lady doesn't use curses. The head maid wants everyone to understand that those rumors are lies," the two maids said matter-of-factly. It was probably scary to work in a mansion where the young lady of the house might curse you, so it made sense she felt the need to clear the air regarding the origins of the rumors.

That said, the Eternal Witch herself *did* use curses. It was so well-known throughout the world that people took it pretty seriously when she, as one of the witch's blood relatives, went around threatening to curse people. It was a more delicate issue than I'd anticipated.

"I can't believe I was so rude to Lady Astrantia... I know she would never curse anybody."

"She's so kind. I'm sure she regrets scaring us."

That explained both their reactions and why the princess had regret all over her face. *Guess I got her so flustered she dug up those forbidden words.* That was a mistake. Even if you tried to seal away words you had said so much, you couldn't get rid of them forever. Sometimes they would involuntarily slip out in a moment of panic.

"It's natural to fear the witch's curse. Instead of pretending you aren't afraid, you should just show her that you believe in her kindness like you said. That's good enough." First I needed to calm their nerves. Although I didn't understand it much myself, I knew fear wasn't so easily overcome. Knowing whom the princess was related to, getting rid of their fear of the curse was no simple feat. No one would blame them for how they reacted.

"Sir Al... Yes, you're right."

"We'll tell her how we feel next time we see her."

“Good.” I got out of bed and finished getting dressed. Both getting to know them better and my morning training would have to wait. “I’m going to meet Lady Astrantia now.” I was sure she was sulking around here somewhere.



In the three months since I’d gotten my body, I hadn’t been attached to her at the hip or anything, but given my role as both her servant and partner, I’d had plenty of chances to meet with her. I had a pretty good idea of where she might run off to sulk.

Sometimes she would run away to the gazebo in the garden her late mother had loved. It was a structure meant to protect from the sun, made only of pillars and a roof. Chairs were set up underneath so you could enjoy the scenery of the garden in the shade. Though she probably wasn’t in the mood for that right now.

“Princess.” She was sitting in a chair, hugging her knees like a child. Her shoulders trembled when I arrived, but she wouldn’t look up at me. “What I was gonna say back there is ‘I’m already cursed.’” Hearing my reply made her shoulders shake even more.

“Ugh... I’m sorry...” She raised her head, and her eyes were swollen like she had been crying.

“I’d prefer if you’d laugh instead of apologizing. That was an undead—no, a curion joke.” I handed her the handkerchief I always carried around in gentlemanly fashion. Although she accepted it, she didn’t wipe her tears.

“I can’t laugh.”

“Come on, relax a little.”

“I’m not allowed to until every single curion’s soul is freed.”

I tilted my head. “Huh? Says who?”

“Myself, but...”

“Then it sounds like it’s up to you.”

“You’re so...” The princess was about to say something, but her voice trailed off.

“Hm? What’s up?” It seemed difficult to say, but she started again at my encouragement.

“We share the same goal, don’t we? How can you be so cheerful?”

“Hm...” Maybe that was why she’d been so mad. Our goal was to find the Eternal Witch and make her pay, yet here I was fooling around with women. She had a good reason to be dissatisfied with me. “If moping around would make me stronger, I’d do it all the time. But why should I act all down in the dumps if I don’t get anything out of it? The maids are worried sick that you’re upset because of them. They think they hurt you.”

“But I’m the one at fault here!”

“Honestly, I don’t think anyone is at fault. Those words are like your protective charm, right?” My words caused her expression to loosen up.

“So you’ve heard about it... Yes, it’s true. They were like a magic spell that stopped people from hurting me. But I’m ashamed of using my ancestor’s crimes as a weapon.”

“You’ve got it backwards, Princess.”

“What do you mean?” Astrantia asked, her eyes opening wide.

“The ones who should be ashamed are the people who messed with you. They got all scared and started playing the victim once you defended yourself. Pretty pathetic if you ask me.” Of course, the maids weren’t bullies, so they were exempt. There was a difference between people who were afraid of ghosts and people who willfully trashed a ghost’s dwelling and got haunted as a result.

“What I did doesn’t qualify as legitimate self-defense. Even if it was only words, I still resorted to cursing them.”

“There is no legitimate self-defense when it comes to those people. Your only options are to sit down and take it or to fight back.” Reasonable people wouldn’t be attacking you for ludicrous reasons to begin with.

“But...”

*Come on, how uptight can you be?!* I scratched my head, then crouched down

in front of her. “All right then. Apologize to me one more time.”

“Ah, okay. Um... I’m terribly sorry for what I said.” Despite her confusion, she obediently apologized.

“And you’re forgiven. That’s that!”

Astrantia stared at me blankly. “Forgiven?”

“Yep. We’re all good now, so quit sulking.”

“But I said something so disrespectful to you, a victim of the witch’s curse—”

“Why are you worrying about it when the person you insulted doesn’t care? Just so you know, your threat doesn’t even work on me. I’m already affected by the curse.”

“B-But...”

I exaggeratedly held out my hands, wiggled each of my fingers, and stared at her chest. “So you’re saying you’ll sit down and take it, even if I attack you?”

The princess’s face flushed bright red. Flustered, she covered her chest with her arms. “Wh-What’s gotten into you?”

“Curse me all you want, Princess. I’m the only one who can’t be offended by it. You don’t have to throw away the words that protected you as a child.” Even if those words were terrible and rejected by the rest of the world, that didn’t change the fact that they had protected her.

Tears slowly welled up in her eyes. It took her a while, but she finally managed to squeeze out a few words. “Those words were really reassuring to me back then.”

“I’m sure they were.”

“But as I got older, I learned the weight they carried and started to fear them.”

“It’s okay.”

“The words that protected me turned so many people into curios... Is it really okay for me to not throw them away?”

I looked her straight in the eyes and nodded my head. “Yeah. I forgive you.”

Astrantia grinned like a child, her entire face breaking into a smile. The tears that had been in her eyes finally fell, but they were no longer tears of sadness. “Then, Sir Al, I want you to do something disrespectful to me.”

“I was just kidding about touching your chest, y’know. You need to be like three years older first.”

“That’s not what I meant! I...” She didn’t seem to have made up her mind yet.

I reached out for her face, touching the beautiful skin of her cheeks. They were incredibly soft and supple. It was like my hands were sinking into them. Then I squeezed them together.

“Mrgh!” Astrantia let out a strange sound.

After enjoying myself for a little bit, I pulled my hands away. “I apologize for my disrespect, my lady. Your skin just looked so soft that I lacked restraint for a moment.” I had done something disrespectful, just as she’d asked.

She blinked her eyes a few times, then let out a short chuckle. “Heh heh. How rude of you, my knight. I ought to curse you for that.”

“I beg your pardon, but I’m afraid I’m already cursed.” We both looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

“Thank you, Sir Al.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“The sinfulness of those words hasn’t disappeared, but my heart does feel a little lighter.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“I’ll apologize to Ilum and Ulri later too.”

“Good idea.”

“Um...will you accompany me?” Astrantia fidgeted, clearly embarrassed.

“Of course. I’m your knight, after all.”

Astrantia laughed again at my respectful reply. “You really are kind.”

“Only to women.”

“And yet I’ve heard of you saving boys from kidnappers and escorting injured old men home, among other things,” Astrantia said, directing a devious look at me.

“How naive you are, Princess. Saving a man may allow me to get close to the women around them. There’s a method to my madness, I assure you.”

“I’d heard that you just couldn’t be honest, but I didn’t expect it to be this bad...”

Now that was a remark I couldn’t let slide. “Heard? From who, exactly?”

For a moment she had the word “oops” written all over her face, but then she shook her head like she had reconsidered and turned to face me. “I haven’t told you why I came to your room earlier yet, have I?”

“Is that related?”

“Yes. I want you to come with me somewhere.” She had seemed like she’d been hiding something ever since I first met her. I had ignored it because it didn’t seem malicious, but it *was* strange. Why was she so knowledgeable about some holy knight from three hundred years ago? Then there was what she’d just said. She had to have heard that from somebody.

“A place, huh? Not a person?”

“Well... That depends on how you look at it, I suppose.” That explanation told me all I needed to know.

“Got it. Then take me there.”

“Of course. I’ll have a carriage prepared right away.”

“Actually, there’s one more thing before that.”

“Yes?”

“You should pay Ilum and Ulri a visit. I don’t want them spending the rest of the day feeling bad.”

“Ah, right. Absolutely.” Although she agreed, she seemed a little uneasy—probably because I’d figured out what she’d been hiding and had barely reacted.

“They probably left my room a while ago.”

Remembering the morning’s events, the princess’s face turned red. Hard to believe a girl this innocent was trying to pull a fast one on me. If she had kept quiet for this long, she must’ve had a good reason. At any rate, there was no harm in going wherever she wanted to take me.



After reconciling with the maids, we set out on our trip. The princess and I headed to our destination in a horse-drawn carriage. I had ridden with her before, but the difference between a noble’s carriage and the ones commoners used always surprised me. It was built to only carry a few people, had an elaborate interior and exterior, and was extremely comfortable. Yet despite all that, the princess still seemed uneasy.

I was lost in thought about what our destination could be when her voice cut through the silence. “T-To be honest...”

“Hm?”

“To be honest, I should have taken you here immediately...but getting permission wasn’t easy.”

“That right? It’s fine, I don’t mind.” Wherever we were going, it wasn’t directly controlled by her family. That meant...

“Sir Al?”

“What’s up?”

“W-Well, um...”

Seeing the anxious look on her face made me second-guess some of my actions. She had been hiding something since the moment we’d met, and today she was finally going to come clean about it. It was clear she was trying to be considerate of my feelings in some way.

“Really, I don’t mind. Stop acting all scared. It makes it seem like I’m giving you a hard time.”

I gave her a smile and she finally relaxed. Then she puffed out her cheeks and pouted.



“I’m not scared.”

“You sure?”

“I was just wondering why you weren’t saying anything...” Astrantia averted her eyes and made up an excuse. She played with one of her pigtails like a cat grooming its tail. It was kinda cute.

Had she finally opened up enough that she was comfortable doing something childish in front of me? The number of people who didn’t care she was related to the Eternal Witch could probably be counted on one hand. “C’mon, I’m not that heartless. No way I’d get mad over you hiding a thing or two, so no need to worry. Though that only applies to women.”

“Is that right...?”

My attempt to make her laugh was unsuccessful. “Really, I’m not mad at you. I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Just trying to remember the past. It’s not easy when those memories are three hundred years old.” Everyone’s childhood memories faded as they grew older. Maybe a few impactful ones would stick around that you could easily recall, but everything else was blurry, like it was lost in fog. That was how my memories from when I had been alive were.

“Were you able to remember anything?”

“A little. I was an orphan, but an annoying holy knight took me in. He had a beautiful wife and an irritatingly good-looking son. They were definitely weird for taking in someone like me.”

“The hero of your city, the holy knight Sir Dan.”

It was hard to wrap my mind around hearing someone else say that name. “Ha ha, so you know that as well, huh? Well, he ended up transforming too.”

“Right...”

“Don’t worry, I finished him off.”

Silence once again filled the carriage. “Oh, I also had a beautiful horse named

Viola. She was the best partner you could ask for. I hope she made it out all right.”

“A black-haired mare, right?”

“You got it. Guess she must’ve gotten away then.”

“It was recorded that aside from a certain mother and son, that horse never let anyone else ride her for the rest of her life.”

“Is that right?” Seemed like she had listened to my request to look after my mom and little brother. She must have decided I was her final master and that no one else but them could ride her.

“I’ve also heard that you refuse to ride any mares.”

There had been many occasions where I’d needed a horse when helping the women—and sometimes men, while I was at it—of the mansion. I had borrowed horses from the princess, but I had never chosen a female. The people who took care of the horses must have told her.

“Horses are more sensitive than you might think. They see their partner riding another horse and they start sulking,” I stated.

“So you don’t want her to get jealous?”

“I’d hate for her to be mad at me for riding another mare when we reunite one day.”

“I see.” We’d successfully escaped the heavy atmosphere from earlier, but now things felt a little solemn.

“Ha, you were thinking I’m pretty faithful when it comes to horses, weren’t you?” I asked jokingly.

“N-No, I... Well, a little.”

“Aha ha ha.”

It seemed like she was just being honest rather than playing along with the joke, but either way, she had at least loosened up a little.

“When it comes to partners to ride, I think Viola was just all I ever needed.” I was content, so I didn’t think about other horses.

“Does that mean human women aren’t enough for you?”

“No, no, no, women are wonderful in their own right, Lady Astrantia.” But I thought back to the “happiness” somebody had told me about when I had been a kid: getting intimate with good women and protecting your loved ones. I had never been able to experience that feeling.

No, it wasn’t over. I wasn’t dead. Well, I was, but I was still living. Which meant I still had a chance. Until the day I died for good, it was still possible for me to find happiness.

As I was thinking to myself, I noticed the carriage starting to slow down. “Guess we’re almost there.”

“Yes, I think so.”

We had arrived at a church with a cemetery. The vast, lush field was lined with countless gravestones. Upon stepping out of the carriage, the princess guided me through the graveyard.

“This is a nice place. I buried all the people from my city, but I couldn’t build a graveyard anywhere near this impressive.” Our country generally buried its dead. This resulted in more undead outbreaks here than in countries that practiced cremation.

“All of them? Come to think of it, I do remember reports that unlike the other Forbidden Cities, they didn’t find any corpses in yours.” I didn’t know how long it took for bones to decay, but it seemed like it was long enough that they had been able to find them in other cities. The princess looked at me with respect as she listened.

“It wasn’t like I did it out of the goodness of my heart or anything. I was just killing time since the barrier stopped me from going anywhere.”

“It was still a commendable thing to do, my knight.”

“Was it?” It might have sounded nice when you described it as freeing people from the witch’s curse and burying them, but being undead myself, I knew the truth. Even if those feelings were forced on them, people who turned felt blessed. And I had taken that from them. Was making graves for the ones I’d killed really enough to atone for that? I wasn’t so sure.

“Over there.” The princess pointed at a certain grave. It seemed like she wanted me to go alone.

“I’ll be right back.”

“I promise I’ll explain eventually.”

“Sure.”

Leaving the princess behind, I headed to the grave she had pointed out. There were two graves with a coat of arms depicting a black sword and horse carved into them. The names on the gravestones were ones I knew well—Robert and Milna MacPhial, my adoptive brother and mother. However, there was another name I’d never heard attached.

“You earned yourself a family name, huh? You sure got ahead in life, little brother.” So the reason the princess—or rather, her family—knew so much about me was because they had taken Robert and Milna in. And they had long since left this world. I knew as much, obviously. No ordinary person could live for over three hundred years. I was happy I had helped them survive, but for some reason, it felt like there was a hole in my chest.

It was a feeling I’d had before, but when? After thinking about it for a while, it finally hit me. It was when the old man who had taken care of me had died, and when Dan had died. It was a feeling of loss.

I leaned over in front of the graves and gazed at them. “It’s been three hundred years since I last saw you guys.” Dan’s entire family had been strange. Dan had been a holy knight who had decided to take in some violent kid from the slums the day he met him. A dirty orphan had intruded on Robert’s perfect family, and he hadn’t rejected him—in fact, he had looked up to that orphan. Milna had treated that orphan with the same affection she’d had for her own flesh and blood son.

Their bottomless kindness had definitely thrown me for a loop. I’d started helping people, and I felt like I owed a debt to my family. Before I knew it, I had become a holy knight—even if it was just a job to me. They’d had a major impact on my life.

“It was you, wasn’t it? You’re the one who blabbed about me to the princess’s

family. You just can't keep your mouth shut." I narrowed my eyes and looked at Robert's tombstone. How she knew such specific details, like my personality and how I had been a candidate for the Twelve Knights, was all starting to make sense. "Though without your big mouth I wouldn't have met the princess, so I guess I'll let you off the hook."

A single leaf had fallen on top of his grave. It had probably fallen from one of the nearby trees. I wiped it off, then left my hand on the gravestone. "You kept your promise and protected Milna. You did good." It wasn't like me to get in long chats with men, so I decided it was about time to wrap things up.

"I'll come visit again, Milna. And next time, I'll bring flowers." Giving my farewell to my adoptive mother, I returned to the princess.

"Are you finished already?"

"Yeah. I'd like that explanation now."

"Certainly," the princess said as we walked. "But first, I must apologize for keeping this a secret from you."

"Don't sweat it. I get why you did." If she'd mentioned my brother when we first met, I probably would've gotten suspicious and not listened to a single thing she'd had to say. If it had been a man telling me that, I might well have cut him down on the spot. It was important to make sure the other person was ready to hear the secret before you told them.

"Still, I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I forgive you."

She seemed like she was going to drag this out forever if I didn't say that. I really didn't mind.

"Was it your family who gave Robert a family name?" I asked.

"No. In fact, I'm told it was Sir Robert who helped us."

"Huh?" The princess's family was still nobility despite being related to the witch who had spread the curse of undeath and plunged the world into chaos. I'd always thought that was a little weird. Personally, I thought the sins belonged to the individual, but the world didn't see it that way. People would

want to hold the organization or family she belonged to accountable. It wouldn't have been outside of the realm of possibility for her entire family to be crushed once people caught wind of their relation to the Eternal Witch, yet that hadn't happened.

That was because the family who had birthed the Eternal Witch was also the family who had saved the world from destruction. Specifically, they had developed the barriers surrounding the Forbidden Cities, the fighting style centered around a holy woman and holy knight, and new magic received from their goddess. That was the gist of what I'd learned in the past three months.

"Sir Robert learned that the Eternal Witch had come from our family, and he informed the family head at the time."

"That was noble of him." It was just like Robert to share the information instead of holding a grudge against them for taking his father from him.

"As survivors from locations where curion outbreaks had occurred were exceedingly rare, the family head took interest in what he had to say. Sir Robert shared information based on his personal experiences and what his adoptive brother had told him. Things like the fact that cutting off their heads kills them for good and that they think they're blessing other people when they bite them." Come to think of it, I had told Robert that the first undead girl we saw had a warm kindness to her.

"Although we contained the infection with barriers, our family was originally a family of mages. We didn't have the means to save the victims." That made sense. Being a mage required innate talent, and even if they were nobility, there was only so much talent a single family could have. One family alone wasn't going to be able to liberate all twelve Forbidden Cities. Knowing that the undead die when they lose their heads doesn't make up for a lack of man power. "Then Sir Robert suggested a combination of holy women and holy knights."

"Oh, so that was Robert's idea." Holy knights back then had just been warriors dispatched to deal with troublesome enemies. They were accustomed to fighting and could be found all over the country. On top of that, holy women received their magic through their faith, making them significantly more

numerous than ordinary mages. However, the magic granted to them by their goddess didn't include offensive magic. That was why Robert had come up with the idea to combine the two. The holy knights would kill the undead, while the holy women used their magic to back them up.

"It was easier to present it to the country as my family's idea, instead of coming from Sir Robert."

"Makes sense." Even if he'd been a holy knight, Robert had still been a commoner. Nobility had a lot more sway than he'd had when it came to matters like this. For once, I was actually impressed by my country. They had listened to useful ideas instead of dismissing them because they had come from the witch's family. Or maybe it just meant the country had been in such bad shape and they'd been desperate.

"Despite all the conflict and hardship, Sir Robert's efforts led to the establishment of what we now call saints." Apparently Robert had fought as a saint himself and earned himself a family name.

"Ha, leave it to my perfect little brother."

"Many people called him a hero for his actions." He had probably been happy to be called the same thing as his father. "Aren't you going to ask?"

"Ask what?"

"Why Sir Robert never returned to your city." Now that she mentioned it, that was a good question. If he had survived and become a saint, he could have returned to his hometown to deal with the undead. "At the time, the top priority was bringing salvation to the curions who hadn't been sealed by the barriers."

I had just assumed that the barriers had been put up fast enough that there hadn't been any issues. In reality, many curions had escaped the areas that were sealed by barriers and ended up spreading the curse. That kept the saints busy. Still, the barriers trapped the vast majority of the curions, which had prevented the situation from escalating beyond what mankind could handle.

"The damage to the area around your city was surprisingly minimal, which made it a low priority. There was also what Sir Robert wrote in a note that was

left behind...”

“What?”

““We can let my older brother handle that city.”” After we parted ways, he had believed that I would survive and continue killing the undead. He’d sure had lofty expectations of me. Granted, I had ended up meeting them. He’d never returned because of the faith he had in me. He’d thought he was better off saving as many people as he could. What a smart guy.

“No wonder you were the favorite.” He was no longer there to give me that irritatingly bright smile of his.

“U-Um... I also have something from Sir Robert to give you.”

“Hm, I’m not much of one to carry around mementos.” The princess pulled out a small cloth. I took it and unwrapped it to reveal what was underneath, only to find a copper coin. Just looking at it caused memories from long ago to flood back into my head.

*“I was just thinking that your swordsmanship is getting really good.”*

*“Flattery will get you nowhere.” I took a copper coin out of my pocket and tossed it to Robert, who caught it with a smile.*

*“It got me a copper coin.”*

*“That’s all the pocket change I have. You’re not getting anything else.”*

“Um... Apparently he always cherished it as a gift from his older brother.” Who would have thought the coin I had tossed to him as a joke would end up being a parting gift? If I had known, I might have gotten him something a little nicer.

“Ha ha. He cherished it, huh? Gross.” I gripped the coin in my hand.

“Sir Al?”

“I’m fine. Can I keep this?”

“Yes. I got permission from the MacPhial family.” It sounded like Robert’s family was still around. That explained why Astrantia had needed permission to bring me to this graveyard. They were the ones overseeing it. If someone told



you that not only had they revived your forefather's brother but they wanted access to the graveyard and a memento from said forefather, you'd naturally be a little reluctant. I was impressed she had gotten them to agree.

"Somehow I managed to get you here before we headed to the academy."

"Thanks for telling me everything." With the academy being in another city, it would be a while before I could pay another visit to the graveyard. "Let's go home, Princess."

# Chapter 4

## Holy Women and Holy Knights

After a while, the day of our departure finally arrived. Under an appropriately clear sky, the princess and I set off for the academy as the mansion servants waved us off.

“Sir Al!”

“Lady Astrantia!”

“Ugh... Sir Al...”

“Good luck, Sir Al!”

“Take care!”

The maids crowded around me, some with smiles, others with tears.

“Thank you, everyone. I’ll take care of Lady Astrantia. I promise we’ll return safely!”

The princess watched our emotional farewell with a conflicted look on her face. “Shall we get going, *my* knight?” The emphasis she added on the “my” wasn’t lost on me. I was reluctant to part with them, but we’d had plenty of time to say our goodbyes the day before. After I managed to escape the clutches of the maids, I boarded the carriage with the princess.

Their voices lingered in my head for a while after the carriage departed. “Ah, what a lovely bunch of women.”

“Well, I’m not pleased.” The princess glared at me with a pouty look on her face.

“C’mon, don’t sulk. They all wished you the best too, didn’t they?”

“I know, and I’m grateful for that, but...”

“Guess I can’t really blame you, given how passionate their farewells were for

me in comparison to you.”

“To top it off, it was only the women who were so passionate in parting ways with you.”

“Aha ha ha.”

It wasn't anything to the degree of what the princess experienced, but the servants of the mansion were also treated poorly by the townspeople. They gossiped behind the backs of the servants, spouting nonsense like how they only worked for the witch's family for the money. It just so happened that anyone who said that kind of thing within earshot of me ended up getting in an unfortunate accident.

“I can't say I'm thrilled about it, but I must acknowledge that the maids have certainly been happier since your arrival.” Apparently the princess had noticed it too.

“Life is best experienced with a smile on your face.”

“I suppose there's truth to that. Let's become saints so we can make a world where everyone can live with a smile on their face.”

“I like the sound of that.” That said, our admission to the academy was by no means set in stone. Flores Holy Woman Academy had an entrance exam, and passing it was mandatory to be granted admission.

As had been explained to me before, only holy women could become students. Holy knights were just there to protect them. They were essentially personal bodyguards protecting young noblewomen. Finding an exceptional holy knight was of the utmost importance, yet it was difficult forming a pair around the same age. As a result, when it came to assigning a holy knight to protect a holy woman, it was usually the strongest individual the woman's family could get a hold of, regardless of age or gender.

“Heh heh heh.” I chuckled to myself.

“What is it, Sir Al?” the princess asked, looking at me perplexed.

“When I heard it was an academy for holy women, I assumed all the women there would be young. But since there'll also be female holy knights...”

Schoolgirls weren't really my cup of tea, so I had assumed my academy life was gonna be pretty dull. However, upon hearing that there wasn't an age limit for holy knights, I'd had an epiphany. If holy women were off the table, I'd just have to get acquainted with a beautiful, adult holy knight.

"I think I can guess what you're thinking. Just be careful."

"Careful of what?"

"While there certainly are female holy knights, over half of the holy women come from noble families. Laying your hands on their knights means laying your hands on another house's personnel. That could cause problems for us."

"For real? Well, as long as she consents, I guess there's nothing wrong with a secret tryst..."

"For real" was a phrase I had picked up since coming back to life. The language itself was more or less the same, but youthful slang evolved by the day. I didn't want people saying I spoke like a fossil. *Please don't call me a three-hundred-year-old geezer trying to fit in.* The princess didn't use much slang, so I figured it didn't spread to noble families.

"Please don't," said the princess, a serious look in her eye.

I reluctantly nodded my head. "I'll be careful not to do anything that gets you into trouble." Despite how it might have seemed, I *was* grateful to the princess. It was thanks to her that I had been able to leave the barrier and had gotten my body back. I had even been allowed to live freely in a noble's mansion. Even if I had been able to escape the barrier on my own, gathering intel as a skeleton would've been a pain in the ass. My mission to find the one responsible was much easier now.

"As long as you understand."

"Besides, if I dream too big, I'm bound to have those dreams crushed." Back in my day, there hadn't been many female holy knights. Even if that had changed a little, holy knights were still bound to be predominantly men. My only solace would be the one day each week we had off. The academy was apparently located in a prosperous city, so I'd just have to head into town then.

"I never would have imagined relations with female holy knights were going

to become my biggest source of worry.”

“If that’s your biggest concern, I’d say you’re doing pretty good. The only thing that matters is that we become saints so we can kill all the undead, right?”

“I wish I could say that confidently... Do try to be careful.”

“I know, I know.”

“I’m serious.” Apparently quarrels between noble families were a real pain in the ass.

“I understand, Lady Astrantia.” Responding as a loyal servant, I was finally able to end the conversation. Now it was time to see what sort of entrance exam awaited us at the saint academy.



The entrance exam was split into two portions: written and practical. Apparently Astrantia had passed the written test with flying colors. The holy knights had nothing to do, so we were just waiting around outside. Keeping the princess’s warning in mind, I refrained from chatting up any female holy knights, leaving me incredibly bored.

However, the upcoming practical exam was a different story. In order to properly assess their combat ability, holy women would fight alongside their holy knights. The test itself was simple—we just had to fight upperclassmen at the academy while the instructors observed. Then they would give a judgment of our aptitude.

The prospective students gathered at the outdoor training grounds, then were split between the several fields where they waited for their turns. We watched the other examinees as we waited, but being taught by the academy—even for just a year—seemed to be a pretty big advantage, as it was pretty rare for an upperclassman to lose. Getting to start after watching a few matches seemed beneficial, but the upperclassmen pairs were swapped out periodically.

Finally, our turn arrived. “Next up, the pair of Astrantia and Albert.” It didn’t make much difference to me, but I had decided to use my full name when applying to the academy. Although Al was a fairly common name, I figured it’d be smart to avoid using the Skeleton Sword Saint’s name directly.

“N-No way...” I heard the princess’s shocked voice behind me as we stepped onto the field. There was a blonde girl with slanted eyes and a tall, taciturn-seeming holy knight before us. Apparently the previous pair had swapped out right before our turn.

“What’s up, Princess? Are these two famous or something?” I asked in a whisper.

“Twelve pairs from this academy are selected as candidates to become the Twelve Saints. Those two hold the position of Gold.”

I’d heard about this before. The candidates for the Twelve Saints were assigned twelve different colors. That meant these two were among the strongest in the academy.

“Hm...” It got me thinking.

The man seemed to be in his midtwenties. He had a built physique and short-cropped hair. With his greatsword in hand, he looked pretty strong. The girl had her hair tied back and hanging over her right shoulder. It was styled in a drill shape and very voluminous.

“Normally they wouldn’t be participating in a practical exam...”

“Oh, I get it. They’re sending out someone ridiculously strong so you get crushed and they can fail you. Aha ha ha, they really hate you, Princess.” If my assessment was correct, that would mean somebody who hated the princess had enough sway to make Twelve Saints candidates participate in the exam.

“Ugh...”

“I understand your concern, but don’t forget who your holy knight is. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Astrantia’s eyes sparkled for a moment, and she nodded her head. Composing herself with a deep breath, she looked at me and spoke. “You’re right, my knight. It doesn’t matter who we face.”

“That’s the spirit. Actually, this is the perfect opportunity, don’t you think?” I started speaking loud enough that our opponents and the instructors could hear. “We seek to bring salvation to all undead, which means we have to

surpass the Twelve Saint candidates anyway. Since they saved us some trouble by coming to us, let's thank them by taking them down."

The blonde girl frowned in response to my declaration, and the holy knight's eyebrow twitched.

Since I was already on a roll, I kept going. "But we don't even have to go all out. Lady Astrantia, please, take it easy. I can handle this all by myself."

That was our agreement. Unless I asked for her help, the princess would only use her magic to protect herself. Fighting with a holy woman's support was standard these days, so my declaration was sure to provoke them. In fact, the blonde girl was already shaking with rage. Opponents or not, I did feel bad about deliberately pissing them off. However, so long as somebody was plotting against my master, it was my duty as a holy knight to face them head-on.

"Albert, was it?" the holy knight asked in a deep voice.

"What?"

"You're a disrespectful man."

"Weird, I feel like I've been hearing that a lot lately."



The purpose of combat skills was to obtain victory. That being the case, if the victory conditions differed, so too did the necessary skills. Training to fight monsters wasn't like training to fight humans. Of course, there were aspects that carried over. Endurance was always necessary, so training to increase it was pretty much universal.

Anyway, fighting styles that hadn't existed in my day were now the standard for today's saints. The essence of their style was different nowadays, but that's what made it so exciting. I was looking forward to seeing for myself what modern holy knights were capable of.

The princess's family apparently had saints who served them, but I hadn't had the opportunity to meet any of them while living at the mansion. This would be my first time fighting a saint since regaining my flesh. Although I had driven back all the saints who'd come through the barrier, that was when I'd been a

skeleton. It was different now that I had my body.

“What are you smiling about?” the grumpy holy knight asked, glaring at me.

“Huh? Oh, I’m just excited. By the way, I wanted to ask—of the twelve pairs at this academy, what number are you?”

“What?” The holy knight looked confused.

“I’m asking how strong you are. You guys have rankings or whatever, right?”

“What does it matter to you?”

“I’d be disappointed if you guys were number one. It’d be kinda boring to become the strongest just from passing the entrance exam.”

The man’s face twisted with displeasure. “Disrespectful *and* arrogant, I see.”

“Call me whatever you want. So, what number are you?”

“We do not engage in pointless conflict. However, in terms of absolutionists, we are ranked eighth.” Absolution was another word for exterminating curions. The princess called it salvation, and I usually called it extermination—it varied from person to person. But calling it absolution implied that they considered curions to be people. Differentiating it from exterminating monsters made me think he was a pretty nice guy. I preferred extermination because it was an acknowledgment that they had to be killed and there was no alternative.

“Eighth, huh? That means there’ll still be seven above us. That’ll do.”

“Enough. Let our blades do the talking.” The holy knight drew a greatsword nearly as tall as he was from a scabbard on his back. The absurdity of it almost made me burst into laughter, but obviously that wasn’t what he was going for. Some modern saints were actually capable of using such massive weapons.

“Ozias, show him the difference in your ranks,” said the blonde holy woman. Though she was young, she sounded full of confidence. Apparently the holy knight’s name was Ozias, but I was sure I’d forget it come tomorrow morning.

“Certainly,” the knight replied.

I glanced back at the princess and saw her sigh, quick on the uptake as ever. “My knight, I have full confidence you will not break our agreement.” I had



made an oath to protect her and to eliminate all her enemies.

“But of course, Lady Astrantia.”

Her pep talks were decent enough. I drew the bone sword I had made with my ability. All the onlookers grimaced, but I didn’t care.

“Now, begin!” The instructor acting as the referee shouted to commence the exam.

The blonde holy woman held her hands in front of her chest and started to glow, then directed the particles of light towards Ozias. The light engulfed him, and I could instinctually tell that his strength had been drastically bolstered. I immediately rolled to the right and evaded his attack. The area where I had just been standing was pulverized by his greatsword and a large crack formed in the field from its weight.

“Didn’t want to be anywhere near it, huh?”

“What’s this, Ozias? Weren’t we going to talk with our blades?” Still, it was a fortunate miscalculation on my part. When fighting ordinary humans, you could get a decent guess as to their athletic ability based on appearance alone. However, magic that had been created in the outside world while I’d wandered the city streets had completely changed that. The light he’d been engulfed by was Physical Enhancement and Physical Protection.

Physical Enhancement made those who were strong even stronger, and those who were fast even faster. The greater your base abilities, the greater the enhancement. His holy woman’s support allowed Ozias to move quickly even while wielding a greatsword as tall as he was. It was hard to get a read on the level of enhancement without seeing it in action first, so I had dodged out of the way farther than was necessary.

“You always have a snarky comeback.”

“Not much of a comeback if I never fall behind.” Now that I understood the level of his enhancement, it was time to focus on Physical Protection. I charged at him head-on.

“Even without divine protection, your speed is impressive.” Physical Enhancement and Physical Protection were called divine protections.

“I don’t want a man complimenting me.”

“Hmph. However...” Ozias held his sword at his hip, then swung horizontally. I heard the sound of roaring wind as the lump of metal cut through the air. There was enough power in his swing to cleave right through a tree in a single stroke. Even if it didn’t land, I would have to slow down in order to avoid it. With the holy woman’s divine protections in place, he would be capable of bringing his sword back around and striking me while I decelerated. That was his plan.

*If I had your strength and speed, I’d do the exact same thing. That’s why I’m not gonna stop.* I leaned forward as far as I could and ducked under his slash. Now that I was on all fours, he would have to lower his attack to hit me. Unable to adjust in time, he missed completely and I was able to close the distance between us.

“Hrah!” I slashed at his neck faster than he could recover his position.

“Wha—” Ozias and the blonde girl’s eyes went wide.

“Hmm, so that’s how it works.” My sword was deflected. I had expected as much, but I’d wanted to see it for myself. Satisfied, I quickly retreated. As Ozias got back into his stance, sweating, I flashed a smile at him. “Did you hear my sword’s voice?” I was pretty confident I had given him exactly what he’d wanted when he’d demanded we talk with our blades.

Still, I could definitely feel the passage of three hundred years. In that time, the goddess had granted holy women new magic in the form of two divine protections. The second of which, Physical Protection, blocked enemy attacks. It was that protection which allowed them to enter the Forbidden Cities and ensured that they couldn’t be bitten by curions, preventing them from being infected. And it covered more than just bites—the amount of damage blocked depended on the holy woman’s skill. The holy woman’s ability was just as important as the holy knight’s. That was the way modern-day saints fought.

“Allow me to revise my earlier statement,” Ozias stated.

“Hm?”

“You may be disrespectful, but you’re not arrogant.” Despite the fact I had provoked him, he still judged me fairly as his opponent. He really was a nice

guy. That was too bad—annoying guys were much easier to beat.

“Like I said, I don’t want a man’s praise.” I felt bad about doing it to such a good-natured guy, but since I had declared I would fight alone, I had to disrupt the holy woman’s protection.

“Lady Palustris.”

“Yes, Ozias. I’ll strengthen the divine protections,” the blonde girl said. Apparently her name was Palustris, and she was capable of strengthening the divine protections even more. When fighting in the Forbidden Cities, the duration of the divine protection determined how long you could fight. Being able to adjust it was a valuable skill. The earth shifted beneath Ozias’s foot as he closed the distance between us in the blink of an eye.

“Ha ha, not bad, Ozias. This must be why you’re number eight!” I parried the overhead strike coming down on me and barely avoided the upwards slash that followed by contorting my body. As I passed by, I aimed a slash of my own at his flank, but the only thing I cut was his white uniform. That confirmed something else I’d been told—clothing wasn’t covered by the divine protection. I had already moved past him by the time his final horizontal slash tore through the empty air.

Before Ozias could turn around, I unleashed four more strikes at his back. Although they were all blocked, the amount of light covering him was reduced—albeit only slightly. The light itself formed the protective barrier, dissipating once it took enough damage. This was also something I had heard beforehand. Therefore, it seemed like it was possible to measure the strength of someone’s protection based on the amount of light they were covered in.

Or maybe the amount of defense each particle of light could handle varied depending on the holy woman? If that was the case, measuring it wouldn’t be so easy. I’d need a lot more experience to know for sure.

Ozias looked over his shoulder at me and asked me a question. “Why do you refuse your holy woman’s divine protection when your base combat abilities are so high?” He wanted to know why I would refuse something that would make me even stronger. There was no real reason for me to answer him, so I didn’t put much thought into it.

“Cause I don’t need it.”

“Is that right?” Ozias adjusted his posture. He held his greatsword horizontal to his shoulder, then thrust.

“Ha ha, thrusting with a greatsword? You’re crazy!” I mocked. Not only that, but he unleashed a barrage of them in quick succession. I’d never seen anybody move like him three hundred years ago. However, since I already had a good grasp of his speed, I was able to read his moves and avoid them. Not a single one of his five thrusts so much as grazed me. “Let me return the favor!”

It was only right that I thanked him for the impressive display, so I unleashed my own series of thrusts—eight in total. Seven of them were deflected by his divine protection, but the eighth was different. I aimed it at his eyes, and for the first time, he looked nervous and retreated. *So that’s it.* Because the divine protection protected the body with light, it couldn’t be used in front of the eyes. Otherwise, the sparkling would interfere with your sight. That meant the eyes were unprotected.

If killing someone was your goal, aiming for the eyes was probably a good strategy, but at the end of the day, this was just a practical exam. I glanced over at Palustris and saw that her face was marred with exhaustion. Reinforcing his divine protection each time I chipped away at it was taking its toll on her. Still, she held the eighth rank at a school filled with aspiring saints. It would take more than that for her to reach her limit. It was possible that being pushed so hard by a holy knight who wasn’t even using any divine protection was weighing on her mentally. I could’ve just continued chipping away at them until her divine protection finally faltered, but was that really the right call?

It wasn’t the result of the match but rather the opinions of the instructors observing that would determine whether we passed or failed. An obvious, easy-to-follow outcome was crucial here. That being the case...

“All right, I’ll end this with my next move,” I declared. Concern immediately washed over the faces of my two opponents. “Don’t worry, it’ll just be a head-on attack.” Ozias seemed confused for a moment but quickly picked up on my intent.

“Were this a fight between holy knights, I would already be dead. However,

this is a fight to determine if you're worthy of becoming saints. Sorry, but I can't simply concede," Ozias stated.

"That makes two of us." Both of us kicked off the ground at the same time, clashed for a brief moment, then passed by each other. It was like our starting positions had been reversed. Then the center of Ozias's greatsword shattered. My sword and I, on the other hand, were completely unscathed.

A chilling silence fell over the field. Apparently only the princess and I had expected this outcome. Ozias could continue fighting bare-handed, but in real combat, a holy knight who had lost his weapon would be wise to retreat.

Ozias looked apologetically at Palustris. "Only our weapons were destroyed. Lady Palustris, we—"

"I know!" Palustris interrupted him, clearly frustrated. "This fight appears to be our loss, instructor." She admitted defeat. While the instructor acting as the referee was clearly perplexed, Palustris's words finally made the situation sink in.

"Th-The pair of Astrantia and Albert are victorious!" That should do it for now.

By the way, the princess hadn't just been standing there the whole time. She had protected herself with her own divine protection. Any curion with some degree of intelligence would target holy women, as they didn't have any means to fight back, so being able to defend themselves with their divine protection was important. It bought them time for their holy knight to come to their aid.

"It was fun, Ozias." I disliked complimenting men just as much as I disliked being complimented by them, but I really did feel that way. Although they were just students, they were near the top of the hierarchy, so it was interesting to see how the fighting style I had developed over the past three hundred years held up against top-class saints.

"Who are you?" Ozias asked.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You're clearly an outstanding warrior, but it seemed like you were trying to figure out how saints fight."

So he'd noticed. I wasn't too surprised someone of his skill had figured it out. "I never fought alongside a holy woman until very recently. There were some things I was trying to figure out." It wasn't a lie.

"Where in the world have you been hiding for that to be the case? You're so young."

I could hardly say I'd been in a Forbidden City, so I just brushed him off with a "who knows." Besides, I was over three hundred years old. I was by no means young. "I can answer your first question, at least."

"I'd love to hear it."

"I'm a holy knight. Just like you, right?" I laughed as Ozias looked at me in shock. Then the edges of his mouth curled up in a barely noticeable smile.

"Right you are. Until we meet again, Holy Knight Albert." With that, Ozias got ready to leave the stage.

However, just as he turned to leave, Palustris glared at us. I couldn't quite tell if she was mad about losing, or if that was just her natural expression. Maybe it was a bit of both. "Just so you know, we didn't want to do this," she said. Honestly, that made sense. Ozias seemed like a stand-up guy, so underhanded tactics didn't suit him. Even Palustris had been willing to admit defeat. Trying to make someone fail the exam seemed out of character for them.

"So whose idea was it?" I took on a more polite tone since I was now speaking to Palustris.

"Black." This time, Palustris was the one to leave, Ozias in tow.

"Gold and Black... Guess that means they're also one of the top pairs at the academy." It was odd that they had been able to influence the entrance exam. They must have had some actual power at the school. *Well, if over half the holy women really are nobles, then I guess it makes sense something like that would be overlooked.* But why did they want to fail the princess so badly? That was a question I'd have to find the answer to eventually.

"Anyway, we won, Lady Astrantia." I thought for sure she'd be happy, but for some reason she had a dark expression on her face. I got closer and whispered in her ear. "What's wrong, Princess?"

“Black’s holy woman is my older sister.” That explained it. I had learned that the princess had an older sister from the maids, but the princess herself had never brought it up, so I’d never asked. It looked like they weren’t on good terms after all. Still, what kind of person tried to make her little sister fail her entrance exam?

Now that the practical exam was complete, we left the stage and joined the spectators to watch the other examinees. The princess was still shaken, so she needed a bit of time to calm down.

“I-I’m sorry. I never expected my sister to do such a thing...”

“Nah, it was fun. Saints are pretty interesting.” They were on our side when it came to the Forbidden Cities, so we probably wouldn’t have many opportunities to fight saints outside of lessons and training. Having a worthy opponent was quite refreshing after spending the majority of the last three hundred years alone. I liked getting stronger almost as much as I liked women.

“Oh, and, I never got the chance to say this, but you were incredible back there.”

“I’m honored to receive my master’s praise.” It definitely beat being praised by a man.

“Was Sir Ozias right in saying that you were trying to learn how saints fight?”

“More or less. I fought some back when I was a skeleton, but that was my first time since getting my body back. I wanted to make sure I knew what to expect.”

“I’m impressed you had the leeway to do that against Gold. I was right to choose you.” Despite saying that, the princess’s face was still gloomy. Her sister must have been weighing on her mind.

“You mind if I ask about your sister?”

“G-Go ahead...” I’d been told that the princess’s sister was a year older than her and that her name was Orlaya. Apparently they’d been on good terms when they were younger, and Orlaya had protected her when she’d been bullied. But after Orlaya’s talent as a holy woman had come to light, she’d started spending more time training and less time with Astrantia. The princess began training by herself to become a holy woman, but when she had told Orlaya that she

wanted to become a holy woman too, Orlaya had been vehemently opposed to it.

Orlaya had told her she wasn't cut out for it, and feeling rejected by her kind older sister, the princess had decided to put all her energy towards her own goals. After that, one thing had led to another, and she had ended up asking me to join her.

"Why is she trying to stop me from becoming a holy woman?" The princess seemed genuinely confused, but I had a guess.

"Don't you think it's because she's worried about you?"

"Worried?"

"Being a holy woman means you're more likely to die in battle than die a natural death." Divine protections were a type of magic, which meant they were dependent on the caster's spirit and mana. Once those were depleted, the divine protections would be lifted and the holy woman would then be vulnerable to getting infected if bitten. Most people wouldn't be thrilled about sending their sister to a battlefield... Even I didn't want to expose the princess to any danger. That said, it was wrong to be overprotective of somebody who had made up their mind. It was my duty as her knight to keep her safe.

"B-But she..."

"She became a holy woman to allow you to live a normal life. That's probably how she sees it."

The princess was dumbfounded, as if the idea had never occurred to her. The family servants had likely realized as much, but nobody had ever told her. Maybe they thought it disrespectful to get involved in their employer's family matters. That, or Orlaya had forbidden them from saying anything. Most of them probably didn't even know the details to begin with. People like me who were both aware of the situation and not afraid to speak their mind were quite rare.

"W-Well, becoming a holy woman was my decision."

Orlaya had her feelings, and the princess had hers. I wasn't going to get into who was right, and there probably wasn't a correct answer in the first place.



“So tell her that the next time you see her.”

“Right. I will.” Now that she had a clear path in front of her, life returned to the princess’s face. Seeing her happy certainly beat seeing her depressed.

“Still, an older sister, huh?” I tried visualizing her in my head. Silver hair, blue eyes, and given her relation to the princess, she was bound to have a pretty face too.

“Wh-What is it?”

“She must be a beauty.” That said, if she was a year older, she was still only sixteen. Unfortunately, that was just barely below adulthood. Wondering why she was so quiet, I glanced at the princess, only to be met with an ice-cold glare. It was the first time I’d seen that look. “No, no, rest assured, I’m only loyal to you, Lady Astrantia.”

“Albert, my knight.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“If you dare cast a perverse gaze at my older sister, I *will* curse you.”

“I beg your pardon, my lady, but I’m already cursed.”

The princess laughed, but her expression immediately stiffened back up. “My sister’s holy knight is also a woman. Bear that in mind.”

“Got it. I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. She’s—”

The final practical exam came to an end. The results were to be announced later, so we were dismissed for the day. Alongside the other examinees, we passed through the main gate and left the school grounds. Outside, we were greeted by a road paved with stone and lined with plants.

The princess had said that over half the holy women were nobles, and the clothes of the other examinees seemed to support that. All it took was a glance at their clothes to tell a rich person from a commoner. One of the more shoddily dressed girls was being laughed at by the noble ladies around her. When she noticed, she just endured the shame and hurried away. They sure were carefree.

I had watched some of the other examinees' matches. *The girl you're laughing at put up a pretty good fight, you know.* I understood why someone in high society might ridicule someone for wearing ragged clothes, but at the end of the day, we were all here to become saints. The only thing that mattered was skill.

While it pissed me off, I couldn't leave the princess's side. Besides, she hadn't been directly insulted, which made it a little difficult to step in. Just saying "knock it off" probably wouldn't have done much. If they passed and became the princess's classmates, I'd talk to them then. Actually, it was weird that the princess wasn't already scolding them for what they'd done.

I looked over and saw her deep in thought, unable to hear the people around her. We got on a horse-drawn carriage and headed back to an inn. I didn't want to interrupt her thinking, so I stayed quiet until she called out to me.

"My knight," Astrantia said out of the blue.

"Hm? What is it, Lady Astrantia?"

"You were truly incredible back there."

"I appreciate the praise, but you already said that."

"Y-Yes, but I was thinking you deserve a reward." The princess's face was flush, and her voice faltered a little. "I-Is there anything you want from me?"

I figured I'd just get some extra money or something, but that didn't seem to be what she meant.

"Hmm." Although the princess was certainly one of the most beautiful girls I'd ever met, by standards I had set back when I was alive, I wasn't going to lay a hand on her. For starters, laying my hands on my master was far too disrespectful for me to even consider. It was completely off the table, but she was just blushing so hard I almost got the wrong idea.

"I-I'm willing to overlook a little bit of rudeness."

Something was definitely off. I tilted my head in thought. *Where did this come from?* The sudden change had to have been brought on by something that had just happened. Was it the practical exam? Us beating the eighth rank? Or

maybe her sister? Had hearing my opinion about her sister caring about her been enough to make her like this?

The only thing I could think of that would cause such a sudden change was jealousy, but that didn't seem likely. Maybe she thought she was in danger? *Oh, wait.* I had joked about her sister being a beauty. It was possible she thought her womanizer of a knight was going to change loyalties.

"I know what I said before, Princess, but as a holy knight I'm completely loyal to you. There's no need to force yourself to do anything." I must have hit the nail on the head, because her face suddenly turned bright red.

"I-I-I have no idea what you're talking about! I-I'm definitely not offering you a reward because I'm worried about you seeing my sister and deciding that making a contract with her would get you closer to your goal!"

*And the truth comes out. How cute.* "All right then. In that case, this is just me talking to myself, but I have no intention of becoming anyone else's holy knight."

Despite her embarrassment, Astrantia heard me and responded in a low whisper. "This is just me talking to myself, but may I ask why?"

"Given her status, your sister could've easily invited me to serve her, but she didn't. You were the one who asked a three-hundred-year-old undead to become your knight. You chose me, so I'm choosing you." I wasn't planning on elaborating any further, but the princess didn't seem convinced.

"So it's because I reached out to you first?"

"Really? That's what you got out of that? What I'm trying to say is... Basically, you're my fated holy woman." Though it was a little cliché, I hoped that would get my point across.

"Fate..." The princess looked down like she was in thought.

"Yeah. So even if by some miracle someone who's both more skilled than you as a holy woman and more appealing than you as a woman appeared, my heart still wouldn't be swayed." I wanted to avoid comparing her to other women, hypothetical or not, but I needed her to understand that her worries were unfounded. The princess had a conflicted look on her face, as though part of her

understood, yet she still wasn't satisfied.

"Skill as a holy woman isn't what you're looking for in a partner to begin with."

"Now, don't be like that."

"It must feel ironic to you that your fated partner shares the Eternal Witch's blood," Astrantia said in a self-deprecating way.

"Nah. If anything, it's ironic for the Eternal Witch."

"How so?"

"Because she's gonna be killed by a guy she turned into an undead and her own blood relative." The very people she had caused so much trouble for were going to be the end of her.

The princess's eyes went wide, and she smiled as though to say, "I've never thought about it like that." Maybe it was just my imagination, but it almost looked like she had tears in the corner of her eyes. "Heh heh, you always seem to have a different perspective on things."

"Are you crying again? Do you need a handkerchief?"

"No, I'm fine. I apologize for letting my worries get the best of me."

"Don't sweat it. I'll take you up on that reward in three years."

"Oh? And just what would you want from me in three years?"

"You'll just have to wait and see." The princess laughed again, but her expression was obscured by her lowered head. Then the conversation died down.

She had been persecuted for having the witch's blood, shunned by the older sister she admired, and then further isolated by the curse she had threatened others with as a child. Given the environment she'd grown up in, it was no wonder she struggled to have any self-confidence. That was why she was so quick to apologize to a commoner despite being nobility.

She was worried that her holy knight would be taken from her upon meeting her sister. However, Astrantia was talented, hardworking, and kind in her own

right. It wouldn't hurt her to take a little more pride in herself, but that was easier said than done.

"Oh, right, Princess."

"Yes?"

"If that reward's still on the table, I have a request."

"Should I get my special words ready?" She was asking if she was going to have to curse me. I was glad she could at least crack a joke.

"No, there's just a festival coming up. Something about celebrating the day the goddess first bestowed magic upon humanity."

"Yes, it's celebrated quite extravagantly here." A ritual giving thanks to the goddess had at some point turned into a festival celebrated across the country. I was amazed it had survived three hundred years. Actually, the goddess's magic was just as important now, if not more so, so it wasn't that surprising.

"Wanna go together?" She was so diligent she rarely took any breaks. The most relaxation I'd ever seen her get was looking out at her late mother's garden. She didn't do much in the way of fun.

"To the festival?"

"Yeah. I doubt you'd go on your own, right? So you can reward your holy knight by hitting the town with him."

"You want to go with a little girl like me?" Maybe she was still holding a grudge about what I'd said when we first met.

"Yeah, I do."

"Very well then. If that's what you want for your reward."

"It is. I'd be honored to enjoy the festival with a beautiful lady like you." She was the partner I'd face the upcoming battles alongside. I much preferred her to have a smile on her face, and when she finally looked up, that was exactly what I got.

"Oh, but nothing uncouth, you hear me?"

"You don't have to worry about that." And so, we made a promise to enjoy

the festival together.

# Chapter 5

## Lunch and an Orphanage

Several days after the practical exam, the results still hadn't been announced, so the examinees were forced to wait around on standby. As the princess's holy knight, I was her bodyguard, but she had given me the day off.

"All right, time to hit the town!" In high spirits, I set out to explore the unfamiliar city. Of course I wanted to check out any good restaurants, comfortable bars, and cheap food stalls, but at the top of my list was getting to know some lovely ladies. The streets were bustling with activity and everyone looked like they were having a good time. Just as I was lost in thought about the promising day ahead...

"Hey! Outta the way!" An angry voice cut through the air, and I saw what appeared to be a small-time thug yelling at an old woman. Next to the old lady, several children were cowering in fear. It seemed like he was mad at the old lady and the kids for getting in his way while they were shopping. The road was more than wide enough for everyone, so he could have easily walked around. He had startled the lady, causing her to drop her vegetables, which only seemed to piss him off even more.

"You stupid old hag!" the man shouted as he pushed the poor old woman. I had already started approaching them, but when I saw him knock her over, I rushed to catch her before she hit the ground. "Huh? Who the hell are you?!" the man demanded, caught off guard by my sudden appearance.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Y-Yes. Thank you very much." After making sure the old woman was steady on her feet, I stood before the thug.

"Apologize to the old lady, then beat it." I wanted to resolve things peacefully if possible. Women were on my agenda, not some mediocre thug.

“Why should I? It’s her fault for getting in my way.” Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like peace was going to be an option.

“All right then, I see your logic. Guess it’s my turn then. ‘Outta the way.’” I was pretty sure that was the first thing he’d said.

“What’re you babbling about?” Clearly he had heard what I said and still had no intention of moving, so I pushed him. “Gaaah!” The moment I touched his shoulder, he let out a goofy scream and went flying. After rolling to the edge of the street, it didn’t look like he would be getting up anytime soon.

“‘Stupid thug.’ We good now? After all, it’s your fault for being in the way, right?” All I’d done was use his own reasoning against him. He couldn’t complain. Ignoring the dumbfounded onlookers, I helped the old woman pick up her vegetables.

“I can’t thank you enough,” the old woman said again.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you weren’t hurt.” One of the children nodded in agreement. Putting my preferences aside, an elderly woman was still a woman.

“Why did you help us, mister?” a child in patchwork clothing asked. He looked like he was around ten years old. Memories of the curion child I had slain flooded my mind for a moment, but he had nothing to do with this. I shook my head and drove the unnecessary thoughts away.

“Because I stick up for women.”

“Woman? A withered old fossil like me?” said the old lady.

“Don’t say that. As long as you’re alive and well, a woman is always a blossoming flower.”

“What does being a ‘blossoming flower’ mean?” This time it was a purple-haired girl around eight years old who asked a question.

“It means a woman at the peak of her beauty. In other words, from the moment she’s born, to the moment she dies.”

“So I’m a blossoming flower too?”

“That you are. Though a little young for my taste.”



The girl smiled and repeated the words back. “Blossoming flower...” It sure beat seeing her cower in fear.

After I was done gathering the vegetables, I got back to my feet. “Well, take care on your way home.”

“E-Excuse me...”

“What is it?”

“Is there any way we can thank you?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“We can’t just do nothing...” the old woman insisted. I really wasn’t interested in forcing an old woman and a bunch of kids to give me anything. In fact, I was eager to get away and return to my initial plans.

“How about you come eat with us, mister?” said the boy.

“We can’t offer much, but please, at least let us give you a meal,” the old woman followed up.

“Really, it’s fine.” As I was trying to come up with a way out of the situation, I felt the little girl tug at my sleeve. I turned and saw her looking up at me with a bright, cheerful smile on her face.

“Please?”

“All right, I’ll let you treat me.” The old woman and the children all smiled happily. *My precious day off...*

I walked with them for a while until we eventually reached a rundown building that barely looked inhabitable. While it appeared to be a church, there were no holy women in sight. Even now, some holy women still worked at churches and provided healing—they weren’t exclusively curion exterminators. According to the old woman, it was an orphanage.

“Welcome back! You were gone for so long I was starting to get worried!” A girl with her hair pulled back in a red ponytail raced out of the building. Compared to the princess’s her chest wasn’t that big, but her brisk pace gave it an impressive bounce. “Who are you?” She looked me over for a moment until it seemed like she had an epiphany. On my end, I also felt like I had seen her

somewhere. Then we both came to a realization at the same time. “You’re the holy knight who took down Gold!”

“I remember you too.” She was the knight of the holy woman who had been laughed at for her clothes.

“I’m sure I only stood out because I look so poor.” She braced herself, her face stiffening up. While her clothes did leave an impression, it was her practical exam that had caught my eye.

“Your swordplay is self-taught, right? I couldn’t help but think how interesting your unorthodox style was. The teamwork you displayed with your holy woman was good too. You were definitely one of the best pairs that day.”

The girl was left sputtering—she clearly hadn’t expected to be complimented. *She seemed a bit irritable, but I guess she also has a cute side. I wonder how old she is?* Since holy knights didn’t have an age limit, it was hard to guess. Just based off her looks, she seemed to be around the same age as the princess.

“What’s wrong, Cuphea?” Another girl came out of the building. She had sky-blue hair, round glasses, and a meek air about her. Her large chest swung gently. “W-Wait, you’re...” She seemed to recognize me immediately. We must have really stood out when we fought Ozias and Palustris.

“This gentleman helped us out earlier,” the old woman said with a curious look on her face. “Do you two know him?”

“He’s awesome! He pushed over a bad guy and sent him flying!”

“He protected Granny!” The children all volunteered explanations, but I wasn’t sure it would get through.

Regardless, it was proof the world worked in mysterious ways. Who would have thought helping an old woman would lead to me meeting two girls who had taken the exam?



“Thanks for the food!” twenty or so children all said in unison. Immediately after giving thanks, they all dug in. That said, only vegetable soup and hard bread were on the menu.

Also at the table were Cuphea, the touchy girl with a red ponytail, and Linum, the shy girl with the blue bob cut. They had been wary of me at first, but they'd softened up after getting the rundown from the old woman and the kids. Now we were all eating together at a long, beat-up table.

"Hmph, this must seem like leftover scraps to a holy knight employed by a noble!" Cuphea seemed to really have it out for rich people. After what had happened the day of the exam, I could hardly blame her. I had to imagine that hadn't been her first run-in with the rich.

I softened up the bread by soaking it in my soup before biting into it. After thoroughly chewing it and swallowing, I glanced at Cuphea. "Y'know, you should be grateful to have a meal at all. It's kinda messed up to call it scraps after they went through all the trouble of making it for us."

"Wha—?! Th-That's not what I meant!" Cuphea was flustered by my joke.

"Yeah, the goddess will get mad at you," Linum added.

"Not you too!"

"Heh heh, I'm sorry. I was just kidding. We all know what you meant." The blue-haired Linum smiled deviously and patted Cuphea on the back to console her. Linum was the holy woman Cuphea was paired with.

"Ugh..." Cuphea seemed to be struggling with the fact that I didn't exactly line up with her perception of rich people. I was seated across from them, with two of the kids I had helped next to me.

"Is it good, Al?" the little girl asked.

"Who are you calling Al, pip-squeak?"

"My name's not pip-squeak. It's Linaria."

"Is it now? Well, it's not bad." Linaria smiled happily at my response. She sure did smile a lot.

"Hey, what do nobles usually eat?" This time it was a boy on the opposite side of the table who asked a question.

"My princess isn't the type to waste money, so usually nothing luxurious."

“Do you eat meat?! Do you eat superhuge meat?!”

“Yeah, we eat meat, but it’s regular size so it can fit on a plate.” Having grown up in the slums, I knew where the kid was coming from, even if it bothered me a little. Back then, I also had assumed the rich were scarfing down top-of-the-line food. But since I’d just been some dirt-poor kid, I’d had no clue what top-of-the-line food even was. All I could imagine was fluffy loaves of bread, huge pieces of meat, and soup overflowing with ingredients. I had been disappointed to learn that it was only commoners who cared about volume, while nobles valued things like appearance, rarity, and the effort it took to prepare.

“I’m sorry this was all we could prepare for you.” Seated a good distance away from me, the old woman bowed her head.

“What are you talking about? This is plenty,” I insisted, but the old woman still felt bad. She had told me that this place was an orphanage she ran with her daughter. However, the biggest shock of the day was that her daughter was absolutely stunning. She was in her thirties, with long, glossy, golden hair, skin that hadn’t lost its suppleness, and a mole under her eye. She had a tight waist, a voluptuous chest, and a curvy rear—truly excellent from head to toe. She was an adult woman, through and through.

Sitting across from the old woman, her daughter looked at me. “We’re truly grateful for your help, Sir Albert.”

“It’s only natural to come running when a woman is in danger. And please, call me Al.”

“You got mad when I called you that,” the little girl pouted. I squeezed her cheeks until she laughed and said, “Stop it!”

“Ha ha, surely you jest...”

“No, I simply want to get closer to the lovely holy woman running this facility.” Come to think of it, if they had a holy woman, they could make money by offering healing services. Or were they already doing that and were still poor? Either way, it wasn’t the kind of thing you asked someone you had just met.

“He didn’t act that way with us,” Cuphea said with an unhappy look on her

face.

Once we finished eating, I helped clean up. As I was getting ready to go, the kids somehow dragged me into playing with them.

“Hrah!” A boy holding a branch charged at me, and I blocked it with a branch of my own.

“Too slow.”

“Gotcha!” Caught off guard by the voice behind me, I ducked to the side and stuck out my foot.

“You should really keep quiet when you’re doing a sneak attack.”

“Everyone, charge!” Good, when you outnumbered your opponent, ganging up on them was the right call. If you could actually surround them, that is. Perfect coordination took a lot of practice. They couldn’t quite manage to coordinate their attack, so I was able to repel them all individually.

“And that’s that. You guys lose. I’m going home now.”

“Wait, wait! Teach me how to use a sword!”

“No thanks.”

“Please!”

“Quit grabbing my clothes! Just get Cuphea to teach you!”

“She sucks at teaching!”

“Hey!” Cuphea shouted, her face red with embarrassment as she watched the back-and-forth between the kids and me. “That’s rude!”

“Why do you even wanna learn how to use a sword in the first place?”

“So I can protect everyone!” The boy’s eyes were sparkling.

“Is that right?” A man’s happiness was bedding a good woman and protecting the ones he loved. If he’d already decided whom he wanted to protect at his age, maybe he was closer to happiness than I was. There had been another orphan who’d said the same thing a long time ago. Then he’d turned and I’d been forced to kill him. “The answer’s still no. I can’t fit babysitting a guy into my itinerary.”

“Lina!”

“Hey, what are you—”

Linaria came running over after the boy called her. “Lina, you want him to come back, right?!”

Linaria nodded her head and looked up at me. “When will you be back?” It was like she couldn’t even imagine that I might say no.

*Not bad, kid.* He had accurately identified his opponent’s weakness and exploited it to his advantage. Maybe he did have the makings of a fighter.

“You’re nice to girls, right?” The smug look on his face pissed me off, but I had to give him this one.

“Fine. I’ll occasionally drop by on my days off.”

“Yay!” the children all cheered. Were they really that happy about it? With no adult men around, maybe they were excited to have someone to look up to. Without Dan, I never would have grown as strong as I had. Still, I wasn’t cut out to be a teacher.

On the other hand, there was a beautiful holy woman here. On top of that, Cuphea and Linum were quite promising as well. Coming to a place with a beautiful woman and two beautiful girls wasn’t so bad. Finally escaping the children’s clutches, I got ready to leave the orphanage.

“H-Hey.” Just as I was heading out, Cuphea called out to me.

“What’s up, Cuphea?”

“U-Um, well...” She fidgeted nervously.

“If you’re gonna confess your love for me, save it until you turn eighteen.”

“Why would I do that?!” Her reactions were so honest it was cute.

“I’ll be looking forward to your future confession.”

“Like I said, why— Whatever. I just wanted to say thanks for today.” Cuphea’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“Sure, you’re welcome.”

“You know, you aren’t the kind of holy knight I expected.”

“Of course not. I was an orphan too, y’know.”

“Huh? R-Really?” Her eyes went wide like the idea hadn’t even crossed her mind.

“Yeah. As far as I’m concerned, this place is great. You get a roof over your head, and you get meals prepared for you.”

“Y-You must have had it rough...” Imagining what kind of environment I had grown up in, she gave me a sympathetic gaze. Her life had no doubt been rough too, but she immediately started worrying about someone else. She was a nice girl.

“Here’s to both of us passing the exam.”

“Yeah. I need to become a saint and make a whole bunch of money. Then...”

“Then?”

“Never mind. B-Bye!” Cuphea hurried back to the church without waiting for me to respond.

“Money, huh? Guess that’s usually the reason.” People usually worked just for money. The princess and I were very much exceptions. That was something I needed to keep in mind.

Thinking to myself, I returned to the inn. As I passed by the princess’s room, the door creaked open slightly and she peered out at me. “Did you enjoy your day?”

“Can’t say it went how I expected.” Was she really planning on having a conversation through the tiny gap in the door?

“It didn’t? You still look happy though.”

“Do I?” I had managed to get acquainted with a charming older woman, so it hadn’t all been for naught. “Oh, I also met with some other examinees.”

The princess flung the door open, her face pale. “Sir Al, you didn’t—”

“No, no, no, you’ve got it all wrong. It wasn’t a noble or a noble’s holy knight.” I had been told not to get involved with any nobles to avoid causing trouble.

“Commoner examinees, huh? Still, that doesn’t mean you can be rude to them—”

“Why are you assuming I tried to lay a hand on them, Princess? That hurts.”

“Think about what you just said for a second.”

I did as I was told and thought for a moment. There were too many reasons to count. “Your concerns are warranted.”

“Thank you.”

“Anyway, there’s really no reason to worry. I can explain later if you’re curious.”

“Please do.”

A few days later, we received a letter stating we had passed the exam. The princess had been formally admitted into the academy, and I was to accompany her as her escort. *I wonder if Cuphea and Linum got accepted too.* It’d be nice if we could meet up at the entrance ceremony or something.



# Chapter 6

## Black and the Sword Saint

It was the morning of the entrance ceremony. As I waited in the hall of the inn, I saw the door to the princess's room slowly open.

"What do you think?" she asked, stepping out of the room dressed in a white uniform. There was quite the striking difference between it and the nun habits holy women had worn three hundred years ago.

It was a mostly white dress, with black and gold accents. The fabric loosened around the ends of the sleeves and the skirt, with many long, narrow folds. A mantle hung over her back, and she wore long black socks. The symbol of the goddess, three diagonal bars running from the upper right to the bottom left, could be seen on her accessories and the fabric of her clothes. The most striking part of her outfit was the uncovered portion of her chest—her cleavage was clearly visible. Her shoulders were bare as well.

"It looks good on you." It was my honest opinion.

"I can't help but notice your disrespectful gaze."

"Then I won't beat around the bush—why the cleavage? Are you getting bullied already? Did somebody cut your uniform?"

"No! There's a reason for it!"

"Is there?"



“Drawing forth and manipulating mana is a delicate process. It’s supposedly best to ensure there are no boundaries between yourself and the world.” It sounded like clothes got in the way of drawing out the mana inside you.

“Does that mean it’s easier to cast magic when you’re naked?”

Blushing, the princess nodded her head. “Yes. B-But obviously that’s not suitable for fighting, so the solution was to remove the fabric around the area where mages focus the flow of their mana—the heart.” Apparently the circulation of mana around yourself wasn’t much different from the heart circulating blood. This was the foundation of mana manipulation. Without that mental image, it was a lot harder to control. Maybe the chest was exposed to make envisioning it just the tiniest bit faster.

“So it’s not to distract curious by getting them to stare at your cleavage?”

“You’re the only curion that would work on.”

“You wound me, Princess. Even the most appealing breasts wouldn’t disarm me.”

“Should I be impressed or appalled?”

“You’re allowed to curse me for that one.”

“Then consider yourself cursed.”

“Whoops, already am.” The princess laughed, then looked a little down. After thinking for a moment, I whispered in her ear. “It really does look good on you. If I’m gonna be sent to Heaven, I want a holy woman like you to be the one to do it.” Being killed by a holy woman like her sounded satisfying. Of course, that came after I accomplished my goal.

“I-Is that supposed to be a compliment?” Covering her ear in surprise, the princess backed away from me, blushing from ear to ear.

“But of course.”

“Th-Then thank you... Your uniform looks good on you as well, my knight.”

I was back in the same old holy knight clothes. There were probably a few minor changes, but it felt pretty much the same. Holy knights had already been

combatants three hundred years ago, so unless there was a glaring flaw, there wasn't much to improve.

Just like the holy woman uniform, it had a white base with black and gold accents. The shirt underneath the jacket was black, and overall the uniform seemed to have more black than the holy woman one. The back of the mantle had a large crest representing the goddess that hadn't been there three centuries ago. It had probably become standard when holy knights started fighting alongside holy women.

"I'm honored to receive your praise, Lady Astrantia." I put a hand on my chest and bowed.

"Now, shall we be off?"

I exited the inn with the princess and we boarded our carriage.

Upon arriving at the academy gate, we followed the instructions of the person in charge. Apparently the entrance festival was going to be held outside, as we were guided to a wide-open space. The ground was bare, and there was enough room to comfortably fit a few hundred people. In fact, it was the same area where the practical exam had been conducted. Several lines had been drawn on the ground to divide it up for the exam, but those were all gone now.

The princess seemed a bit on edge. Just as I was about to comfort her, a familiar red and blue entered my field of view. "Oh, Cuphea! Linum!" It was the holy knight and holy woman I had met at the orphanage. They noticed me and started walking over.

"So you passed too, huh? Good." Cuphea was wearing a holy knight uniform as well, though it had a different air to it from mine. She wore an exceedingly short skirt, showing off everything below her thighs. For better or worse, people's eyes were going to be drawn to her beautiful legs. Our black undershirts had zippers, and hers was pulled down, exposing her cleavage despite her not wearing the holy woman uniform. She had the sleeves of her jacket rolled up, giving her an overall laid-back impression.

"Congrats to you too."

"Obviously I'd pass."

Next to Cuphea, Linum smiled. "Thank you." While she was dressed similarly to the princess, her uniform was a bit bigger and baggier. Both holy women and holy knights were given accessories with the goddess's crest on them. The princess wore hers on the left side of her chest, while Linum wore hers at her waist.

"Are these the two you met the other day, Albert?"

"Yes, Lady Astrantia. Honorable girls who decided to take up arms to repay their debt to the facility that raised them."

"I-It's what anybody would do..." said Cuphea, blushing from my introduction.

"That doesn't make it any less admirable. Thank you for looking after my knight," said the princess.

"If anything, Albert's the one who helped out my family..." Seeing the three girls exchange greetings warmed my heart.

"Albert didn't cause you any trouble, did he?"

*C'mon, have some faith in me. I told you I didn't do anything.*

"Not really. He even played with the kids."

"He's really popular with the children," Linum added. "They've been begging to see him again ever since."

"Well, you're welcome to have him on our days off." She probably figured I'd get into less trouble if I was stuck playing with kids instead of heading into town to pick up women.

"In that case, we'll take you up on that. He did promise the kids, after all." Cuphea made sure to remind me of the promise I had made to teach that boy swordplay.

"Would you like to come too? Though I'm afraid we can't offer much in the way of hospitality," said Linum.

The princess gave a conflicted expression. "N-No, I..."

"What's the harm?" I asked. "Linum is a holy woman too. It'd be a good chance to make some friends."

“I-I suppose it would be nice to talk to other holy women.”

“I’d be happy to,” Linum replied.

The princess stalled for a moment, then realized she was going to have to make a choice and finally nodded her head. “Th-Then I’ll come too.” She hadn’t been able to make any friends in her hometown, so maybe the academy could be a fresh start for her.

I turned my attention back to the two girls. “Anyway, you two look good in your uniforms.”

“Thanks... I had to save up a lot to afford it,” said Cuphea.

“Aha ha ha, it was expensive, huh? I’m lucky I was able to get a hand-me-down from Mama Edel.” Linum gave a bitter smile.

“Is Mama Edel the other holy woman I met?”

“Oh, yes. Obviously she’s not our real mother, but that’s what everyone calls her.”

“Must be nice having a beauty like that for a mother,” I said with a grin, and Linum smiled back.

“Yes, we love her very much.”

“Albert, right? You even think about making a move on Mama and I’m cutting you down,” said Cuphea.

“Cuphea, you know you can’t say that.”

“Hmph.” Cuphea seemed to call the shots, but when push came to shove, Linum knew how to rein her in. I’d heard that they had grown up together, and it showed from their chemistry. They made a good pair. We continued our casual chat for a while, until...

“Pft! Can you believe that?”

“Imagine being so poor you have to save up and rely on handouts for a single uniform.”

“What’s the goddess thinking? No way someone so poor is going to be able to make use of her magic.”

“Why are people who struggle to make ends meet even allowed in an academy for training saints? People who can’t even care for themselves aren’t going to be able to bring salvation to anyone else.”

*And there goes the good mood.*

“They’re making fun of us!” Cuphea clenched her fists and trembled with rage, while Linum seemed to shrivel up and hung her head.

“Princess, may I?” Though she had told me not to get into any trouble, this wasn’t something I could ignore. Unlike before, they were our friends now.

“That won’t be necessary,” the princess replied curtly. She walked over to the group of gossipers, then shouted, “Have some shame!” Her voice echoed through the area, and immediately all eyes were on her. “Why do you think bringing salvation to the dead is such a noble mission?! It’s because life itself is precious! Curions are a perversion of that precious life, and it’s because we free them that saints are honored!”

Overwhelmed by the princess’s anger, the group could only stand there speechless. “Yet here you are, aiming to become saints while ridiculing those trying to better their lives! If you don’t see their value, then what makes you think you’re fit to become a saint? You don’t have what it takes to save the dead unless you cherish the living!” She shouted loud enough to shake the air. I could even hear it resounding in my soul.

“Ha ha ha!” I couldn’t help but laugh, clapping my hands together. I couldn’t ask for a better master.

“That’s exactly right,” said a cold voice from behind us, and everyone’s attention shifted from the princess to its owner. All it took was one glance to know that she was related to the princess—silver hair, icy blue eyes, and a slender body with curves in all the right places. The air around her almost seemed to be alive. At her side was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, female holy knight. “As you say, such people are irredeemable fools. Yet the fact remains that it takes talent to save people.”

“Sister...” the princess mumbled, all the energy she’d had just a moment ago gone in a flash.

“I have that talent. Overwhelmingly so. That is why I told you to let me handle things. So tell me—why are you so insistent on becoming a holy woman?” Her face void of emotion, the beautiful holy woman directed a question at my master.

She was Orlaya, descendant of the Eternal Witch, and Astrantia’s older sister. Her hair was so long it stretched down to her knees, and she used two bird-wing hair clips to keep it behind her left ear. Her uniform had a lot more black than the usual holy woman uniform, and there was a corset-like part tightening her already slender waist. Her leg could be seen peeking through a slit in the side of her long skirt.

However, not a single man cast an indecent look at her. The atmosphere about her simply wouldn’t permit it. Her detached attitude felt extremely cold. Beauty and harshness coexisted within her, like the eternal winter atop a snowcapped mountain, forbidding the existence of any life.

It would definitely be hard to imagine that someone with her attitude was worried about you. I could see how the princess had mistakenly thought she’d been shunned.

“Did you not hear me? I asked you a question, Astrantia.”

Although the princess had resolved to talk things out with her sister the next time they met, she was completely frozen. She couldn’t compose herself.

*Oh well. Guess I’ll buy her some time to get it together.* “If I may—” I stepped forward from behind the princess, and Orlaya’s holy knight immediately intervened.

“Stop right there!” The holy knight drew her sword without hesitation and swung at me. She unsheathed her sword and swung in a single swift, refined motion. I suspected very few of the onlookers could even follow it. Blood dripped from a small gash on my right cheek. “Stand before Lady Orlaya again and your head is forfeit.”

*Damn.* I was genuinely impressed. She was capable of such a fast, precise movement without any divine protection. In all my three hundred years, I’d never seen someone as talented as her. In terms of pure swordsmanship, she was probably about as strong as I’d been when I was alive.



However, I'd been around another three hundred years since then. "They say girls like it when you notice small changes about them, but is that really true?"

"Excuse me?" The holy knight's expression shifted from confusion to suspicion at my off-the-cuff remark.

"Personally, I think they only want you to notice certain changes. You can't just point out every little thing. In that case, maybe men and women aren't so different?"

"What are you prattling on about?"

"Well, since we're here, I might as well test it on you."

"Enough of this nonse—"

"Did you just get a haircut?" Part of her bangs gently fell to the floor. It was as if her hair had finally come to the realization it had been cut. Looking at it from my point of view, it was a clean cut from the lower left to the upper right.

"How did..." The holy knight's eyes went wide.

"Thought so. It definitely gives a different impression, but it looks good." The onlookers and the holy knight had probably simultaneously realized I had swung, but I was certain not a single one had been able to follow it.

That showed her the difference in our abilities. She hadn't even realized I had swung. She simply couldn't see it. At best, the exchange was a draw. Yet from my relaxed demeanor, she could probably tell that I had seen her strike. At worst, it would have been her own head that went flying. Had this been a real fight, she would have been the one to perish even though she had initiated it. Which meant that if I were an enemy, she would have lost her life and been unable to defend her holy woman.

"Y-You!" The holy knight ground her teeth together in frustration. For some reason, I wasn't the least bit interested in her. She seemed to be over the age of eighteen, and despite her stern expression, she was quite pretty. I didn't even care about her height or that she wore tight pants instead of a skirt. So why wasn't I attracted to her?

I looked her over in search of a reason, but the only thing I could find was

what appeared to be a family crest carved into the guard of her sword. It was a black horse and a sword. It seemed oddly familiar...

“Myra.” The holy knight immediately straightened up at the sound of Orlaya’s voice. Apparently her name was Myra. “Stand down. That exchange told me all I need to know.”

“As you wish.” Glaring at me, Myra obediently backed off.

Then Orlaya directed her gaze at me. “Your name?”

“Albert.”

“And the copper coin?”

“I have it.”

“As I thought.” It seemed like she had figured it all out. The princess was pretty quick on the uptake too, so maybe it ran in the family. Orlaya once again turned to her sister. “I believe I told you to make grandmother give up.”

“I-I came here of my own volition! I’ve decided to become a saint!” Finally back in action, the princess responded to her sister.

“You lack the talent.”

“Th-That’s not—” Astrantia looked hurt by her sister’s harsh words.

“However, your holy knight, Albert, does have talent—enough talent and skill to make up for your inexperience. Be grateful for his presence.” The princess lowered her head and gripped the hem of her uniform.

“Lady Orlaya.” After I addressed Orlaya, Myra shot me another glare, but this time she didn’t swing her blade.

“I grant you permission to speak, Holy Knight Albert.”

“Please don’t make light of Lady Astrantia. It’s because of her that I can say with certainty that I will bring salvation to all the undead.”

“And why are you so certain?”

“Because she’s prepared to go to any lengths to accomplish her goal.”



“That hardly inspires confidence.” Orlaya left it at that, but the sad, affectionate glance she shot at her sister didn’t slip past me. As I suspected, she wanted to keep her sister out of harm’s way. She was well aware of her little sister’s determination, so she couldn’t just persuade her—she was trying to break her spirit and make her give up. “Astrantia.”

“Yes?”

“I won’t be there to protect you in the Forbidden Cities. The curse you threaten will be powerless. No one will bow before you simply because you’re a noble. The only things you can rely on are your own strength and your holy knight. Do you understand?”

“Completely.”

“Then show me. Get results that justify your way of life.” It was a roundabout way of saying it, but it seemed like Orlaya would withhold her judgment for now. That was a pretty big step forward from trying to crush us during the practical exam. “My initial intention was to send you back home to stop you from chasing an impossible dream, but out of respect for your holy knight, I will back down for now.” With that, Orlaya turned on her heel and left.

“You said your name was Albert, correct?” Myra asked. She had been glaring at me for so long I had to assume her eyes were getting pretty tired.

“What’s up? You don’t need to pay me for the haircut.”

“I swear I’ll have my retribution one day!”

“Good luck with that.” I brushed her off with a small wave, but truth be told, the skill she had displayed despite her age sure was something. Add Orlaya’s divine protection into the mix and she was probably a force to be reckoned with. Hopefully we’d get a chance to face off at some point.

“Remember my name, Albert! I am Lady Orlaya’s holy knight, Myra MacPhial!”

“Wait, what?” Myra left without even waiting for my response. That one had actually caught me off guard. MacPhial was the family name my adoptive brother, Robert, had been given. Well, I had heard that his family still existed

today, so it stood to reason that he'd gotten married and had kids. Still...his descendants had inherited his skill with a sword as well as his blond hair and blue eyes. *Even after three hundred years, you're still getting on my nerves. Sorry about cutting your descendant's hair. I might've made it a little too short.*

"U-Um..." Somebody pulled on my sleeve while I was in the middle of apologizing to my brother. It was the princess.

"My apologies for my earlier behavior." I bowed my head. "It was impertinent of me to interrupt your conversation with your sister."

"N-No, it's fine. Actually, it made me a little happy," the princess said in a small voice, her lips quivering.

"I simply said what I was thinking." Regardless of how Orlaya actually felt, I couldn't sit idly by while she rejected the princess's dreams. I was her holy knight, after all. "Still, I had no idea Lady Orlaya's holy knight was from the MacPhial family."

"Ah, yes... I tried bringing it up at one point." I tried to remember when that was and recalled the day of the practical exam. The princess had tried to tell me something about her sister's holy knight then. "U-Um, Albert."

"Yes?"

"Let me heal your cheek."

"Oh, sure. Thanks." I had completely forgotten about my injury. Astrantia created a pale light that sunk into my cheek, immediately relieving the sharp pain of the cut.

"I wonder if Myra's hair will be okay."

"She swung her blade at my knight, so I think a little recompense is in order. I wouldn't worry about it." It seemed Myra had upset the princess.

"Are you getting mad for my sake? That's sweet," I whispered. The princess's cheeks flushed red, and she got an annoyed look in her eyes.

"Actually, I changed my mind. They say a woman's hair is an extension of her life. I'm sure she's miserable now that you so callously cut it away."

"That was a quick reversal." Since Robert and I weren't actually blood

relatives, I wasn't related to Myra either. She was too many generations removed to call her my adoptive family. Still, in a way, she was kinda like my niece. That explained why I wasn't attracted to her. It didn't matter how beautiful she was, I wasn't interested in my own niece.

"Lady Astrantia! Albert!" Linum came running over, Cuphea trailing behind her. "Um, thank you for standing up for us. I really appreciate it." Linum grabbed both of the princess's hands and earnestly thanked her.

"I didn't think nobles like you existed. Thanks." Averting her gaze out of embarrassment, Cuphea thanked her too.

"N-No, um... You're welcome." The princess didn't seem to know how to respond, but it was clear from how bashful she was acting that she was happy.

It was a touching scene, but I was doubtful the princess's scolding was enough to convince the gossiping group from earlier. They would probably think twice before messing with the princess since Orlaya was around, but Cuphea and Linum were another story.



Anyway, after all that, it was finally time for the entrance ceremony. They didn't check attendance or make us line up in rows. There was a platform so everyone could see whoever was speaking, and a bunch of speakers gave boring speeches before handing it off to the next one. If it weren't for my duty to guard the princess, I probably would have dozed off. If there was any saving grace, it was that occasionally the speaker would be an attractive instructor.

"Ah!" I perked up at the princess's outburst and followed her gaze. Orlaya was giving a speech as a representative of the student body. I wondered what an upperclassman like her was doing here, but maybe they had asked her to give a speech since she was an honor student. It was possible she had accepted just because she wanted to see her sister. That would be cute of her. Myra stood next to her, her bangs now slanted.

"The Twelve Corpses. It is because of these twelve curions that we have been unable to liberate the Forbidden Cities." Each of the twelve cities had a unique curion within—well, all but one, now that I had slipped out. "There are the Four Losses—the One-Armed Giant, the Voiceless Mermaid, the One-Winged

Archangel, and the Blind Goddess. The Four Scourges—the Grave Keeper of the Golden City, the Boss of the Prison Quarter, the Dregs of the World Tree, and the Shaman of the Heavenly Garden. And finally, the Four Heretics—the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, the Rusted Watchman, the Black-Blooded Holy Woman, and the Skeleton Sword Saint.” Orlaya glanced at me as she said the final name. She and the princess were the only ones who knew the Skeleton Sword Saint was present at this very ceremony.

“So long as these twelve stand, order cannot be restored to the world. As you all well know, the blood of the Eternal Witch flows through my veins. However, this is not atonement. I have been blessed with talent and tenacity, and I intend to use it to put an end to the Twelve Corpses.” This time, Orlaya looked at the princess. Astrantia didn’t avert her eyes and they stared at each other for several seconds before the elder sister relented. “I have but one request for all you new students—don’t get in my way.”

*Well damn.* The atmosphere over the ceremony immediately grew heavy. She was basically saying, “Congratulations on getting accepted! It means nothing!” Kinda harsh for a ceremony that was supposed to be a celebration.

“In the event you receive the blessing in a Forbidden City, you will become a curion, adding to my workload. You only have one life. Do try to put it to good use. That is all.”

If I interpreted her speech in the most favorable way possible, she was kind of saying, “Value your lives and be careful in Forbidden Cities.” That was a really clumsy way of going about it though. Whatever her intent, I was the one who was going to kill the Twelve Corpses. All but one of them, at least.

I had heard that once our basic training was complete, we would head to a Forbidden City to get hands-on experience. One of my fellow unique undead would be there. I wasn’t planning on trying anything during the training, and I certainly didn’t intend to get other students involved, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t looking forward to seeing what that undead was all about.

# Chapter 7

## Bullying and a Duel

I had never gone to school before, as education was generally reserved for the wealthy. For the poor, even children below the age of ten were a vital source of labor. Both the cost of tuition and loss of that labor were significant demerits. I had ended up learning a thing or two after becoming a holy knight, but it was my adoptive mother Milna who had taught me how to read, write, and speak properly.

After being formally accepted by the school, the princess and I had started living in the dorms instead of an inn. Each pair was assigned their own dorm, but the dorms had multiple rooms so the princess and I were sleeping separately. Being the commoner that I was, I wondered if it was really smart for them to keep men and women under the same roof, but apparently that wasn't a concern. To be fair, nobody would be stupid enough to lay their hands on their master given the difference in status. Still, that hadn't stopped Astrantia from being extremely nervous and reminding me not to do anything inappropriate.

I was headed to the cafeteria with the princess, and as we walked down the hall, I asked her something that had been on my mind. "What's the deal with this academy accepting commoners? Are they short on applicants?"

"Rather than being short on applicants, it's more that they want to ensure they have as many people capable of saving the undead as possible."

"That makes sense. Curions are still around even after all these years. Can't hurt to have more people on the job."

"In the case of holy women in particular, the academy expects their time here to give them the necessary skills regardless of the circumstances of their birth." It was an academy for holy women, so the holy knights tended to already have combat experience. Given that we weren't the main focus, it was probably the



most efficient arrangement.

“So once you’re in the academy, commoners and nobles receive the same training? There’s no difference based on status?”

The princess nodded her head. “Correct. At the end of the day, the only thing our faith in the goddess grants us is her magic.”

“Right. Your actual skills are something you’ve gotta work on yourself.”

“Mana consumption and the ability to utilize magic depend on the caster, and they can both be developed with proper effort.” Basically, praying to the goddess just gave them a weapon, and it was up to the individual to learn how to use that weapon. Life wasn’t so easy that you could just have everything handed to you through prayer.

“Still, even just getting magic is pretty helpful.”

“Indeed. The goddess may guide our actions, but she cannot force us to act.” Her faith was truly unwavering. Personally, I would have expected an existence that great to do a little more. Maybe the goddess had some reason for not taking action. Either way, the goddess was a woman, so I was on her side.

“Which means a holy woman’s true strength is a combination of her mana and her faith.”

“Faith is essentially a prerequisite, so most of the focus is placed on mana control.”

“That would explain why status doesn’t matter. You don’t have to be a noble to have faith and work hard.”

“Exactly, though nobles do tend to produce children with more aptitude for it...”

“So it’s not all equal, huh?” When commoners married and had kids, mana was the last thing they were thinking about. Nobles, on the other hand, were concerned with maintaining the lineage of mages within their houses and would marry people with more mana, trying to pass down their talents to the next generation. They had the power, research ability, and drive to do so.

“That sense of specialness results in discrimination towards commoners.”

“Glad my princess isn’t like that.”

“As far as I’m concerned, we’re all allies seeking to bring salvation to the curions. There is no status here.” What an admirable girl. If only everyone had such a beautiful heart.

When we arrived at the cafeteria, I could feel the gazes of all the other up-and-coming saints in our dorm on us. Mostly directed towards the princess. However, nobody said a word, and they quickly looked elsewhere.

“You’re worried about Cuphea and Linum, aren’t you?” Astrantia asked. I wasn’t sure she realized it, but the princess had a smile plastered on her face.

“A little. To be honest, I kinda expected people to be talking about you behind your back too. Glad that ended up not being the case.”

“Were you planning on doing something if it were the case?”

“Nothing that could be traced back to me.”

“Please don’t.”

“Of course, there’s room for reform when it comes to women, so I’d go easy on them.”

“Seriously. Please don’t.”

“As for men, they’d get turned into fish food.”

“Sir Al?” That was enough joking around for now. We got in line, ordered our food, and headed to some empty seats with our trays. This was uncharted territory for the princess, so she was in awe, but she’d get used to it soon enough—we’d be eating here for as long as we were at the academy.

Cuphea and Linum had decided to commute from the orphanage instead of living in the dorms. The dorms weren’t free, so given their circumstances, it was a sensible decision. Even after their talents as saints had been recognized, they were still bound by the chains of wealth. It didn’t seem like three hundred years had been enough time to get rid of inequality.



Let me make an addition to that last statement—apparently three hundred

years hadn't been enough time to get rid of assholes either.

During our practical skills class, we were holding mock battles to become familiar with fighting various opponents. Just like it had been before, the outdoor training ground was divided into several fields with stages set up. We fought one opponent until time expired, then moved on to the next. The princess and I had been on a little winning streak, but that wasn't the issue. We heard a cry of pain from another field and immediately shifted our attention over there.

Cuphea had been hit in the stomach by her holy knight opponent. Fortunately, Physical Protection had done its job, so she'd avoided any serious wounds. Despite that, her uniform had been torn to shreds and she'd been knocked to the ground.

*Was the divine protection not strong enough to withstand the full force of the attack?* Back when I had fought Gold, Palustris's divine protection had repelled my strikes entirely. I turned to Linum and saw her sweating profusely, her breathing ragged. "Why are they getting so worked up during a mock battle?" I asked. It was no wonder she couldn't maintain her divine protection when she was that exhausted. Casting and maintaining magic required concentration in addition to mana, and using it constantly took a toll on the caster.

Looking around, I saw several noble holy women gathering around and giggling. It was clear something had happened to Cuphea. I scanned the crowd for a pair of commoners and found two girls clearly worried about her. "Excuse me, what happened here?" They must have known I was friends with Cuphea and Linum, because although they froze up for a second, they told me everything.

While our instructor was observing our mock battles, he couldn't keep an eye on everyone at once. The nobles had been half-assing their mock battles when the instructor wasn't looking, saving all their energy for Cuphea and Linum. They'd dragged the fights out all the way to the time limit, focusing on whittling away their divine protection. That explained why Linum was so drained. While they could've taken a break, it was likely that Cuphea had been provoked to continue fighting.

“School can be a nasty place, huh?” Holy knight training had been pretty grueling too, but that was to weed out those who weren’t cut out for fighting monsters so they could return to civilian life. This was just nobles taking out their frustration on Cuphea and Linum.

The princess told the instructor to stop the match, but he refused since there wasn’t a rule against consecutive mock battles. Cuphea had accepted, so their match was legitimate. It wasn’t like their lives were in danger. If their Physical Protection broke, their opponents would stop attacking. The bullying was particularly insidious because they were walking that fine line. If I intervened, I’d be interrupting the class, and that would reflect poorly on Astrantia.

“Just let it play out, Sir Al.” The princess returned from talking with the instructor, her shoulders shaking with frustration. I really was glad she was my master.

As much as I wanted to step in, I could see from the look in Cuphea’s eyes that her resolve hadn’t crumbled. Getting in the way now would just hurt her pride. In the end, she barely managed to endure until the time limit. However—

“Oh, I’m sorry. Looks like my holy knight got a little carried away.” The opposing holy woman laughed at her.

Because Physical Protection didn’t protect clothes, Cuphea’s uniform was in tatters. Even calling it a uniform was being generous. It was just a few rags that didn’t even cover her skin or underwear. Being exposed in front of the entire class had to be humiliating. Her face was red with shame.

“But don’t worry. Clothes getting dirty on the battlefield happens all the time. You can just go change— Oh, wait!” The holy woman exaggeratedly clapped her hands together. “I completely forgot! You don’t have a spare uniform, do you? How awful. The academy has a uniform policy, you know? Not wearing one is against the rules.” So they had all ganged up on Cuphea with that goal in mind. “You better work real hard to earn money for a new one. We can have a rematch once you’ve saved up enough money. Of course, it might end up getting dirty again.”

Cuphea bit her lip, desperately trying to avoid crying as the nobles mocked her. Last time they had been more straightforward with their insults, so the

princess had silenced them. This time they were taking a more roundabout approach to drive Cuphea and Linum out. Although Astrantia and I could pay for the new uniforms, that wouldn't fix the core problem. I stepped up onto the stage and draped my jacket over Cuphea.

"I-It's you..." Cuphea looked at me in surprise.

The opposing holy woman's face twitched. "W-Well, aren't you a gentleman, Sir Albert?"

"When to show her skin is something a lady should decide for herself."

"That may be true, but you don't have the luxury of caring about your opponent's clothes in the midst of battle."

"You're absolutely right. Which is why there's something I'd like to confirm."

"And that is...?"

"You said you'd have a rematch when they came back, right?"

"Y-Yes. What of it?"

"Good. That's exactly what I wanted to hear!" I deliberately shouted loud enough for the entire class and instructor to hear. "Next time, you're going to lose! Because I'm going to whip her into shape!"

"Huh?" Cuphea's jaw dropped.

"Wh-What in the world—"

Ignoring the opposing holy woman, I continued.

"One week! In seven days, the difference between their abilities and yours will be put on display!"

Cuphea and Linum hadn't lost because of their skills to begin, but it was just to get the holy woman riled up. In fact, her face was already red with anger. Her noble pride wouldn't allow her to tolerate being mocked by someone she believed to be beneath her. That made her easy to manipulate.

"You're going to teach these street rats some new tricks to beat me in only a week?" She was shaking with rage.

"I could do it in three days, but they need time to earn money for the new

uniform.” I shrugged my shoulders in a performative way. I was basically saying they could work and train at the same time and still win. The effect was immediate.

“Y-You’re making a mockery of me!”

“I sure am. So, what’ll it be? I’m no monster. You can call the rematch off if you’re afraid.”

“Obviously I accept!” Thus I had secured a chance for Cuphea and Linum to get back at her. Bullies didn’t care how much their victims endured—the only way to get them to stop was to teach them a lesson.

“Can you stand, Cuphea?” I asked.

“Y-Yeah...”

The princess ran over to Linum and helped her walk.

“Sorry for getting you into a fight without your permission.”

“It’s fine,” Cuphea replied. “Thanks for the jacket.” Her cheeks were a little flushed. Was she embarrassed?

“You’re welcome.”

“A week, huh? I hate to admit it, but they aren’t pushovers.” Bullies being weak was only a thing in fiction. In the real world, those with the nastiest personalities tended to have a lot of sway.

“Don’t worry about it. Do as I say and you’ll be just fine.”

“Who are you, really?”

“Your teacher. Those kids don’t get me all for themselves.”

“You better not try to touch me somewhere and pass it off as training.” It seemed like Cuphea was back to her usual self. Good.

“And where might that be? Tell your teacher in detail.”

Cuphea giggled. “Drop dead.”

*I dropped dead a long time ago.* That aside, I was looking forward to the rematch.



Cuphea and Linum left early that day, and after the princess and I finished our classes, we headed to the orphanage.

“Oh, that’s right.” I stopped at a confectionary store I saw on the way there.

“You’re getting them a present?”

“Why not? They might prefer meat or something, but sweets are nice when you’re feeling tired.”

“Then I’ll pay for it.”

“Huh? Nah, don’t worry about it.”

The princess nonetheless insisted. “They’re my...friends. I’d like to make up for not being able to do anything before.” The princess hadn’t been able to accuse the bullies of anything since the mock battle hadn’t been against the rules. They had formulated their plan knowing full well they could get away with it. Such sinister plots weren’t exactly the forte for honest people like Astrantia. Messed-up guys like me were better at handling underhanded tricks.

“All right then, go for it.” The princess handed me her wallet, and I picked out some baked sweets. The clerk was a little taken aback by the amount I bought, but there were no issues.

“It smells delicious,” said Astrantia, a small smile on her face. She could smell the aroma of the sweets through the bag.

“Wanna try a little?”

“I could never.” I figured she’d say that. Nobles were apparently above eating sweets. Instead, I opened the bag and ate a cookie. “Those are supposed to be a gift. What are you doing eating them yourself?”

“Mmm, that’s good. So sweet and crunchy.”

“You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?” The princess glared at me.

“Would you like one, Lady Astrantia?” I pulled out another cookie and held it in front of her face.

“Not while we’re walking...but... Ugh...”

“Just give it a taste. How do you know if it’s a good gift if you don’t try it?”

“I-I suppose that’s fair.” Just as she tried to take the cookie, I shoved it in her mouth. “Mrgh!” Astrantia shot me a reluctant look, but she didn’t spit it out. “It’s sweet,” she grumbled, her cheeks red, probably from embarrassment.

“I bet people think we’re lovers doing this in the middle of town.”

“Th-That was just because you forced me to.” Yeah, she was definitely embarrassed.

“I’m just joking around.”

“You’re so rude! I-I’m going to curse you!”

“Already am.” We exchanged jokes in a low whisper. Although she had seemed a bit down in the confectionary shop, she looked like she was feeling a lot better now. After a little more cheerful walking, the orphanage finally came into view.

“Al!” The same little girl from before came running out. Her light purple hair was pulled into pigtails. Apparently she had been waiting ever since she’d heard I was coming. I couldn’t bring myself to give her the cold shoulder after that, so I decided to let her call me Al.

I got down on one knee and patted her on the head. “Hey. Are you doing well, Linaria?”

“Yeah!”

“Glad to hear it. Here, I got you a present.” I pulled a cookie out of the bag and pushed it into her mouth. She opened wide and chewed, like a baby bird being fed by its mother.

“Yummy!”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Linaria in tow, I headed to the entrance of the orphanage.

“You really came!”

“Is it already your day off?”

“Cuphea said they have plans!”



“Train me!”

The children playing in the yard all swarmed around me.

“Hey, back off! Only women are allowed to crowd around me!”

“Aha ha ha! You really are one of those ‘lady-killers’!”

“Of course I am. I’d much rather see the holy woman than you brats. I am a man, after all.”

“Holy woman?”

“You mean Mama Edel?”

“She’s off at work!”

“Are you after her?”

“Bleh!”

Like Linum had said, the orphans really saw Edel as their mother. I was about to answer with “obviously,” but then I remembered Linaria was there.

“Do you like Mama, Al?” she asked, staring at me with her puppy-dog eyes.

“It takes a very kind woman to raise all you guys. I’m sure everyone likes her. I’m no exception.”

“Yeah! I like her too!”

*Whew. That was close. It’s too soon to be giving them a lesson on adult love.*

“Who’s that?” The children now crowded around the princess.

“My master. Don’t you dare take advantage of the crowd to cop a feel unless you’re ready to get slugged.”

“Albert, you shouldn’t threaten children,” the princess said.

“No, Lady Astrantia, it’s precisely because they’re children that you need to make sure they understand.”

“Is she a noble?!”

“Is she the one who bullied Cuphea?!”

“Is she mean?!” The children bombarded me with questions.

“No. She’s a good noble.”

“Those exist?”

“They do. They’re just really, really rare.” We approached the church as I talked to the children. “There were more of you last time. Are the others working?”

“Yeah, but there aren’t many people who’ll hire us, so we can’t all work.” Even young children could lend a hand with farmwork, but we were smack-dab in the middle of a city. On top of that, there were probably very few people willing to employ orphans. Upon closer inspection, all the tallest kids were missing, so they were likely the only ones who had been able to find work.

“So teach me how to use a sword!”

“Yeah, we can earn money to buy meat by fighting monsters!”

“I’m gonna beat up the nobles who bullied Cuphea!”

“She said she’d do that herself.”

“But—” Despite their worn-out clothes, the children were as bright as could be.

“What are you all making a fuss about?” asked Cuphea, stepping out of the church. With her uniform destroyed, she had put on casual clothes. The children immediately straightened up when they heard her voice.

“We were just showing Albert around!”

“Hmm.” She put up a brave front, but the corners of Cuphea’s eyes were red and swollen. She had definitely been crying before I had arrived. “You really came.”

“Of course I did. We have a relationship now, don’t we?”

“And what kind of relationship is that?”

“Do you need me to spell it out?” I thrust my hips, and her face contorted with disgust.

“Gross.”

“Aha ha ha.” If she could handle a back-and-forth like that, she was probably

fine.

“Ah, Albert! And Lady Astrantia! You came!” Linum was also in her regular clothes. Maybe she didn’t want Cuphea to feel bad.

“Thank you for having us,” said the princess, bowing.

Linum was flustered. “We really don’t have much to offer, but thank you for coming anyway.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s a pleasure just talking to you,” the princess stated.

“I-If that’s all you want... Eh heh heh.” Linum and the princess seemed to have opened up to each other. Astrantia must have made a good impression when she’d stood up for them.

“Aren’t you glad I came, Cuphea?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Aha ha ha, you’re so shy.”

“Can you not take a hint?”

“I’m a little dense is all.” Obviously I’d back off if she really rejected me, but Cuphea just couldn’t be honest.

“What’s that you’ve got there? It smells good,” asked a sharp-eyed boy.

“Presents courtesy of Lady Astrantia. There’s enough for everyone, so eat up.”

“Presents?”

“Food!”

“Yay!”

“Thanks, Lady Astra...Astranteea?”

“Ah, you’re welcome. Please, enjoy,” said the princess.

It was hard to keep up with the kids and all their celebrating, so we let Linum hand out the sweets. “Now, everyone,” she said. “I’ll prepare some tea as well, so let’s go to the dining room.”

“You should go with her, Princess. I’m gonna get started training Cuphea.”

“A-All right.” Although she nodded her head, the princess looked a little uncertain.

“My apologies, Lady Astrantia. I’m sure you feel lost without your guiding light, your humble holy knight, Albert, at your side, but please acquiesce to this unreasonable request—”

“I-I get it! I’m going! I intend to take my time talking to Linum, so please don’t cause any problems for Cuphea!” Puffing out her cheeks in anger, the princess hurried after Linum.

“So, why are you still hanging around, Linaria?”

“I already ate my cookie...” She didn’t see any point in going with them since she’d already eaten hers.

I bent down and whispered into her ear, “Nobody saw you eat your cookie. I’ll keep it a secret, so go have another.”

Her face lit up for a moment, then she shook her head. “Then someone else won’t get one.”

“No need to worry. We bought plenty.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Th-Then it’s okay for me to have another?” she asked, still hesitating.

I nodded. “Eat up.”

“Yay!” Linaria dashed off in an instant. However, she stopped halfway and turned around, a radiant smile on her face. “I love you, Al!”

“Is that right?” I stood up and turned to Cuphea. “You should have some too when we’re done.”

“Sure.”

“Now, let’s get started. Do you have any wooden swords?”

“I’ll go get them.”

While waiting for her return, I moved to a more open area of the yard. It was

where the children had been play fighting last time. After a bit, Cuphea came back with two wooden swords. I took one and gave it a light practice swing.

“U-Um...” Cuphea hesitated.

“Hm?” I looked Cuphea in the eyes and saw a very serious expression.

“Thank you for this, Sir Albert.” She bowed her head.

“No problem. I’ll make sure you win.”

“I don’t wanna lose. Not to them—to reality. To this whole situation.” She was trembling. It was natural for her to be frustrated after being humiliated in front of the entire class.

“Don’t worry. When you’re strong, nobody can take anything from you.” That said, despite being the strongest person in the city, my adoptive father and my own life had still been taken from me. That meant I wasn’t strong enough. I needed to become strong enough that no one could ever take anything from me, even if it meant becoming the strongest person in the world. At the very least, overcoming a few school bullies didn’t take that much strength.

“I don’t want anyone interfering with our lives.” Cuphea and Linum hadn’t done anything to those nobles. They had simply been picked on because they were poor. They had the right to fight back.

“It’s simple. Just get rid of any obstacles in your way. If you’re prepared to do whatever it takes to win, you’ll be the victor a week from now.”

Cuphea raised her head and nodded. “Got it. I’ll do whatever it takes.” I could see a fire blazing in her eyes. It was clear she wouldn’t give in to the nobles’ discrimination.

I had heard that the academy didn’t charge tuition for any commoners who passed the entrance exam. That seemed like a good system to me, as otherwise commoners wouldn’t be able to become saints without taking on a whole bunch of debt, but it had apparently been quite difficult to establish.

Some wealthy people didn’t care about their status and wanted as many saints as possible to save their ancestors who had been sealed in the Forbidden Cities. However, over the past three hundred years, saints had become

something of an honored occupation. Nobles tended to produce children with more aptitude for becoming saints and, as such, had long been ingrained in the occupation's administration. Allowing anybody to become a saint undermined that sense of specialness.

That probably wasn't the only reason, but either way, there were definitely people who wanted to rid the academy of commoners. The battle between the faction that wanted to recruit anyone with talent and the faction that wanted nobles to be the core of the occupation would likely continue for a long time. That was why despite being exempt from paying tuition, commoners still had to pay for their own uniforms and materials as well as replace them if they got lost or damaged.

I would have hoped that people could band together and focus on saving the undead, but people were the same as they had been three hundred years ago. It didn't matter how many people were in trouble—so long as people had differences, there would be conflict.

At the end of the day, all that stuff didn't matter to us. All Cuphea needed was a uniform so she could attend the academy again. That, and a way to fight back against the nobles who were harassing her.

One week later, the time had come.



We were once again holding mock battles in our practical skills class.

"My, I didn't expect you to actually show up. And you even got a new uniform." It was the same holy woman as before. She had wavy, golden hair and held her hand in front of her mouth as she laughed. Her holy knight was a large, rugged man with short hair.

"Of course I did." Cuphea calmly responded to her provocation.

"I'm sorry, it's hard for me to fathom how the lower classes make money. Did you two spend the entire week working, or did you have those little orphans scrounge up everything they could earn to help you?"

"What's it matter to you?"

“Now, don’t be like that. I’m just worried about you. Who knows how many more uniforms you’ll need until you graduate. You aren’t going to rely on that orphanage to buy them for you forever, are you?”

“That’s none of your business. Now get ready.”

“Pft! Get ready for what, might I ask?”

“These mock battles are to prepare us for real combat, so you should be prepared for anything, just like on a battlefield. Did you enter this academy without understanding the duties of a saint? Nobles really just coast through life, huh?”

“Why don’t you crawl back into an alley like the orphan you are.”

And so, the mock battle commenced. This time, the princess and I were there watching from the start. Over the past week, we had drilled strategies into their heads. The princess had trained Linum in holy woman magic, and I had trained Cuphea in swordplay—or really, how to fight in general.

“It’ll take more than a week to become better than me! Time to face reality!” At the golden-haired holy woman’s command, her holy knight sprung into action.

“Let’s do this, Cuphea!”

“Yeah! Let’s go all out!” After exchanging words with Linum, Cuphea disappeared.

“Wha—?!” The holy woman was stunned.

However, Cuphea had simply moved so quickly it only looked like she had disappeared. She slipped by the holy knight and closed in on the golden-haired holy woman. “Hope you’re ready.” Cuphea swung her sword at the holy woman without hesitation.

“Ah!” Her strike was repelled by a faint light surrounding the holy woman. Holy women were taught to always maintain Physical Protection on both themselves and their holy knights, yet all it had taken was a single strike to throw the light covering her into disarray. Nobles were often trained as holy women before even entering the academy, but at the end of the day, they were

still nobles. They had been sheltered their entire lives and relied on their holy knights to protect them. While they might have been aware of the possibility of someone getting past their holy knights and attacking them directly, they certainly couldn't imagine it actually happening. As a result, her mental state had been thrown out of whack.

"You coward!" Letting his anger get the best of him, the opposing holy knight swung at Cuphea, impatience written all over his face.

*Aren't you the coward for attacking her from behind?* Nonetheless, Cuphea had anticipated it. She cleanly dodged his downward swing as though she had eyes on the back of her head. As the holy knight's sword was stuck in the ground, she went to knee him in the chest.

"You think that'll— Gah!"

Cuphea's knee sunk into the holy knight's stomach and sent him flying. The crowd's panicked murmurs were music to my ears. Thanks to the previous battles, I had come to realize that divine protections would weaken based on the holy woman's mental state. Targeting her first, then striking her holy knight after her Physical Protection had weakened was the first step of our plan.

The opposing holy knight was sent rolling across the field, but somehow he managed to maintain his grip on his sword. Getting up on one knee, he held his stomach with one hand and coughed violently.

"How cowardly! You call yourself a proud saint candidate?!"

Hearing the holy woman's complaints, I yelled at the stage, "Oh? Didn't you say something about clothes getting dirty while on the battlefield? Well, curious targeting the holy woman is also something that can happen on the battlefield. Surely you know that?"

Although I normally stood up for women, that didn't mean I'd let them get away with anything. If they did something out of line, it was only right for them to be punished. This time, though, it was Cuphea and Linum doing the punishing, not me.

"Argh!" Having her own words used against her, the holy woman was unable to deny it.



“What’s the point of all this training if you aren’t aware of your surroundings? It’s not like it’s against the rules.”

“I-I’m asking if you have no pride as a saint!”

“The only thing a saint needs to take pride in is killing curions. Clothes, education, pedigree, wealth—none of that matters. You won’t last long if you can’t understand that.”

Her face dyed red with anger, the holy woman bit her lip.

“You can give up if you want,” Cuphea teased. The opposing holy knight looked pale. While that was partially due to the pain he felt that was usually nullified by his partner’s divine protection, there was more to it than that.

“Don’t be ridiculous! We can easily heal this off!” It was easy for her to say, given she wasn’t the one who had been hurt.

The color returned to her holy knight’s face as he stood back up after being healed, but his expression lacked confidence. The blow he had just received had probably far exceeded his expectations. The reason for that soon became clear—in fact, it was visible if you looked closely.

“Is your Physical Enhancement only on your legs?!” the holy knight asked in shock. The pale light Linum was giving off was only covering Cuphea’s lower half, meaning the divine protection was only enhancing her leg strength. That was why she could move so fast and kick so hard.

“What of it? It’s a pretty rudimentary technique,” said Cuphea. Distributing the divine protection to different areas was part of a holy woman’s skill. The eighth rank Palustris had managed to strengthen her holy knight’s entire body, but that wasn’t something Linum was capable of yet. As a result, she was focusing her mana on one spot. If only the legs were targeted, the enhancement would be greatly strengthened.

“Wh-What?! Are you insane?! You’re strengthening your legs by removing your Physical Protection! A single blow could kill you!” The holy woman looked at Cuphea in disbelief. She was right. Cuphea had bet everything on her leg enhancement. If she received even a single blow, things could be dire.

“I know the risk. But if I don’t get hit, then it’s not a problem.” Cuphea’s

words visibly infuriated both members of the opposing pair.

“I won’t let my guard down again. Here’s the strongest enhancement I can give you!” The particles of light emitted by the holy woman increased and wrapped around the holy knight. He instantly closed the distance between himself and Cuphea with an explosive burst of speed, then swung his sword.

Once, twice, three times—Cuphea cleanly dodged each and every strike. Sometimes she narrowly avoided him, other times she jumped out of his range with room to spare. Each time her opponent presented even the slightest opening, she responded with a slash of her own. Damaging his Physical Protection, she forced the holy woman to expend more energy reinforcing it. Their positions had been completely reversed from their last fight.

Cuphea sliced away at the holy knight’s uniform, exposing muscle I definitely didn’t wanna see. She would occasionally turn towards the holy woman, spooking her and making her holy knight scramble to protect his master. They seemed to be traumatized by how the fight had started.

Before long, sweat was rolling off the holy woman like a waterfall as she gasped for air. Her holy knight’s uniform had been torn to shreds, leaving him nearly naked. Cuphea and Linum alone had accomplished what had taken their opponents a series of several fights.

Their opponents might have thought they had composed themselves after that first attack, but they could never fully recover. It was stuck in their memory, planting the fear that it might happen again. And an unstable mental state led to unstable magic. If Cuphea continued chipping away at the holy knight’s protection, it would take a heavy toll on the caster.

“Why... Why can’t I hit you?” the opposing holy knight grumbled.

“Because Albert could run laps around you, even with your enhancements.” Although the leg enhancement increased Cuphea’s speed, we still needed to compensate for her lack of defense. We had decided to keep it simple—just don’t get hit. After a week of squaring off against the Skeleton Sword Saint, she had nothing to fear from the average swordsman.

And then, time expired. Nobody had won, but that was the point. Everyone watching could tell that Cuphea had been dragging it out. The bullies knew it

too. If they tried to mess with Cuphea and Linum, they would be next. They would be toyed with for the entire duration of the mock battle, in front of the entire class, unable to land a single hit on the commoners. Their holy knight's uniform would be in tatters, and the holy woman herself might even be attacked. And even though their opponent focused her divine protection on her holy knight's legs, leaving the knight defenseless, they would be incapable of winning.

For prideful nobles, there was no greater humiliation. The trick to stopping bullying was to make them think that the bullying itself was a detriment to them. If Cuphea had just won the battle normally, the bullying might have continued in a different form. Now that she had shown she was willing to fight back, they would think twice about harassing her. She was too dangerous.

"So, who'd like to be my next opponent?" Taking a deliberately polite tone, Cuphea looked at all the nobles who had fought her a week ago. They all looked away, no longer willing to face her head-on. They had chosen to flee from the commoner they had looked down on. Seeing that, Cuphea shook with joy and came running over to me. "We did it!" The expression on her face was dazzlingly bright.



She must have really been grateful for my training to come running to me before celebrating with her partner. Like the holy woman had said, some might have considered her methods to be cowardly. However, I thought it was the correct approach. It was only fair that you use your opponent's methods against them.

Stressing out the holy woman, destroying the holy knight's clothes, and dragging the fight out until the time limit were all things they had done first. Cuphea hadn't been happy about the idea at first, but when she remembered the burden they had placed on Linum, she'd eagerly accepted it. It was clear that their skills were improving. They just had to keep training.

"Well done, my student."

"Heh heh. Thanks, teach." And with that, their harassment ceased. In the end, a happy ending.



For a while after that, our academy life continued uneventfully. Cuphea and Linum became a ray of hope for the other commoners, even to the point of forming their own little group. Granted, part of it was probably because they wanted protection, as the nobles would think twice before messing with any friends of Cuphea.

As long as both sides agreed to it, I didn't have an issue with self-serving relationships. The princess and I found ourselves as part of their group too. Given that all the holy women and most of the holy knights were female, it was fine by me. Even with other motives at play, it could eventually turn into real friendship. The princess, Cuphea, and Linum all seemed content with the arrangement.

With all the group members being commoners, getting intimate with them wouldn't cause any issues. Though whenever that thought crossed my mind, the princess's frigid tone interrupted my train of thought, as though she could read my mind. It was kind of scary how quickly she had been able to grasp the kind of person I was.

On one of our days off, the princess and I were once again visiting the

orphanage. Cuphea and Linum had warned us not to spoil the children too much, so we only brought presents every second or third visit. I didn't care about the boys, but the old lady, Edel, Cuphea, Linum, and even little Linaria were all there. The presents were mainly for them.

Today we had brought meat. The old lady was extremely grateful and decided to make it into a stew for tonight's dinner. While I did offer to buy the ingredients, she was adamant that I should stay behind while Linum and the boys took care of it. I couldn't help but wonder why as I saw them off.

"Ah, Princess! Wanna see my treasure?" Linaria asked. Several of the kids had overheard me call Astrantia "Princess" and had started copying me. Since they were just children, Astrantia allowed it.

"Is it all right for me to see it?" the princess asked in return.

"It's a special thing. Follow me!" Linaria took the princess somewhere, leaving just me and Cuphea in the dining room.

"U-Um... Let's take that meat to the kitchen."

"Sure thing." Cuphea was acting kinda weird, almost like she was nervous. I picked up the meat, and she led me to the kitchen. *Hmm... Something's definitely off.* It was obvious that everyone had deliberately left me alone with Cuphea.

"A-Albert."

"What's up?"

"Is it all right if I call you that?" Cuphea's face was as red as her hair.

"Sure, I don't mind."

"O-Okay... Thanks."

"I'm just gonna keep calling you Cuphea like always."

"S-Sure, that's fine." Then she went silent.

"Was that all you wanted to talk about?"

"N-No... Um... Ugh." Cuphea covered her face with her hands but soon raised her head. "Thank you so much for training me before!"

“Oh, you’re welcome.” I was pretty certain she’d already thanked me, but I wasn’t going to complain about getting thanked by a woman over and over.

“A-And... I was talking with Linum, and we decided we need to do something for you in return.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“It wouldn’t be right to just take advantage of you, but we don’t really have enough money to give you anything, so I was hoping that maybe there was something I could do for you.” The princess had said something similar after we’d beaten Gold. “If there’s anything you want from me, I’ll do it.” Cuphea placed her hand on her impressive chest. It had clearly taken a lot of courage for her to say that.

*In other words, the only thing she can offer is herself.* Still, a man was liable to take that the wrong way. I was no exception. Who knew what I might’ve done if I didn’t consider younger girls to be off the table.

“I might not be capable of much, but if there’s anything I can do to help you, Albert...” Yeah, that definitely wasn’t what she meant. I was relieved I hadn’t jumped to the wrong conclusion.

“That’s not true. I’m grateful just to have a friend I can count on.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Apparently we have to form groups later on in our training, so let’s work together when the time comes. Assuming the princess and Linum agree, of course.” Our instructor had told us we were going to form units that would support each other. There was no reason to believe the other two would object.

“S-Sure!” Cuphea happily smiled at my suggestion. I decided to take the opportunity to clear the air.

“Whew, that’s good. I almost got the wrong idea there.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you said you’d do ‘anything,’ I almost thought you meant something a bit dirty.” Cuphea froze up. Normally she would have immediately retorted with something like “Absolutely not!”

Cuphea was blushing, holding her hands together in front of her stomach. The pose squished her chest together and emphasized her bust. Out of my strike zone or not, it was impossible for me to ignore something so alluring right before my eyes. “I-If I did mean it that way, is there anything you would want?” she asked with a sweet voice. Cuphea looked up at me, her eyes moist. It was clear this was really important to her.

“Uh, hmm...” I paused so I could formulate an answer, but she seemed to take my hesitation as rejection.

“Y-Yeah, of course not. I’m not the kind of girl you wanna protect like Linum, and I’m not beautiful like Astrantia. My hands are rough, and my skin isn’t pretty...” Cuphea looked like she was on the verge of tears.

I immediately spoke up. “What are you talking about? The way you do everything in your power to protect and support your family is truly beautiful. Your perseverance to never give up no matter what is inspiring, even if you struggle to hold back your tears.”

“Albert...”

“And I think you’ve got the wrong idea, because you’re definitely cute.”

“Huh?”

“So don’t ever say that kind of stuff to anyone but me. Men are a bunch of horny monkeys waiting for their chance to pounce.” Though I would cut down anybody who tried that when I was nearby.

“I-I won’t...”

“Good.”

“Do you really mean that? You think I’m...c-cute?”

“Yeah, for sure,” I said without a hint of hesitation. It was the truth.

“Th-Then do you want to...touch me?” Her cheeks flushed, she looked at me expectantly. For a moment, my resolve wavered.

“How old are you again?”

“Sixteen...” Holy women all entered the academy at age fifteen, but there was



a lot of variance for holy knights. This meant Cuphea was a year older than Linum.

“Gah!”

“Albert? Why do you look so regretful?”

“Two years... Ask me again in two years!”

“Wh-Why in two years?”

“It’s nothing personal. Just a policy of mine.”

“All right...” Cuphea looked perplexed, but she didn’t pursue the matter any further. Finally, she giggled. “You’re so weird. I thought you were a pervert since you’re always ogling Mama Edel, but you’re a gentleman when it comes to Linum and me. You’re always kind to Astrantia too.”

I had to stop myself from saying, “That’s only because you’re all still little girls.”

Instead I said, “No, you’ve got the right idea. I’m the kinda guy who wants to get intimate with all sorts of women.”

“Are you really?”

“You bet.”

“Hmm...” Cuphea grinned impishly, then took a step closer to me. “Then you want to get intimate with me two years from now?”

“If you haven’t changed your mind, absolutely.”

“All right then.” Cuphea clapped her hands together and turned to exit the kitchen. As she was leaving, she gave me a bright smile. “Guess I’ve got one more reason to stay alive.” Being a saint meant death was around every corner—two years was a long time.

“I won’t let you die. We’re gonna fight together, aren’t we?” I could relate to what she’d said. I also felt like I’d found one more reason to remain in the world. I had to make sure I saw this noble girl blossom into a woman.

“Then let’s survive together.”

Unfortunately, I had died long ago. Of course, that was something I had to

keep to myself, so I just answered with a smile. “Sounds like a plan.”

## Chapter 8

### The Twelve Corpses Conference and the Training Spot

One day, while eating lunch with the princess, I overheard a conversation from a nearby seat.

“Our training is coming up soon. I wonder which Forbidden City is going to be chosen.” The holy woman sounded a little nervous. Given that you couldn’t even enter Forbidden Cities until you were accepted into the academy, I couldn’t blame her.

“It could be any of the three managed by the royal family, right?” another holy woman responded. Listening to their conversation, I turned to Astrantia sitting across from me and whispered a question.

“Which of the Twelve Corpses are in those three cities?”

The princess sighed. “We went over this in class, you know.” Astrantia was eating fish, while I was having steak. Since the food in the academy cafeteria was free of charge, Cuphea and Linum were also here, eating with their other friends.

“Isn’t that class taught by a man? I’d never forget if it were a woman.” What men told me went in one ear and right out the other, but I remembered everything women told me. You never know when something can be a valuable conversation starter. The princess was used to my personality by this point, so she just rolled her eyes and answered.

“Varying circumstances have led the Forbidden Cities to be managed by different people.” It probably wasn’t feasible to force lords to give up their lands just because they had become infested with curions. Even kings didn’t always get their way.

“And your family manages the Skeleton Sword Saint’s city.”

“Correct. Becoming a saint doesn’t give you free rein to enter any city as you

please.” Nobles probably wanted to handle any problems with their territories internally. They would lose face if saints affiliated with other nobles wiped out all the curions on their lands without their help.

“Is that why this is still a problem even after three centuries?”

“Well...” The princess looked uncomfortable. The Forbidden Cities were closed-off environments, so a few unpleasant reasons for keeping them around came to mind. Curions had a form of immortality, albeit a limited one. Their skeletal appearance didn’t change the fact they were once human. This made them the ideal test subjects for trying out magic and weaponry. So long as their head wasn’t separated from their neck, their bones would keep regenerating.

Astrantia herself had restored my body and helped me escape the barrier. It was easy to imagine other nobles also performing secret experiments in their territories. There were probably even some people who didn’t want curions to go extinct.

“You need permission to enter cities managed by other nobles, right?”

“Correct.” That explained why the academy was only allowed to use the three cities managed by the royal family as training grounds.

“Sounds like getting into the other nine cities is gonna be a pain.”

“I’ll figure something out when the time comes.” There was nothing I’d be able to do as a commoner, so I’d have to let the princess handle it.

“Well, we’ve got access to three of them, so I guess we can start from there.”

“The Pestilent Guardian Dragon, the Boss of the Prison Quarter, and the Voiceless Mermaid.” The Pestilent Guardian Dragon’s city was an ordinary city just like mine. Somewhere deep in my memory, I felt like I’d heard about it being home to a dragon knight who’d fought alongside a drake. He’d loved his city so much that he’d turned down joining the Twelve Knights. *If his dragon became one of the Twelve Corpses, what happened to the knight?* Not that there was much use worrying about it now.

“The Prison Quarter is that remote area where a bunch of people who had been exiled were gathered, right?”

“Yes. Three hundred years ago, they intended to develop the frontier, so they sent criminals and slaves there for man power.”

*Slaves too, huh? Guess criminals alone weren't enough.* “Then the curse spread, and they all ended up turning.” Criminal or slave, I'd have to kill them to free their souls all the same. “Don't think I've ever heard of the mermaid though.”

“Originally, she was just an island legend. Nobody knows whether she's an actual mermaid or some kind of transformed curion.” I knew a thing or two about mermaids. They were mysterious creatures with the upper body of a beautiful woman and the lower body of a fish. Their actual existence was unconfirmed, and they were generally believed to be fictional.

“I'd like to meet a living mermaid.”

“So you can get intimate with her?”

“Obviously.”

“Of course...” The princess gave an exasperated smile.

“So there's a normal city, a remote frontier, and an island to choose from?” The closest city was the one home to the Pestilent Guardian Dragon.

“Apparently the Prison Quarter was selected last year.”

“So that was where your sister went, huh?” I hadn't gotten a chance to speak to Robert's descendant Myra since giving her the haircut. Made me wonder if her bangs had grown back yet.

“The Boss of the Prison Quarter apparently has the ability to manipulate other curions and uses all the curions in the city like an army.”

“Sounds like a pain.” Controlling other curions must have been its special ability. The Embodiment of the Spirit, it was called. I had one too, but mine didn't let me control other curions.

“The Voiceless Mermaid is rarely ever seen, but I hear the Pestilent Guardian Dragon stands guard in front of a building without moving. It only goes on a rampage whenever someone approaches the building.”

“Hmm... Maybe there's something important inside.”

“At any rate, Sir Al.”

“What’s up?”

“We can figure out how to tackle the Twelve Corpses after we graduate. Put it on hold for now,” the princess said with a serious look on her face.

“I know. Wouldn’t want any promising students getting caught up in our mess.”

“If you say so.”

The twelve unique undead who had survived for more than three centuries had to be of some value to the Eternal Witch. They were individuals who were achieving her desire for true eternity through their own strength and undead nature. She probably wouldn’t be thrilled if we killed them all.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t eager to face them, but I could control it. Roughly two months after we were admitted into the academy, our training location was decided. This year, we would be heading to Luzarigue, the Pestilent Guardian Dragon’s city. Since the city was holding a festival soon, we’d set out once it ended. Speaking of that festival, I’d made a promise to go with the princess.



“Hey, say something...” It was the day of the festival. The princess and I were in our joint dorm living room, and I had frozen up after seeing her outfit. It was a great departure from her usual holy woman uniform and the attire typically worn by young noble ladies—she was dressed like an ordinary city girl. She glanced at me anxiously, her youthful face a bashful pink. The combination of her white dress and silver hair was truly stunning.

“Uh... It looks good.”

“I-I see. Thank you... The head maid forced me to bring it. She said there may come a time when I need it...”

“She did a good job.” I thanked the head maid in my mind. If left alone, the princess’s bountiful chest would have made the fabric hang loose over her stomach, but a belt-like strap underneath her chest prevented that. She had put

a lot of thought into it.

“I wasn’t sure what to wear, but I figured I should pick something easy to move in for the festival.” Even laymen who didn’t know much about art would freeze up in front of a true masterpiece. That was the kind of shock I had just received. *Otherwise there’s no way I’d be fixated on a young girl... Right?*

“It’s good. On top of being cute, it’s got a sort of whimsical feeling to it.” I tried to pile on the compliments to cover up my reaction.

“Th-That’s too much.”

“No, I’m serious. And the best part is...” Despite her telling me to stop, I whispered into her ear. “The shape of your skull.”

“Huh?” I could feel the air leave the room. My curion joke was a bust.

“Uh, that was a joke. I really do think it looks good on you.”

“Sure.”

Now that I’d poured cold water over her, it’d take time for her to warm back up. It was my fault for forgetting she was still a maiden. I still hadn’t fully recovered. My heartbeat was erratic, and I couldn’t look directly at her. What was going on?

“Anyway, why are you in your uniform?” she asked.

Even though it was our day off, I was wearing my holy knight uniform. “A girl as beautiful as you would definitely get hit on, but the uniform should keep them away.” With a holy knight at her side, it would be evident she was a holy woman, and most holy women were nobles. Only an idiot would try to make a move on her.

“I don’t think...”

“There are gonna be a bunch of people who don’t know who you are. Better safe than sorry.”

“If you say so, my knight.”

“All right then, let’s go.”

We exited our dorm and left the academy grounds. After walking for a while,

we were met by festival goers as far as the eye could see. “Damn, look at all these people.” Everywhere we looked was packed. Merchants were running stalls, and shopkeepers were beckoning people inside their stores. It was hard to find anywhere to walk. There were families, lovers, friends—even tipsy old men. The streets were bustling with people.

“Th-This is rather intense,” said the princess.

“Sorry, I didn’t expect there to be so many people. I don’t want you to get crushed by the crowds. Let’s grab some food somewhere else and head back.”

The princess didn’t take too kindly to my suggestion. “Don’t look down on me! We might get surrounded by curious in the Forbidden Cities! I’m not going to run away!” I didn’t really buy that argument, but maybe she was more excited about the festival than I had realized.

“All right, we’ll tough it out. But don’t go casting Physical Protection on yourself. Anyone who bumps into you is gonna go flying, and we don’t want anyone getting hurt.” It’d be no laughing matter if there was a chain reaction of people falling over.

“I-I know that.”

“But you considered it, didn’t you?”

“O-Only for a moment.”

I chuckled and scoped out the street again. “This crowd is a problem though. It’s gonna be hard to find each other if we get separated, and it’s not like we can hold hands.”

As I was thinking, I felt the princess pull on my sleeve. “I-I don’t mind,” she said with her head lowered, her voice barely audible over the noise of the crowd.

“You sure? I don’t imagine you’ve ever held hands with a man before. You want me to be the first?”

“Where’s your usual confidence gone? It’s not like you to be so self-deprecating.”

“If you’re fine with it, then I don’t mind.”



“Well, I am. Besides, today I’m just a normal city girl.” The princess gave a slight smile. A normal city girl, huh? She must have been talking about her outfit.

“In that case, it wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for a normal city girl to go on a festival date with a handsome, slightly older guy.”

“I wouldn’t go quite that far.”

Exchanging jokes with the princess, I held out my hand. She hesitated at first, but she found her resolve and took it. Her soft, slender hand in mine, we slipped into the crowd of people. While it was good that we couldn’t be separated, it was hard to avoid the waves of people coming at us. But it was too late now.

“Sorry, Princess.” I could feel our hands slipping apart, so I let go for a moment and grabbed her waist, pulling her close. I could feel her body heat and smell her flowery aroma.

“Eek!” Holding her so close made me a little uneasy, but now wasn’t the time. My arm around her waist, we traversed the crowd for a while until we found an alley and were finally able to take a breather.

“Festivals in big cities are really on another level. The ones in my hometown were a little more laid-back.” I had already let go of Astrantia’s hand. She had her hands on her knees, catching her breath. “Sorry about that. Just wanted to make sure we didn’t get separated.”

“I-It’s fine... I think it’s nice that the city is so lively.”

“The people who live here are probably used to it.” It was gonna be tough to enjoy the festival. I probably could have toughed it out if I had been alone, but it’d be hard getting anywhere with the princess in tow. I thought about what to do as I waited for her to catch her breath.

“Hey, buddy. You there, in the holy knight clothes,” somebody called out to me. The empty alley we had ducked into turned out to not be so empty. A middle-aged man had set up an accessory stall. He looked a little shady, but he didn’t seem like a bad guy.

“Hm? You mean me?”

“That’s a real beauty you’ve got with you. She a noble?” He had probably assumed that Astrantia was a holy woman since I was accompanying her in my holy knight uniform. He was right, but it wasn’t any of his business.

“I’m afraid that’s private. This outfit’s just popular with the ladies.”

“Aha ha ha, that’s ’cause only strong people can wear it. Women like strong men.”

“I certainly hope they do.”

“If she agreed to come here with you, I think you’ve got a shot. Eh, miss?” That would have been a rude question to ask a noble lady, but since she was incognito and I had denied it, all I could do was keep my mouth shut. After making sure the princess wasn’t in a bad mood, I responded.

“Don’t rush things, old man.”

“Sorry, sorry. How about I help you woo the pretty lady?” He finally got down to business. I had known what he wanted from the start, but I was fine with playing along.

“You’re telling me to give her one of your wares?”

“I’ll even give you a discount. You’ve got an uphill battle ahead of you.”

“I appreciate that. Wanna take a look at what he’s got, Princess?”

“Huh? Um, ah...” the princess stammered in confusion. She must not have been able to keep up with our conversation.

“Princess, huh? You must be head over heels for her,” the stall owner remarked.

“She’s just as sweet as a princess, don’t you think?”

“Ha ha ha, right you are.” Overwhelmed by praise, the princess was red to her ears.

She perused the stall’s wares as we took our break, but to a noble like her, they probably all seemed like toys. Maybe it was just because it was a novel experience, but once she started perusing, a look of excitement crept onto her face. Her gaze stopped on something, and when I followed her line of sight, I

discovered that she was fixated on a blue flower hair clip.

“Is that what you want?”

“N-No, um... It just made me a little nostalgic, that’s all.” Come to think of it, I had seen that kind of flower in her mansion’s garden. It probably reminded her of home.

“We’ll take this one, old man.”

“Sure thing!” he eagerly replied.

“Huh? Wait!” the princess shouted.

I paid and offered the princess the hair clip.

“U-Um, I wasn’t trying to get you to buy it...”

“I know, I know. You don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to. Just keep it as a reminder of your garden.”

“Al...bert... You realized that was why I was looking at it?”

“I had a hunch.” The princess hesitated for a moment, then finally accepted it.

“Th-Thank you. Can I put it on right now?”

“Go ahead.” At my word, she put it in her hair.

“Wh-What do you think?”

“It looks lovely, my lady.” I gave a polite bow.

“Heh heh, thank you.” She gave me a bashful look, befitting of her age. It was far from the allure of an adult woman that I preferred, yet I found myself unable to look away. “Albert?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. So, are we gonna brave the crowd again?”

“Let’s give it a try. Since we’re already here, I’d like to at least get something to eat.” She was a lot more enthusiastic about the festival now. She’d come a long way from thinking that buying sweets was embarrassing. Maybe I was a bad influence.

“Then let’s go.” I once again grabbed the princess’s waist.

“Um... You holding my waist is a little embarrassing.”

“Hm... Then, if it’s all right with you, wanna hold on to my arm?”

“S-Sure.” I wanted to avoid restricting my dominant arm, so I asked her to grab my left arm instead. I wasn’t usually conscious of Astrantia’s bust, but it was hard to ignore when her chest was pressed against my arm. However, I kept quiet since it would be difficult to slip through the crowd if she didn’t stay close. “I-Is this good?” she asked nervously.

“Perfect. Time to find something to eat.”

“If we manage this, I’ll be able to say I managed to adapt to the crowd at least a little.”

“Then let’s go.”

“All right!” The princess and I once again entered the crowd. I heard the stall owner say, “What a nice couple,” behind me, but I ignored it.

A few days later, we would be headed to the Forbidden City that the Pestilent Guardian Dragon called home.



We would be traveling by horse-drawn carriage until we reached the Forbidden City. It wasn’t a coach like nobles usually used but rather a covered wagon for transporting goods that the academy had remodeled and added seats to. They had prepared several to account for all the students.

Although a few of the nobles objected, the instructors seemed to anticipate their reluctance and allowed them to use their own carriages if they preferred. The princess didn’t mind, so I assumed we’d be riding with the other students until a coachman led us to a separate coach as we were lined up. It was the same coach we usually rode in. I asked him to explain, and he told me that Astrantia’s older sister, Orlaya, had arranged it.

“What is she thinking...?” the princess muttered, unsure of her sister’s intentions.

“She’s probably just being overprotective.”

“I can’t even imagine that.”

“Nah, girls like her are really caring.”

“It’s true that she used to be very kind...”

“Anyway, it’d be dumb to turn it down. Might as well take her up on her generosity.”

“Right.”

“Hey, you two want a ride?” I called out to Cuphea and Linum who were standing nearby.

“Hmph!” Cuphea just looked at me, then turned away.

“U-Um, why don’t we ride with them, Cuphea? They offered.” Flustered, Linum pushed her childhood friend towards us. We all got inside the coach, the two pairs facing each other. The interior began gently shaking before too long as we started to move.

There was an air of awkwardness inside the coach, and the princess shot me a look that said, “Do something.” It had all started when Cuphea noticed the hair clip the princess was wearing. She apparently saw my outing with the princess as a date, and that had soured her mood.

“You’re looking cute today, Cuphea.”

Cuphea ignored me and looked at the princess.

“Good morning, Astrantia.”

“G-Good morning.”

“How old did you say you were again?”

“I’m fifteen, like Linum and the other new students,” Astrantia answered, clearly confused.

“Oh, interesting. Say, Albert.” Cuphea flashed a disturbingly sweet smile at me. It sent chills down my spine.

“Wh-What?”

“You’re not making Astrantia wait three years?” I’d had the chance to close the distance between me and Cuphea a few days ago, but I had opted to put it off for two years. We had closed the day on a good note, but now she seemed to be assuming it was actually a roundabout rejection since I had gone on a date

with the even younger Astrantia.

“Like I said, it wasn’t a date. If that counts as one, then so does every single time we stop to buy sweets on our way to the orphanage.” We’d been walking together and going shopping. It was basically the same thing.

“That hair clip looks good on you, Astrantia.” Cuphea returned to ignoring me and spoke to the princess.

“Th-Thank you.”

“Did you buy it yourself?”

“Um... No, Albert gave it to me.”

“Oh, so Albert just gives girls gifts on ordinary shopping trips.” I had always considered myself someone who didn’t experience fear. Rather than allowing fear to consume you, it was better to figure out a way to overcome the situation. Then I remembered the words of an old colleague whose face I could no longer remember.

*Physical attacks don’t work on ghosts, so obviously I’m afraid of them.*

I had brushed it off at the time—you could just retreat and come back with a holy woman—but now I understood. Sometimes retreating wasn’t an option, even when faced with an opponent where regular attacks wouldn’t work. However, I was the man who had become the strongest person in my hometown—the undead known three hundred years later as the Skeleton Sword Saint. *I’ll get out of this!*

“H-Hey, Cuphea.”

“What?”

I pulled out the gift I had hastily prepared the day before. “I’m sorry for giving you the wrong idea. The princess is my master, and I *am* fond of her, both as a holy woman and as a person, but it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“I’m not so sure about that. You see knights and princesses end up together in stories all the time. Just like the book Linum bought with her pocket money.” Caught in the cross fire, Linum’s face went red, but that wasn’t important at the moment.

“There’s a reason I got her a gift, but we’ll put that aside for now. Cuphea, I want you to have this.”

Cuphea was still pouting, but she glanced in my direction. “Are you trying to butter me up with a present?”

“I won’t deny that, but I *did* choose it because I thought it’d look good on you.”

“I’ll at least see what it is.” She accepted my gift and unwrapped the paper, revealing a string she could use to tie up her hair. There was a silver ornament shaped like a flower in the middle.

“Your hair is always in a ponytail, so I figured having an extra hair tie around couldn’t hurt.”

“Yeah...” Though she was flustered for a moment, Cuphea soon returned to pouting.

“Even though we didn’t go to the festival together, we can still hang out some other time if you want. You can even give me a tour of the town.”

“You’re not just forcing yourself to say that?” Cuphea really didn’t have much confidence in herself as a woman. Linum and the princess were certainly attractive, but she was no slouch herself.

“I don’t help, train, and give gifts to people I don’t care about. So, what’s it gonna be?”

“Okay...”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Good.”

Cuphea seemed to have settled her feelings and apologized to the princess and Linum. “I’m sorry for getting you involved, Astrantia.”

“It’s fine. My knight has a tendency to be a little too friendly with women. Hopefully this was a good lesson for him.” Though the princess smiled softly, there was a pressure behind it similar to Cuphea’s from earlier. Maybe I was imagining it, but that feeling was somewhat reminiscent of the time when I’d gotten intimate with her family’s maids.

“You too, Linum. Sorry for exposing your hobby.” Cuphea apologized to her

childhood friend and gave a timid smile.

“I’m glad you two made up, but you really shouldn’t share people’s secrets,” Linum said with a stern look on her face.

“I-I know. I’m really sorry.” After seeing Cuphea’s remorseful expression, Linum laughed.

“All right, you look like you’ve learned your lesson. I forgive you.”

“J-Jeez! I thought you were actually mad at me!”

“I just wanted you to think about what you did.”

“Got it. No more talking about your bookshelves.”

“Y-You don’t have to go quite that far.” I had actually prepared a gift for Linum too so she wouldn’t be the only one left out, but I didn’t want to ruin the mood. It could wait until later.

“Albert.” Cuphea turned to face me again.

“Yeah?”

“Th-Thank you. I’m sorry for pouting like a child.”

“It’s my fault for giving you the wrong idea. We can still hang out and have some fun for the next two years.”

“Okay...” Blushing, Cuphea nodded her head.

“You gonna use that hair tie?”

“Um... All right. I guess I’ll put it on.” Cuphea let her hair down, then tied it up with the string I had given her.

“Wh-What do you think?”

“It looks good.”

“Th-Thanks. I’ll take good care of it,” she said with a smile. It was charming in a different way from her usual dignified attitude.

“Oh, but don’t go looking for it if it falls off in the Forbidden City. Your life is more important.”

“I know. I’ll just make sure it doesn’t fall off in the first place.” Cuphea spent a



little while fidgeting with her hair tie. Just as I thought the princess had been quiet for a while, I saw her whispering something to Linum.

“About that book Cuphea mentioned earlier...” said the princess.

“Are you interested in it? I’d be happy to bring it to the academy sometime.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. It was a little embarrassing to have my hobbies shared publicly, but I’d love to meet someone with similar interests.”

“Then please do.” Apparently Astrantia was interested in Linum’s book. We spent the rest of our coach ride chatting amicably.



Several days later, we arrived at the Forbidden City Luzarigue. Our training would involve getting hands-on experience exterminating curions under the supervision of actual saints and several pairs of upperclassmen. I already had plenty of experience myself, but for most of the students, this would be their first time.

Training or not, it was actual combat with the undead. Expectations would differ from reality. It would separate those who could do the dirty work from those who couldn’t stomach it.

After we dismounted our coach, the instructor in charge gave everyone a rundown of things to keep in mind. Although the city’s walls were crumbling, the barrier was still functional. Curions couldn’t enter or exit. That same barrier had kept me trapped in my hometown, so it had to be pretty strong. Apparently thieves had been a problem in the past, as humans could freely pass through the barrier. Anyone who stole from a Forbidden City was surely going to Hell. Most of them had been bitten and transformed, joining the ranks of the undead.

“This is our first step, Princess.” It might have only been training, but it was still our first time going out to kill undead together.

“Indeed. This is where it begins.”

Luzarigue’s walls had been completely sealed off, with one exception. The

original gate had been demolished, along with part of the walls, making it the only entrance. This was done to make it easy for people to check if any curions were near the entrance before heading inside. You couldn't see outside from within the barrier, but apparently the reverse was possible. Opening and closing the gate every single time only to potentially be attacked by a curion lurking in a blind spot would be both dangerous and foolish, so it was a logical decision.

The students were split into groups and then assigned a leader. "Holy Knight Albert." A girl with a golden side ponytail spoke to me.

"Oh, Lady Palustris." The twelve strongest pairs in the academy were assigned titles based on their curion extermination exploits. She was the holy woman of the eighth-ranked pair. Next to her was a large, untalkative knight. They were the two we had fought during the practical exam—Gold.

"Don't. I hate people forcing themselves to behave modestly around me just as much as I hate people looking down on commoners. Just act normally." It seemed more like a personal hang-up of hers than her being open-minded.

"All right then, I'll take you up on that, Palu."

"Albert!" The princess gasped next to me, her face pale.

Palustris had said it was fine, but maybe taking her seriously hadn't been the right call.

"Excuse me?" she asked indignantly.

"It's a nickname. You give them to friends."

"And when exactly did we become friends?"

"Just now?"

"You're certainly a bold man. Well, I suppose it's an improvement."

The princess breathed a sigh of relief after seeing that Palu wasn't mad.

"I figured you wouldn't like me too much after the practical exam. I'm glad to see that's not the case."

"I can appreciate people who are strong."

"And I can appreciate cute girls."

Listening to our conversation, Cuphea made a show of stomping on my foot. “Oh, sorry. My foot slipped.” It was cute how direct she was in showing her jealousy. She even made sure not to stomp hard enough to actually hurt me.

“Ha. Unfortunately, I’m not fond of shallow men.”

“Hey, neither am I. We’ve got a lot in common.” Really, I just wasn’t fond of men in general.

“You truly are a smooth talker.”

“And I have a lot I want to say to the future beauties of the world.” The princess covered her face with her hands as if she was ashamed. It felt like she was saying, “There my knight goes again,” but I wasn’t really causing any trouble. Cuphea was blatantly glaring at me, and Linum had a troubled look on her face.

“Good for you. Anyway, we’ll be in charge of you all.”

“Glad to hear it. It’s a pleasure to work with you, Palu. And, uh...”

“Ozias,” said the quiet knight.

“Of course. I knew that.” I remembered that it started with an “O.”

I wasn’t sure what the person who’d put our group together was thinking, but it consisted of three pairs with noble holy women and three pairs of commoners, with Palu and Ozias supervising us. One of the noble pairs included the holy woman who had bullied Cuphea. The mood was anything but good, but at least it didn’t seem like they were about to swing at each other.

“Also, Lady Astrantia.”

“Wh-What is it, Lady Palustris?” The princess was startled at being called out so suddenly.

“I have a message from Lady Orlaya. ‘Don’t be in a hurry to prove yourself.’”

“All right...”

Knowing her sister, I interpreted that as meaning “Don’t rush into danger, and come home safely.”

As we were talking, the other students started heading inside the barrier.

Finally, it was our turn to set foot inside, with Palu and Ozias leading the way.

“There was something I wanted to ask you, Albert,” said Palu.

“Just Al is fine.”

“Albert. Do you still intend to forgo divine protection, even within the Forbidden City?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.” *Guess it’s too soon to get her to call me Al.*

“There’s no shame in borrowing your holy woman’s power.”

“Are you worried about me? Thanks.”

Palustris sighed. “Lady Astrantia, while I’m unaware of the terms that were agreed upon when you appointed him as your knight, please, cast your divine protection on him at your own discretion, should it prove necessary.”

“I’ve agreed to leave it up to him,” said the princess. She would only cast divine protection on me if I asked for it. That was our promise.

“Very well.” Palu didn’t pursue the matter any further.

Once inside the barrier, we saw a city that had been frozen in time for three centuries. Roofs had collapsed, walls had crumbled, wood had rotted, buildings had been overrun by plants—and nobody had done a thing. With all its inhabitants deceased, the city itself had died. It filled me with a familiar, almost comforting, feeling. Some of the other students, however, seemed quite sad.

“We’ll be heading in this direction. Linum, what should you remember while traversing a Forbidden City?” Palu’s question startled Linum, but only for a moment as she then immediately responded.

“V-Visibility and positioning. You won’t notice curions coming from a poor vantage point, and walking near buildings increases your likelihood of being attacked from the shadows.”

“Correct. However, this area has long been maintained by our predecessors, so it should be relatively safe.” So instead of just crumbling on their own, some of the buildings had probably been destroyed. We slowly proceeded onward, staying near the center of the road.

“E-Excuse me, Lady Palustris? Why aren’t we staying near the barrier for our training?” the blonde holy woman who had bullied Cuphea asked, an uneasy expression on her face.

“An excellent question, Agrimonia. When you fight near the barrier, the idea that you can simply escape outside if things go south occupies your mind. However, saints must often venture to the center of the city to hunt curions and aid them in passing on. Being near the barrier provides a sense of safety that will only become a hindrance to gaining real experience.” It seemed like the holy woman’s name was Agrimonia. What Palu said checked out. Knowing you had a nearby escape route would make you too comfortable. Real combat wasn’t the place to be lax. To determine if a student was cut out to be a saint, the situation needed to mimic an actual battle as much as possible. “Ah, that didn’t take long.”

A horde of curions had appeared farther down the road. Just like me, they had all become skeletons over the past three hundred years. “Ah, you poor things...” A hoarse, female voice came from one of the curions. I had learned about it in class, but seeing it in person was still a shock.

Three hundred years ago, I had adapted to my transformation and regained my sanity. My adoptive father, Dan, had adapted to his undead body as well and taught me about it before I killed him. At that time, we’d been the only ones who had managed to adapt to the transformation, but three centuries had passed since then. Even people who had been slower at adapting than me could control their curion bodies to some extent now. They could speak of their own volition, and if they had been combatants in life, they could still make some use of their skills. And very rarely, some of them possessed unique abilities.

“They haven’t been blessed yet.”

“Oh, how pitiful.”

“We’ll have to fix that.”

“Eternity is something to be shared.” The voices of men and women of all ages resounded through the city streets.

*Right. That’s how it felt.* It was a nasty curse that convinced you undeath was a blessing. It was my first time hearing a curion speak aside from Dan and

myself. None of the townspeople I'd killed had been able to. Maybe I'd killed them before they had become capable of it.

"If any of you feel like you can't fight, don't force yourself. Just stand back and wrap yourself in your holy woman's divine protection," said Palu. Even people who entered the academy intent on bringing salvation to the dead might lose heart when actually faced with a curion. They weren't unspeaking undead. They were victims who approached the living with kindness in their hearts. And saints were the ones who had to kill them.

"Let's play..." There was a young child mixed into the group of curions. "Come play with me..."

Several students couldn't stomach it and vomited, clutching their chests. Cuphea and Linum went pale. They were probably reminded of the children at the orphanage. They had all been engulfed by the atmosphere of the Forbidden City. Palu and Ozias, on the other hand, were obviously unfazed, and the princess looked ready to go as well.

"Lady Astrantia, bring them salvation as you see fit." I drew my bone sword from its scabbard.

"I will. Best of luck to you, Albert."

I asked Palu a question without turning to face her. "Can I go?"

"You may. Ozias and I will protect the others." The moment she finished speaking, I dashed towards the horde.

"What's with the sword, boy?" one curion asked before I lopped off its head.

"Ah, how cruel!" another lamented as its head went flying.

"Please, don't kill me!" Upon being truly killed, all traces of them disappeared. Their bones tumbled to the ground, then crumbled into dust.

The curions I had killed in the past had left corpses. Maybe that was because it hadn't been long since they'd died. The passage of time was stopped by the witch's magic, but once they died for good, those three hundred years probably caught up to them and resulted in their bones fading away. They couldn't even leave behind a body anymore. "Good job hanging in there for three hundred

years. I'll guide you all to your next lives now."

"What are you talking about?"

"We were going to live together as a family forever!"

"How dare you kill my husband!"

"Murderer!"

"Even a man like you is deserving of the blessing."

"Please, sin no further."

"Sorry, but you've all gotta die. It's my duty as a holy knight." I put an end to their immortality, sometimes cutting off their hands, sometimes taking away their legs to impede their mobility, and sometimes kicking their heads right off. Just as it crossed my mind that there were an awful lot of male voices coming my way, a pale light streaked past me and enveloped the child curion from earlier. When the light faded, the curion had been reduced to lifeless bones, clattering to the ground and crumbling to dust.

"I pray that you reach adulthood in your next life." The princess had used her magic to make the undead pass on. It was just as effective now as it had been three hundred years ago. However, it could only kill one at a time, and it was difficult to maintain divine protections while casting it, so the presence of a holy knight was still necessary. Since the princess didn't have to worry about using her mana to power my divine protection, she could fire it off more freely than other holy women. She seemed to be specifically targeting women and children out of consideration for me.

*I sure am lucky to have her as a master.* Careful not to interfere with me, she kept up her support. Just as we thought we had finished off the first group, more curions poured into the street to take their place.

"Albert! I'll back you up!" Her red ponytail bouncing, Cuphea popped up next to me, clad in Linum's divine protection. She swung her sword as swiftly as the wind, putting an end to three curions.

"You good to go now?" I continued fighting as I spoke to her.

"Seeing it firsthand was rougher than I expected, but running away was never

an option.”

“Well, look at you.” I cut down another four curions.

“A-And also...”

“Hm?”

“We promised to fight together!” She swept a curion’s legs out from underneath it and cut off its head, then twisted around and sliced another oncoming curion’s head off right above the jaw.

“You got that right.”

“Anyway, you’re way too strong! You can take out four in the time it takes me to beat one!”

“That’s why I’m the teacher.”

Cuphea had made up her mind to fight, and Linum’s divine protection wasn’t wavering in the slightest. They would make good saints.

“Also, use your divine protection! You’re scaring me! What if you get bitten?!”

I couldn’t tell her I’d already been bitten. “You’ll just have to kill me if that happens.”

“That is so not funny!”

I just laughed. Before me was a swarm of undead intent on blessing me. To my side was a friend fighting her hardest, and behind me was my master providing excellent support. Killing curions meant killing people who had once been human. It would never be fun, but it wasn’t as depressing as it had been three hundred years ago. Maybe it was their presence helping me out, or maybe I’d just gotten used to it. Eventually the other students joined in, perhaps inspired by Cuphea and me. By the end, there wasn’t a single person who hadn’t fought.

“You all pass. After we clear out the next wave, we’ll retreat to the barrier.” Everyone ended up getting a passing score. Once Palu and Ozias joined the fight, the curions were wiped out in a flash. “Now, fall back—”

The world rocked violently for a moment. It was like someone took the earth



itself by the shoulders and shook it. Several people fell over, and a few nearby buildings collapsed. When the shaking died down, purple flames rose up a short distance away.

“It can’t be...” Palu was dumbfounded.

“Pestilent Fire...” Ozias muttered, causing everyone to remember a certain curion. This member of the Twelve Corpses was said to only move from a certain spot when an intruder dared to approach it, causing it to go on a rampage—the Pestilent Guardian Dragon.

“Looks like someone pissed off the dragon.” Nobody responded to me. The reality of the situation hadn’t yet sunk in.

# Chapter 9

## The Guardian Dragon and the Sword Saint

“W-We have to get out of here,” said a holy woman, her voice trembling with fear.

“Getting you all outside the barrier is our top priority.” Palu made the call for us to retreat outside the city.

As we ran to the exit, I asked Palu a question. “Am I supposed to take that to mean you’re staying behind?”

“Of course. It’s my duty as your supervisor to prioritize your safety, but I’m not going to abandon the others.” There wasn’t a hint of hesitation in her voice.

“How admirable.”

“That’s what it means to be a saint.”

“Right...” What to do? Palu was adamant about staying to help the other students evacuate past the barrier, but that increased the chances she might cross paths with the guardian dragon. She and Ozias were good, but I wasn’t confident they’d be able to take one of the Twelve Corpses, especially not during an emergency.

“Why did the Pestilent Guardian Dragon take action?” asked the princess, a grave look on her face.

“Some moron probably got curious and provoked it.”

“Surely nobody would do something so foolish...” While I considered it a possibility, the princess didn’t seem very convinced. Maybe leaping headfirst into certain death was too unbelievable.

In the meantime, the exit came into view. Several holy women and holy knights had gathered in the area right before the edge of the barrier, where the gate had been demolished, checking their clothes and bodies for any injuries.

“Ah, they made it!” Agrimonia cried out, relieved. Some of her noble friends were part of that group. I saw some of the saints sent to supervise us as well, but something seemed off.

“There are still students inside the barrier. Shouldn’t they be helping?” Cuphea asked. Her question was a valid one. One step ahead, I had already arrived at the answer. I could feel it from them—that familiar warmth.

“Palu.”

“I know.” Though we had stopped in our tracks at Palu’s command, some of the students still hadn’t realized something was wrong. “Do you have any last words?” she asked the group in front of the barrier.

“We have committed a terrible sin. We brutally murdered innocent people who only wanted to enjoy the happiness of eternal life,” said the holy knight. It had adapted remarkably fast to already be capable of speech, or maybe speech just developed faster nowadays. It could be that knowledge of the transformation process helped with adapting to your undead body faster. Regardless, it didn’t seem to have regained enough sense of self to resist the blessing.

Were you powerless to resist the curse no matter how much you had studied it while alive? The next to speak was the holy woman. “Despite our sins, they welcomed us as fellows with love and affection.”

“You all must be blessed as well...”

“Blessed!”

Curions couldn’t leave the barrier, which was why they were confined to the Forbidden City. Even after turning, their memories and personalities from their time as humans remained. However, the curse had convinced them that being undead was a happy thing. They were curions with the knowledge and abilities of saints. They had cut off our retreat in order to save us from our misfortune and sadness.

“No... It can’t be...” Agrimonia’s face was warped with despair. I couldn’t blame her. When my adoptive father first turned, I had frozen up too. But that was all the more reason I couldn’t condone that sentimentality. I knew firsthand

that it led to death.

“I’ll kill them. Hurry up and get outside.”

“Wh-What are you saying?!” Agrimonia shrieked and glared at me.

“We don’t have time. You can grieve for the dead later.” She looked at me incredulously, like I was some kind of monster.

“Y-You’re inhuman.”

“For once, I agree with you.” I had long since stopped being human. I was just a curion who had regained his flesh.

“Watch your tongue, Agrimonia. Albert is carrying out the duty of a saint. Deep down, you know that. Once a person has become a curion, there’s no saving them,” said Palu. Supported by her holy knight, Agrimonia looked like she was on the verge of tears. “The rest of you don’t need to move, but at least maintain your divine protections.”

The only ones who sprung into action were Ozias and I. There were seven pairs—fourteen enemies facing us. The holy women covered their holy knights in pale light. Even as curions, they retained their magic. Since they still had their memories and feelings, they retained their faith in the goddess, allowing them to use her magic. Aside from spreading the blessing now being their top priority, they were otherwise unchanged.

Ozias made liberal use of his Physical Enhancement, cutting right through the Physical Protection of a curion holy knight. He observed it carefully and struck the areas where its protection was weaker without hesitation. Ozias cleaved it clean in half horizontally, then crushed its neck with his greatsword.

During that time, I had killed four holy knights myself. It didn’t matter that they had Physical Protection. That just meant I had to hit them with enough strength to break through their defenses. Four heads went flying through the air, and I cut through another two before they hit the ground. Well, it was less of a cut and more of a splatter due to the amount of force I was using, but the result was the same.

Together, we had killed all seven holy knights. Only the seven holy women remained. My muscles screamed in protest as I ignored the limits of the human

body, but the princess could fix me up later. The only drawback was the intense pain I felt as I continued the way I had as an undead. In this one specific situation, being a skeleton might have actually been preferable.

“You cut right through their Physical Protection. What are you?” Ozias mumbled something, but we needed to put an end to this quickly.

I could feel the rumbling behind us rapidly approaching. At the rate things were going, the Pestilent Guardian Dragon would get here while Cuphea and the others were still inside the barrier.

Closing the distance between myself and the holy women, I cut off one head after another, enduring the pain and conflict in my heart. Even after hundreds of years, and even knowing they were undead, it still pained me to kill women. Nonetheless, I didn’t stop. It was a feeling I had experienced all too many times already.

“You—”

“But how?”

“You should hear the voice—”

“The blessing—”

They were curious too. They had realized I was one of them.

“But we’re happy.”

“I know you are.” I cut off the head of the final holy woman in one stroke. Even though they’d bullied Cuphea, that didn’t mean they couldn’t have changed and become honest saints. Maybe they could’ve made up with Cuphea and Linum. But all those possibilities had been taken from them the moment they’d turned. “All right, the way is clear. Let’s get outta here.”

Since they had just died, their corpses didn’t crumble to dust. While it would have been nice to recover their bodies, the top priority was getting everyone still alive outside the barrier.

“Ah... How could this happen...?” Falling to her knees, Agrimonia was forcibly dragged away by Palu.

“Hurry it up! Do you want to become curious too?” The students escaped

outside the barrier at Palu's urging.

"I-I'm sorry, Albert. I said we'd fight together, but I..." As we headed outside the barrier, Cuphea apologized to me with tears in her eyes. She bit her lip as though ashamed of herself. Killing someone who had been your fellow student until just a moment ago was different from killing a skeleton. The mental toll from killing someone who still appeared human was on another level entirely.

"Given the situation, how you reacted was understandable." I'd just had three hundred years to get over it. Cuphea evacuated to outside the barrier alongside Linum.

"Albert, are you all right?" The princess looked up at me with concern in her eyes.

"Yeah. I might have overdone it a bit, but I can still move."

"That's not what I mean..."

"Then what?"

"I-It looked like something heavy was weighing on your mind." I had no idea what she was talking about.

Once we were outside the barrier, Palu reported to the other supervisors and I took a moment to think about what the princess had said. *I looked like something was weighing on my mind?* It sounded like I had looked deeply troubled. Come to think of it, I'd never had a chance to look at myself in the mirror on that day three hundred years ago. Maybe I'd had that same look on my face when I cut down the people of my hometown all those years ago.

"Albert."

"What's up, Princess?"

"There are some who will fear you for cutting down the undead without hesitation."

"Yeah, I know." I had become quite familiar with being seen as a monster, both now and in the past.

"Most people struggle to separate themselves from their feelings for the dead."

“I know that too.”

“Yet despite knowing that, you wield your blade to save those who are cursed and protect those who still live. You’re a good person.” She looked like she was about to cry.

“Why are you making that face? Do you need a handkerchief?”

“N-No. I’m just upset about what Agrimonia said.”

“That I’m inhuman? Why are you getting upset? I’m the one she was talking about.”

“She insulted my knight! Obviously I’m going to be upset!”

“O-Oh.” The princess yelled at me, causing the others around us to turn our way.

“A-Anyway, you did the right thing.” I didn’t really care if it was right or wrong. I’d just been doing my duty as a holy knight. That was really how I felt. At least, I thought I did, but for some reason, the princess’s words set me at ease.

“Holy Knight Albert.” Palu came walking up to us.

“Hey, Palu.”

“Well done back there.”

“I’m honored to have your praise. Do you need something from me?”

“Yes. There’s a group that has yet to return.” Palu must have checked with the others who had made it out. Obviously, she wasn’t talking about the group we had just killed. “Stay here and don’t go anywhere.”

Entrusting supervision of our group to us, the two members of Gold headed back inside the barrier. The princess and I promptly went in after them.

“Why are you following us?”

“There’s no way I can allow a beautiful girl like you to leave this world.”

“Surely you don’t feel the same way, Lady Astrantia. Your sister told you not to be in a hurry to prove yourself.”

“I can’t abandon the people who haven’t made it out,” Astrantia replied. “And I think you’ve already seen the utility my knight can provide.”

“Very well then. Seriously, where have you been hiding all this time?”

*In another Forbidden City.* Not that I could tell her that. “You wanna get to know me?”

“Ha. Didn’t I make myself clear before? I’m not fond of shallow men.”

We once again entered the barrier. We felt intermittent tremors, the source of which seemed to be rapidly approaching. We would soon find ourselves face-to-face with the Pestilent Guardian Dragon.



There were twelve unique curions that humanity had been unable to exterminate for the past three centuries. Ordinary curions hadn’t been fully exterminated simply due to their sheer numbers. However, the Twelve Corpses remained for other reasons—some possessed overwhelming strength, some had dangerous abilities, and some rarely showed themselves.

Of the twelve, the Pestilent Guardian Dragon was known for causing the fewest casualties. That was because it never moved from the building it protected. If you could ignore an enemy you couldn’t defeat at no cost, then putting it off was perfectly reasonable. However, that enemy had now begun to move.

“The barrier’s just a little farther!” I heard a voice from the direction of the shaking. All the dust made it hard to see, but it seemed like a group of survivors was running from the guardian dragon. A gust of wind blew the dust away, revealing several pairs of surviving saints and a skeletal drake.

The skeleton reminded me of a crocodile. It had four legs and a tail but no wings. Its massive body looked like a two-story building had fallen on its side, and it was stomping through the Forbidden City at incredible speed. It would soon catch up to the people fleeing from it. Yet, for some reason, it came to a sudden stop. I wasn’t so foolish as to believe it had given up.

“Get to cover!”



The only ones able to react to my warning were Ozias and a pair of fleeing saints. I picked up the princess, and Ozias shouldered Palu, both of us leaping to either side. A moment later, the drake's lower jaw opened and purple flames poured out. A torrent of fire blew through the street, and when it cleared, there were saints bathed in flames, screaming in pain and rolling around on the ground.

"I-I need to heal them!" Astrantia was about to rush out into the street when I stopped her.

"It's too late, Princess."

"But—"

"They're not being burned, they're being cursed. We learned about it in class, remember?" The Pestilent Guardian Dragon wouldn't rampage unless someone got close to its building. That information was only known because someone had angered it in the past and lived to tell the tale. That same survivor had explained the guardian dragon's ability. Its name was Pestilent Fire. Anyone struck by the dragon's breath was cursed. Its noxious flames rotted the flesh, instantly turning the victim into a skeleton. It easily overwhelmed a holy woman's Physical Protection, making it extremely problematic. "How many times do you think you can withstand its breath, Princess?" I asked as I put her down.

"At least once." Astrantia pulled several manastones out of her pocket. She had stored mana in case of emergencies. Manastones were too expensive for the average person to use, but the princess had several that she regularly filled with mana.

"All right. Ozias, you get the survivors! I'll handle the dragon!" I took off running before he could even respond. Fighting something the size of a building was crazy, but I was and had always been a holy knight. My previous battles against monsters had provided me with the experience of fighting creatures several times larger than a human.

The dragon noticed my presence and tried to open its mouth again. I wasn't sure how it could even breathe fire when it was nothing but bones, but that was just how curion abilities worked. All I needed to know was that the fire came

out of its mouth. I slid directly under its head and thrust my blade upwards. The bone sword and the dragon's jaw collided with a dull thud, forcing its head slightly higher and making its flames burn up the second floor of a nearby building. The purple flames seemed to also function as regular fire, leaving the building smoldering.

"I have the survivors and finished off the ones who turned!" Ozias's voice reached my ears. It was reassuring to see that he worked fast. Seemingly angry that there were survivors, the dragon quickly turned its attention towards them.

"Then get outta here already!" I yelled back at Ozias. I thrust my sword between the bones of the dragon's foot, trying to hold it back, but it continued moving without a care. I could hear the sound of my muscles tearing and the ground cracking where I had plunged my sword into it, yet the sound of the dragon's footsteps soon drowned it out.

"We'll be back!"

"You're a brave man, Albert."

I thought I heard Ozias and Palu say something, but I could've just been hearing things. At any rate, they held the eighth rank in the academy. They would get the survivors out. They should understand the futility of hesitating during an emergency.

*And to be honest, they'd just get in the way here.* Although it was still going after the survivors, I pulled back my blade and ran out from underneath the dragon, slipping between its front and back legs. Then I acted like I was headed to the building it usually protected. "Hey, you overgrown lizard! That building you love so much is this way, right?"

My attempt to draw its attention proved effective almost immediately. The dragon turned its head and faced me. *As I thought, it's really attached to that building.* Even now, it still held on to its memories, feelings, and attachments from when it had been alive. Unlike other curions, it didn't attack humans on sight. It retained its sense of self and remained at that spot by its own will.

The dragon roared in anger, so loud it nearly ruptured my eardrums. It seemed like skeletal dragons could still roar, just like normal skeletons could

still talk. I would've had to come up with another plan if it had continued chasing after Ozias, but fortunately that wasn't necessary.

The princess and I were now opposite each other, with the dragon between us. I didn't have to worry about her getting caught up in the Pestilent Fire if it attacked me. Just as that thought crossed my mind, it breathed its noxious fire all over me. It was more spread out than last time, leaving me with nowhere to escape.

"Perfect." Grinning, I charged straight at the dragon. Engulfed by the fire, my skin burned and rotted. The smell of burning hair and flesh soon disappeared—it scorched my body so badly my sense of smell ceased to function. My eyes evaporated and my field of vision was altered. The feeling of the sword in my hands was no longer from my sense of touch. Clad in purple flames, I had been freed from the shackles of the flesh.



“Thanks for taking that skin off. Couldn’t have done it without your help, lizard.” Back in my skeletal body for the first time in a while, I lunged at the guardian dragon when it finished spewing fire. It stiffened up as though startled, and I slammed my bone sword against its upper jaw.

Its head slammed into the ground, the impact shaking the earth. Although my uniform had taken a few divine protection-enhanced slashes, it must have been fire-resistant, as it still clung to my skeleton body, only slightly singed. Having a living body was nice and all, but fighting as a skeleton was much easier. The dragon groaned as it slowly raised its head. It must have realized I hadn’t become an ally.

“Can’t say I planned for this when I woke up this morning, but I’m not gonna pass up a perfect opportunity. You’re gonna be number one.” Then the Twelve Corpses would become eleven. It was time to kill the Pestilent Guardian Dragon.

Curions possessed three abilities. The Witch’s Gospel was the mental manipulation that made them think the curse was a blessing, and the ability to spread the infection. I was already a curion, so that one posed no threat to me. The Skeleton’s Grace granted near immortality and bone regeneration. That one was trouble. Every crack I had managed to put into the Pestilent Guardian Dragon had already disappeared. Finally, there was the Embodiment of the Spirit—a unique power only a few curions possessed. That was what allowed the Pestilent Guardian Dragon’s fire to spread the gospel. To me, however, it was no different from ordinary fire.

As far as I was concerned, the most annoying things about the dragon were its regenerative abilities and its sheer size. I looked down at my sword. While it was sufficient for killing people, I wasn’t confident it could behead a dragon. “Guess this isn’t gonna cut it.” It wasn’t helping me, so I tossed it aside. I had never been one to get attached to my weapons.

I reached behind my head and put my hand on my cervical vertebrae. “Bone Sword Generation.” I envisioned myself drawing a sword, with my own body as the scabbard. The more precise the image, the sturdier the sword. I closed my hand and felt the weighty grip of the sword. This was the unique ability I had obtained in death.

“This one oughta do the trick.” In my hand was a greatsword similar to Ozias’s. However, it was made entirely of my bones. My power as a curion granted me an unlimited number of weapons.

Noticing its fire was ineffective, the dragon resorted to swiping at me with its right foreleg. Such an attack could demolish boulders, but instead of evading it, I met it with my greatsword. The moment it made contact with my sword, its sharp claws were cleanly sliced off and went flying. Leaving its right leg swiping at the empty air, I immediately raced towards its left leg. This time, I cut it right through it. If it had been human, it would be like cutting through its wrist. Rather than a clean slice, it was more like smashing through a tree trunk with brute force.

The dragon lost its balance and its head once again slammed into the ground. Not letting up, I raised my sword overhead so I could cleave its head off. Realizing that its forelegs wouldn’t regenerate in time, the guardian dragon rolled to avoid my slash. I had heard something about crocodiles rolling after biting into their prey, and it seemed drakes used a similar tactic. Just when I thought I had dodged out of the way, it rolled in the opposite direction and came towards me. It was both an evasive maneuver and a counterattack.

Not inclined to let myself be crushed, I put some distance between us and circled around the dragon. The buildings that had been in its way crumbled beneath it and were reduced to rubble. “You had that dragon knight guy as your partner back when you were alive, right? You think he’d appreciate you destroying his city?” Even though I knew it couldn’t respond, I just kinda felt like running my mouth a bit.

After its roll failed to kill me, the guardian dragon decided to switch things up and used its powerful hind legs to leap off the ground.

“Seriously?” There was so much force behind its jump that the building-sized creature hurtled towards me like a speeding arrow. It was possible to avoid it, but I didn’t want the dragon getting behind me—then the princess and I would be on the same side. I had deliberately placed us opposite each other and drawn the guardian dragon’s attention.

There was no time to think—I braced myself, deciding to take it head-on. I

was blown away like I had been struck by a carriage, only stopping after colliding with the stone wall of a house. “Figures that wouldn’t work.” I immediately got up and raced back into the street. A second later, the dragon crashed into the house and turned it into a pile of rubble. “That was somebody’s home, y’know?”

After seeing that its fire hadn’t worked, the dragon seemed to have realized the threat its size posed to me and had changed tactics. The bones of its forelegs had already finished regenerating. Shaking its head, the guardian dragon extracted itself from the rubble.

“If I had the time, I could finish it with just this sword.”

Palu and potentially others were probably headed this way. I had to settle things before they arrived.

“C’mon. I’ll end this with the next blow.” I beckoned to the dragon with my free hand. It let out a cautious roar but eventually came charging at me. A moment later, it collided with my sword. However, it wasn’t my greatsword.

A massive sword burst out of the ground, thrusting into the dragon and pushing it into the air. I had created it with my Bone Sword Generation. By activating my ability at the bottom of my feet, I had extended a bone through the ground and created a sword beneath the guardian dragon. My ability was controlled through imagery, and I’d had three hundred years to hone my imagination. I was capable of creating more than just handheld weapons—I could create weapons of any shape and any size.

I just couldn’t use it too much. Although I was an undead that shouldn’t have felt fatigue, I grew oddly tired when using my ability for too long. The same was true when I increased its scale. I didn’t know what would happen to me when that exhaustion reached its limit, and I wasn’t eager to find out.

“Sorry. I can be pretty competitive.” It was a holy knight’s duty to defeat any enemy before them. Vulnerable and pierced by the giant blade, the dragon’s backside was exposed. I swung my sword at its neck before it could react, and the blade struck true, slicing its head clean off.

It was a little anticlimactic, but it would have been nearly impossible for a human to pull off the same feat. To start with, most people would have been

infected by the Pestilent Fire and started attacking their allies. Even if they somehow got around the dragon's breath, they would have to immobilize it and cut its neck with a force greater than what was possible for a human. Combined with the fact that it was harmless unless provoked, it was no wonder the Pestilent Guardian Dragon had been left alone. It had been a powerful enough foe to even make me relinquish my flesh.

Its massive head hit the ground with a loud thud. I made the giant bone sword disappear, causing its body to slam to the ground as well. I landed comfortably on my feet, victorious, but still uneasy. The greatsword I had used to behead the dragon was glowing purple. And that wasn't all. The next moment, my consciousness faded.



Before me stood a man wearing a reassuring smile. "I'm sorry. Your mother turned into a monster. There was no other way." I had been waiting for my mother to return to the nest, but a strange human clad in white had appeared instead. The fear in my heart grew.

I instinctively snapped at the man's arm, causing him to wince in pain for a moment before covering it with a smile and patting my head with his other arm. "There, there. It's all right." Then I—no, not I. This wasn't *my* memory.

"Everyone says dragons can't be tamed, but I'm gonna try my best to raise you. I owe you that much." Suddenly, I understood. This was the Pestilent Guardian Dragon's memory. I'd never seen the memories of a curion I'd killed before. What was going on? There was still a lot I didn't understand about the witch's curse. More importantly, it didn't seem like there was any way out of this memory. I'd just have to stick around for a while.



The dragon was taken in by the holy knight who'd killed his mother. That same holy knight gave him the name Hector. Though, really, he just started living near Hector's nest all of his own accord. No matter how much hostility the dragon showed him, he would just ward him off with a gentle smile and tell him not to attack people. He possessed incredible fortitude and kept it up for three whole years.



The man seemed to have studied dragon ecology, and he taught Hector to hunt for food in place of his mother, using gestures to teach him how to build his nest as he grew larger. When Hector came down with a disease unique to dragons, the man did everything in his power to nurse the creature back to health and even procured medicine from who knows where.

The man sometimes had to leave to conduct his work as a holy knight, but he always returned to the dragon. His persistence was so great that Hector eventually picked up the human language. Despite that, the dragon's attitude remained cold.

In truth, Hector had realized his mother had been acting strange before she had been killed. She had even attacked Hector, not recognizing him as her own child. Though the dragon understood the holy knight's actions, he still felt opening up to the man would be betraying his mother. It wasn't until the knight was nearly killed by his own allies that Hector finally opened his heart to him.

Apparently Hector was supposed to have been killed alongside his mother, but the man had opposed it and gotten the holy knights to postpone their judgment. However, no matter how much time passed, the dragon remained untamed. It was decided that he needed to be exterminated before he could cause any damage. Given that Hector's mother had been killed by a human, it was logical to expect that he would harbor resentment towards humanity.

Yet the man stood up for Hector. He went so far as to defend the dragon from his own allies. It was then that Hector realized dragons were feared by the creatures around them. Aside from his mother, that man had been the only one to ever care for him. He was standing against his own people to defend a juvenile dragon. That took guts.

Hector lay flat on the ground to show that he wouldn't resist. The man immediately understood and petted Hector, insisting that he was harmless. The other holy knights were taken aback, but having seen proof that Hector didn't attack people and would listen to commands, they once again put the dragon's extermination on hold.

Eventually, someone suggested that the man take Hector on a mission with him. They started fighting monsters together, the man atop Hector's back. After

a few years, Hector was even granted permission to enter the city.

“I’m so busy I rarely get to visit, but this is where I grew up.” It was a church that looked after orphans. The yard was large enough to accommodate Hector, and he would regularly fall asleep there. The children were wary at first, but once they realized he wasn’t dangerous, they started climbing on him and playing. “My parents died a long time ago, and the people here took me in. That’s why I refuse to let the death of your parents be the end.”

That was the reason he hadn’t abandoned the dragon. Eventually, the man came to be known as the dragon knight, and Hector, beloved by the townspeople, was called the guardian dragon. Yet one day, that happiness came to an abrupt end.

“Hector! This is bad! Undead are appearing all over the city. The rate the infection is spreading isn’t normal.” The man came running back from the holy knight quarters, his face pale, as Hector rested in the churchyard. Undead were appearing? What was the big deal? They had exterminated undead plenty of times. A little fire breath was all it took to be done with them.

“We can’t; they’re in the middle of the city. And these aren’t just any random undead—they’re the citizens of this city. The people we’re supposed to protect.” The man spoke as though he could read Hector’s mind. “Anyway, I’m gonna gather up the holy knights and evacuate everyone we can. I want you to protect this place.” Hector wanted to go with the man, but he couldn’t refuse his partner’s request. “Please, Hector. Don’t let anyone hurt my family or my home. I need you to protect the ones I love.”

Hector reluctantly nodded. The man told the people inside the church to barricade the doors and to not open them until he returned. How much time had passed since then? Hector kept his promise, killing all the undead who approached the church—sometimes crushing them, sometimes tearing them up with his claws. Some of them were people he recognized, but he kept his promise to the man and killed every single person who tried to enter the church.

Long after the dragon had lost track of how many undead he had killed, the man finally returned. Though Hector wanted to complain that the man had kept

him waiting for far too long, he quickly realized there was something off with his partner. His face was pale, his eyes vacant, and his body covered in bite marks and blood. His gait was unsteady, and his arms were held forward, grasping at nothing. These were all unmistakable traits of the undead.

The man bit at Hector's foreleg as the dragon sat there dumbfounded. It took a while for the man to notice his bites were ineffective, which prompted him to then unsheathe his sword. Seemingly having remembered something, he used it as leverage to tear off one of Hector's scales and bit the flesh underneath. All the while, Hector hadn't moved a muscle. The dragon couldn't process the fact that the man had died.

However, the pain of being bitten spurred the dragon into action. He had to keep his promise. Reflexively swinging his foreleg, he slapped his partner away. The man became a stain on the side of a distant house, like a fruit that had been thrown at a wall. A split-second decision was all it had taken to erase his partner from the world.

Had he acted just a little slower, Hector wouldn't have become one of the Twelve Corpses. The Eternal Witch's curse made you believe that being undead was a blessing, that a world free from the fear of death and separation from your loved ones was a happy place. However, Hector had killed his loved one with his own hands before turning. Obtaining eternity was meaningless to him. It was killing his partner that had allowed him to retain his sense of self.

The guardian dragon never let go of the promise he'd made to his partner as he continued to protect the church. The adults and children inside were probably long dead, or maybe they had managed to escape at some point. Either way, Hector hadn't seen their faces since that day. He was too afraid to look inside.

The dragon remained faithful to his promise, long after it had ceased to serve any purpose. He eliminated those who came to exterminate him and those who mistakenly believed the building he protected housed some sort of treasure. He could no longer remember the name or face of the man who had given him the name Hector.

Only two things kept echoing in his mind—the name he had been given and

the promise he had made. He was house watching for a man who would never return home. But now, even that had come to an end. He had been defeated by a lone holy knight.



“Al... Sir Al!”

I felt like I was waking up from a dream. I saw the princess’s worried face as she shook my shoulders. I had been standing in place, dreaming of the dragon. I had seen the dragon’s memories from its perspective, kind of like how you could envision yourself as someone else in a dream.

“Are you all right? You were unresponsive for several minutes.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

The princess looked relieved. She must have been really worried.

“I must say, I’m impressed.”

“Did you think I’d lose?”

“No, I just thought we were planning on saving the Twelve Corpses until after graduation.”

“It was only one, but that just means we’re ahead of schedule now.”

“Indeed. Are you certain you’re okay? Does anything feel off?”

I couldn’t blame the princess for being worried after I’d spent several minutes motionless in the middle of a battlefield. I had also lost the flesh armor she’d restored for me.

“I’m not sure how, but I think I saw the dragon’s memories.”

“Memories? You mean of when the Pestilent Guardian Dragon was alive?”

“Yeah. He was keeping an old promise he made.” The guardian dragon had been keeping his promise to protect the people in the church. While it reminded me of Cuphea and Linum, that wasn’t the only thing.

*“Thank you, Al. For protecting the ones I love.”*

Those were the words my adoptive father had said to me three hundred years

ago. Having experienced his life, I was well aware of the guilt that had weighed on the dragon's shoulders. His partner wouldn't have blamed him—he had kept his promise. But the dragon had thought otherwise. If only he had been able to hear the words my adoptive father had told me.

“U-Um, Sir Al... You beat the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, so what's going on here?”

“What do you me— Oh.” I realized what she meant partway through speaking and stopped in my tracks. The dragon's head and body were still there. If it had truly died, the past three centuries would have caught up with it and its bones would have crumbled to dust. It hadn't shown any signs of life, so I had been late to realize something was wrong. In fact, that wasn't the first thing I had noticed. Its headless bones had started to move.

“What in the—”

“Damn it.” I immediately threw the princess over my shoulder and retreated, my greatsword in my other hand. There was no way I could leave the princess in harm's way when I had no idea what was happening.

“S-Sir Al, what's going on?”

“I don't know! But it's not the guardian dragon's consciousness controlling that body anymore! I know for a fact the dragon's dead!”

“B-But it just moved!”

I heard the sound of destruction behind us. Was it just attacking everything at random? Even after a curion's eyes rotted away, it could still observe its surroundings through its eye sockets. Had losing its head taken away its ability to see? How was it moving again after I'd decapitated it and it had died a second time?

“Has it become immortal?” I pondered.

“Sir Al?”

“My initial theory about the curse was that the mastermind was using it to experiment with immortality.”

The princess knew I wouldn't talk about something irrelevant at a time like

this.

“I agree. The documents left in my family suggest as much,” the princess stated.

“Since they die when their heads are cut off, it isn’t true immortality.”

“That’s true, but the witch wasn’t supposed to have found a solution to that.”

“Wasn’t finding that solution the purpose of the experiment?”

The princess was at a loss for words.

“It was an experiment involving the entire world to see if a perfect immortal could be created by an imperfect curse.”

“S-So that dragon is a perfect immortal?” If that were the case, my battle with the dragon would have fulfilled the witch’s greatest desire.

“I don’t think so. Like I said, the dragon’s consciousness is gone.”

“You mean only its bones are immortal?”

“Exactly. Even after its flesh and soul are gone, its empty shell continues to move. I guess you could call that immortality.” The witch wasn’t content just making a mockery of life—she’d made a mockery of death too.

After putting some distance between myself and the dragon, I stopped and set the princess down. Then I got on one knee. “Lady Astrantia.” I said her name with genuine respect. It wasn’t the same as when I spoke politely to other people. Sensing that something was wrong, she immediately straightened up.

“What is it, my knight?”

“I ask that you lend me your strength.”

It took her a moment to respond. “Are you certain?” When we’d made our contract, I’d asked her to stay out of my fights and her compromise was that she would only use magic on herself unless I requested it.

“My fight with the dragon is over, and I don’t think my sword alone is gonna do it anymore. Relying on your prayers is the only way to set him free.” It was pathetic, but there was nothing else I could do when faced with a foe my blades couldn’t kill. And after seeing that dream, I couldn’t leave things unfinished.

“Wonderful.” The princess looked at me fondly. “You seem to think of yourself as selfish and unreliable, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth. You’re willing to discard your own pride and request assistance out of respect for the fallen dragon. I truly admire your compassion.” Astrantia clasped her hands together, tilted her head, and closed her eyes. It was only for a moment, but it was so beautiful I was certain I would never forget it. “You are the noble sword saint. A knight I can take pride in.” The princess smiled radiantly, full of respect from the bottom of her heart.

At that moment, I finally understood. The warmth that filled my chest despite my lack of flesh made me realize my feelings. I had completely—

“Does that mean you’re cool with me inviting you to my bedroom in three years?”

Astrantia frowned, then giggled in exasperation.

“Do you want me to curse you?”

“I’m already cursed, so how about you pray for me instead?”

“Pray for you I will, my holy knight. So that you may deliver salvation upon the dragon.”

Gripping my glowing purple bone sword, I stood up. I was going to fulfill my duty as a holy knight—no, we were fighting together now. I was going to fulfill my duty as a saint.



After quickly wrapping up our strategy meeting, I faced the guardian dragon alone. My only goal was to buy time—I didn’t have the princess’s divine protection. Although I had just asked for her prayers, the sentiment was enough. The dragon was the one who needed her powers right now, not me.

I raced underneath the dragon, cutting both its forelegs as I passed. “Try not to destroy too much. This is the city you and your partner protected, after all.” The headless dragon, now just bones without a soul, simply rampaged mindlessly. It had the destructive force of a natural disaster, but as an opponent, it proved woefully insufficient. It was no longer capable of using tactics as it had before.

To avoid damaging the city any further, my plan was to sever its legs and tail. They would immediately grow back, but that just meant I had to sever them again. Though the dragon was likely blind, it slowly struggled and writhed its way forward.

“Try to make it quick, Princess...” Seeing the creature in this state was an affront to the dragon’s legacy. I was growing more and more furious with the witch behind it all.

“Sir Al!”

I heard the princess’s voice in the distance.

“You ready?” I asked.

I saw the princess emerge out onto the street in a pose of prayer. Particles of light poured out of her, all rushing towards the dragon’s skeleton. I promptly dodged out of the way to avoid coming into contact with them. It was a spell that had existed three hundred years ago—one to turn the living dead back into the unliving dead. Since then, it had been further refined for use against curions.

Although I had seen her use it before, it had never had this much light. Even now, it probably wouldn’t be sufficient to finish off one of the Twelve Corpses. However, I suspected it would be enough for the dragon. The spell consumed an immense amount of mana in order to force the soul to pass on, but the dragon’s soul was already gone. All that was left was neutralizing whatever was manipulating the dragon’s skeleton—undoubtedly something related to the Eternal Witch’s curse. Magic to nullify the curse should prove effective.

“Whoa.” In fact, it was already working. The dragon’s tail and hind legs had stopped regenerating, and its bones were crumbling starting from the rear. However, its remaining front half slowly crawled towards the princess on partially formed forelegs. *Is it focusing all its regenerative powers to the front?* Even though it now lacked a head to think, I couldn’t come up with any other explanation.

Annoyingly, I couldn’t lay a hand on it while it was wrapped up in that light. It would have the same effect on me. Meanwhile, the dragon’s upper body was drawing near to the source of the light. All of the princess’s attention was on



her magic. She was diligent, and the dragon had lost its soul, but it was still a tall order to ask a freshman holy woman to kill one of the Twelve Corpses.

She was in no condition to move, and picking her up would probably ruin her concentration. Fully aware of that, the princess stared directly at the dragon. Would she die first, or would it?

“Nothing ever goes as planned, huh?” Prepared for death, I got ready to stand between the princess and the dragon as my greatsword began to shake. It had been glowing purple ever since I’d decapitated the dragon. “Wait... Is that what this is?”

I didn’t have time to think about it. If I was wrong, then I would just have to jump between the dragon and protect the princess, even if that meant being vaporized by her light. Careful to avoid being hit by it, I stood beside her. “You’re almost there, Princess. I know you can do it.” It was a little cliché, but I truly felt that way. There wasn’t much of the dragon’s body left, yet what remained would reach the princess before she could finish it off.

I raised my sword in the air. “If I’m right about this, then help me out here, Hector.” I knew I was wasting my breath. The dragon’s soul was no longer in this world. Still, it felt like part of him remained. My sword burst into flames—purple flames.

*“Certain curions awaken unique abilities. The nature of those abilities varies, but they seem to be influenced by the individual’s mind and spirit.”*

The princess had once told me that. I had desired to kill every single undead in my city with my own two hands, so I possessed the ability to create an unlimited number of weapons. The dragon had desired to protect his partner’s home and family, so he possessed breath capable of burning all his foes to ash.

Maybe this was another form of the witch’s curse. Either way, I was certain the remnants of the dragon’s spirit had become part of me after I’d dealt him the finishing blow. *I’m already cursed. What’s the harm in one or two more?*

I swung my sword down, unleashing purple flames. They mixed with the princess’s light, surrounding the dragon and scorching its bones. Whatever had happened, it had made the flames capable of burning a curion’s bones for good. The dragon’s left foreleg burned away and disappeared. It lurched forward,

falling to the ground.

Yet even that wasn't enough to stop it. It reached out its remaining foreleg towards the princess. However, she didn't run away. She didn't avert her eyes.

"You probably can't hear me anymore, but if I were your partner, I'd be grateful you kept your promise all these years." I said the words I thought the dragon needed to hear. I wasn't sure I was the right person to say them, but there wasn't anyone else who could. Just before its sharp claw reached the princess, it crumbled to dust.

At her limit, the princess went limp and I caught her before she fell. "You okay, Princess?" She was covered in sweat, her silver hair stuck to her burning skin. Despite all that, she looked at me and smiled feebly.

"You did an excellent job, my knight."

"It was all thanks to your power."

"I couldn't have done it alone. It was only because I met you that I was able to bring salvation to the Pestilent Guardian Dragon."

"You already know complimenting me is gonna get you a nighttime invitation. Since you keep doing it, I can only assume that's what you're after." I wasn't comfortable with all the praise, so I tried to brush it off with a joke.

"Once we've saved all the curions, I won't have any reason to refuse." Her face red, Astrantia gave me an answer that left me at a loss for words. "Or am I not worth the effort?" Faced with her impish smile, I managed to squeeze out a brief sentence.

"Nah, but let's get that in writing. I don't want you taking it back later."

The princess giggled. "Do you have any idea how many years that might take? I could very well be an old lady by then."

"That's fine. Your youth isn't your appeal."

Her eyes went wide. "Then what is?"

"I told you before, didn't I?"

The princess audibly gulped. I could feel her tensing up.

Stroking her hair, I answered, "Your skull." It was what I had complimented her on the day of the fair.

"Jeez! Why are you like this?! Just when I thought we were finally having a serious conversation, you go and pull that!" Tears in the corners of her eyes, the princess erupted into anger.

"Sorry, sorry."

"You're not forgiven! I'm going to curse you! The worst curse ever!"

"I was just hiding my embarrassment."

"Then I'll give you a chance to redeem yourself."

She'd never forgive me if I cracked another joke. "I am touched by the strength of your soul as you bear the sins of your ancestor, mourn for the dead, and seek to rid the world of its twelve calamities. You are an honorable, noble holy woman and a master very much worth serving."

This time, she really did cry, though it wasn't from sadness or anger. She wrapped her arms around my back. Embracing me probably wasn't easy, given I was nothing but bones now. "Th-That will do. I expect you to stay by my side until the very end."

"Of course. We're in this together. Until I meet my own end." We stayed like that for a while before I broke the silence. "Hey, Princess."

"U-Um, unless more curions come, I'd like to stay like this a little longer..."

"That's fine, but how exactly am I supposed to go back looking like this?" I hadn't been thinking about it during the fight, but now it was a real problem. I didn't have flesh or clothes. The princess slowly looked up at me, a troubled expression on her face.

"I-I'll figure something out."

# Chapter 10

## The Revived Sword Saint and What the Dragon Protected

We had successfully exterminated the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, one of the Twelve Corpses. I certainly hadn't expected its soulless skeleton to go on a rampage, but with the princess's help, I'd managed to get through it. The only problem left was the fact that I was now naked bones.

"I forgot to ask earlier—are we gonna need that giant manastone again to get me back to normal?" The stone in question hadn't been destroyed, so it was presumably still at the princess's mansion, though it was now lacking the necessary mana. According to her explanation when I had first gotten my body back, several generations had been pouring mana into it.

"No, we won't need that much mana this time."

"Really?"

"Most of that mana was spent erasing part of the witch's curse."

"Oh, I get it now." Blocking off my ability to infect others was what had taken most of the mana. Restoring my flesh cost next to nothing compared to sealing the curse. The dragon's fire had simply rotted away my flesh, meaning my ability to infect was still sealed. That was good news. If it was safe for me to be hit by the Pestilent Fire, that meant my ability to infect others wouldn't return if I was bitten by a curion either.

"Just in case, I store my mana in manastones daily." She had more mana to spare than most students since I fought without her divine protections. However, she had just used it all up, including the manastones.

"Sounds like a lot of work. Anyway, it's great that you saved up mana for an emergency, but, uh..."

"What is it?" the princess asked.

"You didn't bring a spare change of clothes, huh?"

“Oh.”

Well, I was the one who’d sprung into action without thinking, so I couldn’t really talk.

“I-I’ll prepare one next time,” the princess stated.

“Nah, I’ll take care of it myself unless it’s really necessary.” I already felt bad about putting such a burden on her every time I needed to return to being human.

“Th-Then, what about my divine protection?”

“Can I count on you to use it from now on?”

The princess looked at me happily.

“Of course.”

I probably should have accepted her as my partner sooner.

“What do you think you’re embracing?”

Turning my skull to the sound of the voice, I saw long, silver hair and icy eyes.

“S-Sister?!” Flustered, the princess immediately pulled away from me. “No, um... It’s not...”

“That isn’t an answer, Astrantia.”

“H-He was just catching me because I almost fell! Oh, this is Sir Al! We just... The dragon... Um...” Why was Orlaya here in the first place? I hadn’t heard anything about her joining the hands-on training.

It seemed like she was trying to hide it, but Orlaya was sweating profusely and her breathing was ragged. She had to have been here from the start—we weren’t so close to the academy that she could have just arrived. Since I hadn’t seen her with the other supervisors, she might have come here secretly. Was she worried about her little sister? How cute.

“There are signs of a fierce battle taking place here prior to my arrival. This question is for Holy Knight Albert—did you exterminate the Pestilent Guardian Dragon?”

“The dragon’s soul was saved by Lady Astrantia’s prayer.”

“Not by your power as one of the Twelve Corpses?”

“I expect Lady Astrantia will provide you with the full report later, but without her prayer, the dragon would not have found salvation.”

“Understood.” Orlaya shifted her attention to the princess. “I ought to punish you for jumping headfirst into danger...”

“Ugh...” The princess groaned.

“However, you got results. I misjudged your ability.” Orlaya acknowledged her mistake and her sister’s talent. A moment later, tears started pouring out of the princess’s eyes. Seeing that, Orlaya froze up.

“I-I... I thought you hated me...”

“Don’t cry. Why would I hate my own sister?” Though she remained expressionless, Orlaya was clearly flustered.

“Because you suddenly started acting so cold... You used to be so kind...”

“I just didn’t want you to become a holy woman out of your admiration for me. I’ll be the one to restore peace to the world. I want you to live happily after that.”

“I-I can’t let you shoulder that burden all on your own!”

“You’ve got it backwards. I couldn’t allow my little sister to bear that heavy load.” The sisters were more alike than they thought. Although, the princess wasn’t pleased about that realization.

“Wh-Why couldn’t you just say we’d do it together?!”

“What was I supposed to do if you got hurt and lost your life when I wasn’t there?!” It was the first time I’d ever seen Orlaya shout.

“Do you think I feel any different? Not a day goes by that I don’t worry about you!”

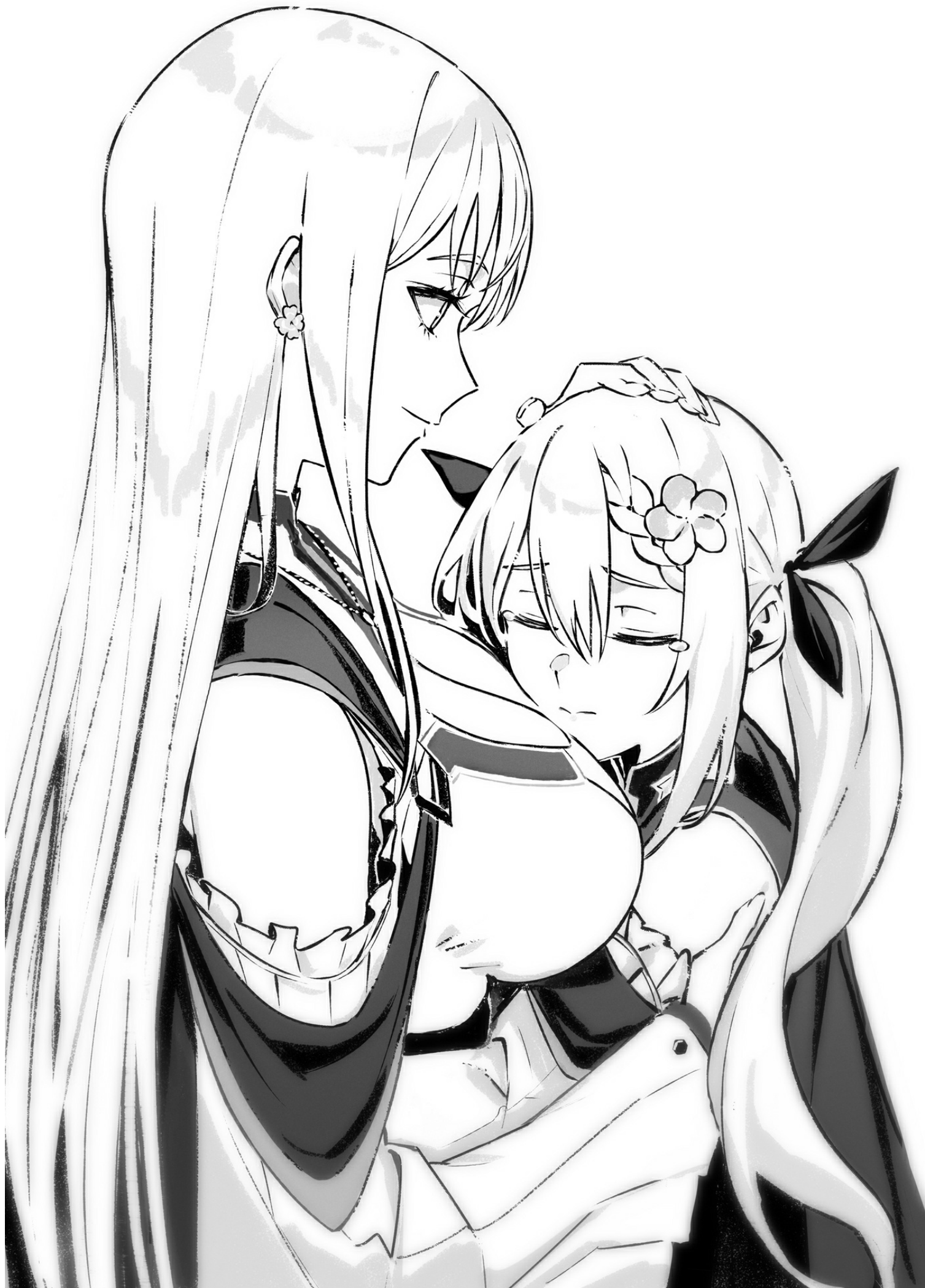
Orlaya had a conflicted expression, like she was both happy and sorry for worrying her sister. “Well, there’s no need for you to worry. I’m a talented holy woman, and I have an equally talented holy knight accompanying me. Besides...” Orlaya ran her fingers through her hair, pushing it behind her ear.

She showed off an earring in her usually hidden right ear—a four-leaf clover.

“Ah!” The princess cried out, and Orlaya nodded her head.

“I’m also blessed with my sister’s prayers. Nothing could stop me from coming home safely.” I assumed the earring had been given to her by the princess. Since she hadn’t brought it up, she probably mistakenly thought Orlaya never wore it.

“Orlaya!” The princess dived into Orlaya’s chest, and her sister warmly accepted her.





“I’m so glad you’re safe.” Watching the sisters mend their relationship was quite heartwarming, and I didn’t want to interrupt it, but...

“Excuse me.” I raised my hand as they embraced.

“You may speak.”

“Since you’re here, Lady Orlaya, would it be right for me to assume you’ve made some preparations regarding my body?”

“Correct. I prepared everything in advance, suspecting that the Skeleton Sword Saint might regain his curion form and then be at a loss as to how to go back to normal when the battle was over.” Everything she had said was right on the money, so I couldn’t even refute it. Had she really gone through all that effort and then followed her sister just based on that small chance? She seriously cared about Astrantia. “That said, I didn’t expect you to actually defeat one of the Twelve Corpses. You have my praise.”

“You’re too kind.” Being complimented by both sisters wasn’t a bad feeling. “By the way, where’s Myra?” Myra was Robert’s descendant, and the holy knight whose bangs I’d cut the other day.

“I put her in charge of bringing the manastones and finding a suitable location to activate the magic.”

“Um, sister. Albert needs a change of clothes...”

“I have one, of course. You think I’d make a gentleman go outside in the nude?”

“Ugh...” Unlike her little sister, it seemed like Orlaya didn’t make mistakes. The princess looked over her shoulder and pouted, as though she could read my mind.

Then, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed holy knight Myra made her appearance. Her bangs had grown a little, but they were still slanted. Apparently she hadn’t bothered fixing them. “I’m back, my lady.”

“Are the preparations complete?” Orlaya asked.

“Yes, everything went smoothly.”

“Excellent work, Myra.”

“However, we should make haste. Lady Palustris and Ozias, along with others unaware of the circumstances, have begun their search.” Palu and Ozias were probably really worried about us. I appreciated the sentiment, but seeing them in my current state wouldn’t be good. I needed my fleshy armor restored.

“Then let’s get right to it.” We began walking, Myra in the lead.

“Myra,” I called out to her. I wanted to apologize about her hair.

“What is it, Master Albert?”

“Hmm?” Something felt off, and I quickly realized what it was. She had never spoken to me respectfully before.

“I’ve informed Myra of your identity. That you’re the adoptive brother of the hero Robert,” Orlaya answered, seemingly sensing my confusion. That explained it. Even though Orlaya had been able to surmise as much when we’d first met, to Myra, I was just some rude holy knight. However, now that we were restoring my body, Myra needed to be clued in.

Orlaya had probably explained that her sister’s holy knight was the Skeleton Sword Saint and asked her to prepare a bunch of stuff so he could return to normal in case he was left as nothing but bones. She might have been told even earlier, but either way, Myra knew now. The man whose cheek she had cut was the adoptive brother of the hero Robert, the founder of her family and first head of the MacPhial household.

“I may not have known, but I behaved extremely rudely towards you,” she said apologetically.

“No need for all that. I didn’t realize you were Robert’s descendant either.”

“I’ve decided to leave my hair like this as evidence of my inexperience.”

“Uh-huh... Well, it looks good.” She seemed really straitlaced, unlike Robert. He had known how to joke back and forth.

“As I serve Lady Orlaya and seek to bring salvation to the curions by her side, I cannot offer you my life. However, I will accept any punishment you deem acceptable.” She was taking cutting my cheek really seriously.

“Seriously, don’t worry about it. Just think of me like a distant relative or something.”

“I-I could never treat you with such discourtesy...”

“Besides, I don’t think Robert would be too happy with me when we meet in the afterlife if I made his descendant serve my every whim.” Actually, he’d probably just give a forced smile, but some things were better off only known to me.

“Th-Then, Sir Albert...”

“I guess that’ll do.” Things had taken an odd turn. Her deferential attitude might have been even worse than her hostile one. All that aside, we continued on to our destination.



Myra led us to a stone house that still had most of its basic structure intact. We asked the two members of Black to wait outside as the princess and I entered. I stripped off the tattered remains of my old uniform, then put on the new holy knight uniform they had prepared for me and faced the princess.

She pulled out ten or so portable-sized manastones that presumably belonged to her sister, then cast a regeneration spell on me. A pale light enveloped my body, and before long, I had regained my flesh.

“Ah, that’s more like it. Being made of bones has its perks, but senses feel way more vivid when you’ve got flesh and blood.”

“Do they really?”

“Yeah. You look even more radiant than before.”

“Th-Thank you.” The princess blushed and averted her eyes.

“Anyway, how are you holding up?”

She had exhausted herself setting the dragon free.

“I’m fine. Though admittedly, I am a little tired.”

“I really put a lot of pressure on you this time, huh?”

“Rely on me as much as you need. We’re only saints when we’re together.”

“Yeah, you’re right. In that case, there’s one more place I’d like you to accompany me to. I need to speak with Orlaya and Myra too, so let’s head outside.”

The princess and I left the house and regrouped with Black. Then I told them about the dragon and the church.

“I’d like to hear a more detailed report about the dragon’s memories later, but very well. Let’s head to the church.” With Orlaya’s approval, the decision was made.

“Th-Thank you, sister!” The princess seemed really grateful her sister shared her opinion.

“Do you want to mourn the people the dragon was trying to protect, Sir Albert?” Myra asked.

“He was too afraid to ever check if he actually protected his partner’s family. I’m not trying to do it for him or anything, but it’d feel wrong to go back without ever looking.”

I knew firsthand what the chaos had been like three centuries ago. It would have been exceedingly difficult to get a large number of people to safety in that situation, and the people Hector’s partner had wanted to save probably hadn’t all been gathered at the church. It wasn’t realistic to think he could have just put everyone on Hector’s back and gotten away safely. The guardian dragon’s partner had made the best decision he could have at the time. It just hadn’t panned out.

Once the streets became full of undead, escape became even more of a hopeless prospect. In all likelihood, the ones the dragon had tried to protect had died inside the church. If their food ran out and they had no means of getting more, there was no other possible outcome. Even if they clung to a ray of hope and ventured outside, the moment they got bitten, it was over. In hindsight, it was a miracle I had been able to get Robert and Milna out safely.

“We don’t have much time. Let’s discuss our future plans on our way to the church.” At Orlaya’s word, we got moving.

“What do you mean by future plans? Uh, if I may ask.”

“No need to be so mindful of your words around me. Of course, that doesn’t apply when others are present.”

“Thanks. I learned a little while at the princess’s house, but speaking politely is still kinda hard for me.” Even now I still wasn’t fully comfortable.

“Princess?” Orlaya looked perplexed.

“It’s like a nickname I gave to Lady Astrantia.”

“Is that right?”

“Do you want one too? I’ll need to come up with something better than just calling you the princess’s sister.”

“You don’t fear me?” She was certainly difficult to approach—something she seemed to be aware of—but I didn’t think she was scary.

“Nope, not at all.”

“Then you may refer to me however you wish.”

“Orlaya it is.”

“Very well.”

The princess and Myra both looked shocked. Apparently they hadn’t expected her to allow me to just call her by her name.

“Back to the matter at hand, it’s probably inconvenient to say someone who was just admitted to the academy like the princess beat one of the Twelve Corpses, huh?”

“Indeed. Worst-case scenario, she would be removed from her classes and immediately sent to the front lines.” While the princess possessed talent and was a diligent worker, she still needed time to develop while at the academy. I wanted to avoid immediately forcing her to graduate and sending her straight into danger.

“That wouldn’t be good.”

“So I have a proposal. Concealing the guardian dragon’s defeat won’t be possible, so how about we say we defeated it together?”

So we’d be saying we’d beat it with the assistance of Black, one of the

academy's top-ranked pairs. People would assume the princess had played a support role. They might still be impressed, but they'd accept it as something a first-year was capable of.

Orlaya and Myra, on the other hand, would get more credit than they had actually earned, but since they wouldn't be claiming to have taken it down all by themselves, they might not be forced to graduate immediately. Or maybe she was confident she could ensure things would turn out that way.

"B-But sister, Sir Al is the one who brought salvation to the Pestilent Guardian Dragon." The princess seemed to be having trouble accepting it.

"Yes, I'm aware. I don't mean to take your knight's achievement away from him. It's fine if we say only a single knight defeated the dragon. However, the story would then be that I was there to protect my younger sister."

"So we're gonna say that I teamed up with another holy woman to kill the dragon?"

"I'm glad you're quick on the uptake." That was the biggest concession Orlaya could make. If I wanted credit for killing the dragon, it'd have to be with somebody other than the princess. Then she'd be able to keep my identity a secret too.

I glanced over at the princess and saw a shocked look on her face. I could only laugh in response. "The princess is the only holy woman for me." She looked relieved from the bottom of her heart upon hearing my answer.

"Are you certain? This would without a doubt be a deed that would leave you known as a hero in the history books."

"That's fine. I've never been in the habit of bragging about the enemies I've killed."

"Teaming up with another holy woman might hasten your path to beating the other Twelves Corpses, you know?"

"I can go at the princess's pace."

"My sister is more valuable to you than achievements, honors, and even the fastest path to your goal?"

“She sure is. That’s how much she means to me.”

Although the princess was looking down, I could tell from her red ears that she was blushing.

“I see. Allow me to express my thanks for your loyalty, Holy Knight Albert. Your actions are deserving of so much more, but know that at the very least, everyone here considers you to be a true hero.”

“You’re welcome.” And that was that.

“I’d expect nothing less of you, Sir Albert. Once you’ve decided on a master, your allegiance never wavers! You truly are an exemplary holy knight!” Myra was trembling in awe. There was no sign of the person who had cut me when we’d first met.

“Ah, Albert,” the princess called out to me.

“What’s up, Princess?”

“I’ll do my best to become a holy woman deserving of you as soon as possible!”

“I know. There are still a bunch of the Twelve Corpses left. Let’s get strong enough that we can hold our heads high and say we were the ones who killed them when we best the rest.” I didn’t care for bragging about myself, but I was sure it’d make me happy to see the princess get recognized.

We were attacked by curions a few times after that, but we easily exterminated them and managed to reach the church safely. It definitely looked like it had faced three hundred years of deterioration since I had seen it in the guardian dragon’s memories. Part of the walls had crumbled, and the ceiling had caved in. The door to the entrance fell over from a single touch.

We didn’t have time for sentimentality, so I headed straight inside. There were several skeletons lying inside the old, dark church, many of them belonging to children. “That figures.” Though I had expected as much, that didn’t make it feel any better.

“At least we know they passed without turning into curions,” said Orlaya. She was probably trying to make me feel better in her own way.

“Yeah... If nothing else, Hector succeeded in protecting his family from the enemy.” Living and dying properly in the era you were born was certainly better than wandering forever as a curion, filled with false happiness.

“I hope their next lives are ones where they don’t have to worry about going hungry.” With a pained expression on her face, the princess offered them a prayer. It’d be awful for someone who died of starvation to have to worry about food in their next life too. At the very least, I hoped they wouldn’t go hungry again.

“Their souls have moved on to their next lives. There’s no sign of them turning into evil spirits and becoming bound to this place,” said Orlaya.

I responded to her without a second thought. “You can tell?”

“We can’t see souls with the naked eye, but as we have magic to exorcise evil spirits, it’s possible for us to sense them. Of course, it varies depending on the holy woman.” I looked over at the princess, and she nodded as well. None of them had turned into evil spirits. Even this terrible situation had a saving grace.

“I wish we could bury them, but...” the princess sighed.

“Now that the Pestilent Guardian Dragon is gone, I’m sure others will come to check on the church. We can ask them for help burying them,” I stated.

Palu and Ozias were apparently looking for us. Maybe we could get their help if we waited for them to arrive. As for the explanation... Well, I could just tell them I’d found some skeletons in the dragon’s den and wanted to mourn them.

After a short while, we regrouped with Palu and the others. Although we left out a few details, we managed to enlist their help with the burial. We ended up burying the bones in the yard Hector had slept in.

“Phew... Let’s go home.” We still had a lot of work ahead of us, but our work here, at least, was finished.



The moment I got outside the barrier, Cuphea embraced me—though really, it was more like she flung herself at me. I had to brace myself and catch her so I didn’t fall over. The warmth of her body and the softness of her chest was



pressing up against me, but I couldn't say anything in response to her sobs.

"I was so worried," Cuphea said, pushing her forehead into my shoulder.

"Sorry."

"Don't die on me. You promised."

I patted Cuphea's back as she held me tighter. "I won't."

We had date plans in two years. I couldn't die until then. Well, I was already dead, but that wasn't the point. It was hard to get Cuphea off of me. I could feel the princess's pouting stare behind me, though it also could have been Orlaya's icy glare.

Linum stopped to smile at me, then ran towards the princess. They were probably happily celebrating her returning safe and sound. Ordinarily I would have been content to enjoy Cuphea's embrace for hours, but given the situation, it was a little awkward.

"This is a pretty passionate hug, Cuphea. It's like you're trying to make our relationship public." The instructors and other students were waiting just outside the barrier. All eyes were on our return. We probably looked like an affectionate couple to all of them. Once she calmed down and thought about it for a moment, Cuphea grew embarrassed and tried to separate from me, but I pulled her back in. I couldn't pass up the chance to tease her. "What's the matter, Cuphea? We can keep going."

"S-Stupid!"

I could feel her body temperature increasing. I didn't wanna tease her too much after she had been worried about me, so I eventually let go. However, the moment I did, Myra pointed her sword at Cuphea's neck.

"'Stupid'? You dare insult Sir Albert?" Ever since she'd learned I was Robert's adoptive brother, I had become her second most respected person after Orlaya. Now it was getting a little out of hand.

"Wh-What's your problem?!"

"I'll give you three seconds to retract those words and apologize. One. Two..."

"Hold on, Myra. Cuphea wasn't insulting me. We were just playing around."

Didn't you hear our back-and-forth?"

"If you say so, Sir Albert." Myra sheathed her sword and glared at Cuphea.  
"Be grateful for Sir Albert's compassion."

"H-Huh?! What's wrong with you?! Wait, aren't you the holy knight from Black?"

"What of it?"

"You hated Albert before!"

"That was just your imagination."

Cuphea had hit a nerve, and Myra averted her eyes.

"There's no way!"

"Anyway, take care not to offend Sir Albert."

"You of all people have no room to say that!" The two girls exchanged glares.

Getting between them, I put a hand on each of their heads and patted them.  
"Relax, both of you." First up was Myra. "Myra, don't get on Cuphea's case so hard. She's an important friend of mine." Next was Cuphea. "Cuphea, I'm sorry about Myra. We had a little misunderstanding, but we made up. Don't worry about it." The two of them reluctantly backed down.

"Very well. I apologize for my rudeness, Cuphea," said Myra.

"Fine. I'll forgive you since Albert asked me to." Just as I sighed with relief, Cuphea pulled on my sleeve. "By the way, when exactly did you two make up?" Since she saw me at the academy on weekdays and at the orphanage on weekends, she was probably curious how exactly I'd met with Myra without her noticing.

"Just now, inside the barrier."

"Huh?" Cuphea was smiling, but she clearly wasn't happy. "So you were making nice with a female knight while I was out here worried to death?"

"I think you've got the wrong idea."

"Myra, how old are you?"

“Nineteen, why?” Myra replied.

“So she’s in your strike zone, right, Albert?” Cuphea seemed to have realized what my target age was since I’d told her to wait two years.

“No. For various reasons, I’m not interested in Myra.” I couldn’t say she was the descendant of my adoptive brother, so it wasn’t very convincing.

“Suspicious! You even call her by just her name!” Cuphea was sulking.

“Believe me, Cuphea, nothing happened. Not even I would try anything inside a Forbidden City.” Cuphea seemed to calm down a little after I grabbed her shoulders and spoke to her earnestly.

“R-Right. Sorry for losing my cool.”

“It’s fine.” *Whew. Somehow I got out of that.* Mentally, I wiped away the sweat on my forehead. I wouldn’t hide anything I’d actually done, but explaining away things that hadn’t happened was hard work.

“I seem to recall you making advances on me inside the barrier.” Palu joined the conversation with a sudden ambush. It was probably revenge for how much I’d worried her.

“Albert?” Cuphea’s smile returned.

“I wouldn’t say I made a move on her so much as I was just being myself.”

Cuphea gave me a reproachful look for a moment, then sighed.

“Fine. I can imagine. You compliment women as easily as you breathe.” Cuphea really understood me. Though it also kinda felt like she’d given up hope.

Orlaya and the princess were quietly talking behind us. “Astrantia, do you truly want him as your holy knight?” the elder sister asked.

“H-He may have his flaws, but as a knight, he’s truly outstanding,” the princess replied.

“Hello, lovely sisters, would you mind not talking about people when they’re within earshot?” Forcing a smile, I turned back to look at the beautiful sisters who had just mended their relationship.

“Th-They say great men have great desires...” Myra did her best to back me

up in her own straitlaced way.

How commendable. I patted her head, and she silently adjusted her posture so that I'd have an easier time. I found her cute, but in an entirely different way from romantic feelings. It was like an irresistible urge to give her an allowance or something. It was probably how an uncle would feel about his niece.

"Like I said, he doesn't know how to keep his distance," Cuphea said.

Cuphea seemed like she was about to explode with jealousy again, so I kept the patting to a minimum.

The instructor who seemed to be in charge of today's training stepped in front of Orlaya. Apparently even instructors had trouble handling students of noble birth, as he then bowed his head to her. "I would like to thank the two members of Black for their assistance today—"

"We can skip the formalities." Orlaya cut the instructor off in her usual ice-cold way. "The situation is under control. The cremation and collection of remains is complete."

All of the saints who had turned into curions had been defeated, so we had collected their remains on the way back. With the help of Palu, Ozias, and several other saints, it hadn't been too difficult. As this sort of situation was expected in the line of duty for saints, they brought corpse collection equipment with them on missions. They had taken a wagon loaded with equipment with them when they had reentered the barrier.

"You really are on top of everything."

"I wasn't finished."

"M-My apologi—"

"We also exterminated the Pestilent Guardian Dragon."

Everyone froze, as though time itself had stopped.

"What did you just...?"

Since we didn't have any definitive proof we had defeated one of the Twelve Corpses, it was a little hard to believe. That said, the Pestilent Guardian Dragon Hector had a known behavioral pattern, so confirming it probably wouldn't be

too hard. There were also curions in the Twelve Corpses, like the mermaid, who rarely showed themselves. How would we prove we had defeated them when the time came? Would other people's testimony be enough?

It wasn't like I could just show off the abilities I had absorbed from them. We were already claiming that my greatsword was a replacement weapon Orlaya had brought me. I'd entered the barrier with a normal sword, so we needed a consistent explanation for the greatsword on my back.

"We'll explain everything to the academy, and the capital if necessary."

"O-One of the Twelve Corpses was defeated?" The instructor still couldn't believe it. It was a curion that had been unbeatable for three hundred years, so I didn't blame him for having a hard time accepting it.

"That's what I said. My sister and her holy knight also contributed a great deal," Orlaya stated. We had agreed on the story beforehand, so I had no qualms with her explanation. "I'll be taking command now. Is that acceptable?"

Speechless, the instructor could only nod his head. Under Orlaya's exceptional direction, the confirmation of survivors, their treatment, the identification of the dead, and loading of supplies onto the wagons all proceeded swiftly and efficiently.

"Take care not to let anything fall off. Now, we return to the academy," said Orlaya.

We all got back in the coach we had arrived in. Orlaya seemed a little sad to be riding separately from her sister.

"What a day..." the princess said next to me.

"You got that right." In the end, we were one step closer to achieving our goal. We chatted for a while, until I suddenly felt the princess's head on my right shoulder. She had fallen asleep. Cuphea and Linum smiled when they noticed her. When we'd first met, I had been ready to do everything by myself, but now I was glad to have her as my partner. "Thanks for everything, Princess." Not that she could hear me. Not too long after, I grew tired myself and closed my eyes.

# Final Chapter

## The Death of the Skeleton Swordsman

It was the middle of the day as I was walking with somebody along a wooded path. “Brother.” I looked to my side and saw a handsome blond-haired, blue-eyed man. It was my adoptive brother, Robert.

“Ugh.”

“Even after three centuries, you haven’t changed a bit.”

“I only want beautiful women in my dreams.”

Robert just laughed. It had to be a dream—I was meeting a dead person.

“What do you want? I don’t think I did anything to deserve you haunting me.” I had just cut his descendant’s hair a little.

Robert forced a smile as though he could read my mind. “Be nice to Myra. She had a rough upbringing, so she’s starved for affection.”

“Why do I have to be the one to solve the MacPhial family’s problems?” Although Myra had been pretty quick to believe me, I’d heard that the MacPhial family had been reluctant to let me visit the grave. Maybe the current head of the family didn’t think too fondly of me. That, or they still doubted I truly was the holy knight Al.

“We’re brothers, aren’t we?”

“Don’t care.”

“Come on.”

“I don’t need you telling me to be nice to girls to begin with.”

“Fair enough.”

Of all the dreams I could’ve had, it just had to be two men walking along an empty, gently sloping path. What had I done to deserve this?

“Brother.”

“What?”

“Looks like you brought down one of the Twelve Corpses.”

“You were watching? Do they not have any other entertainment up in Heaven?”

“You obtained the dragon’s power.” It seemed like he actually wanted to have a serious conversation.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“What do you make of that?”

“Beats me. Do I look like a scholar to you?”

“Curions have the innate desire to share the blessing, and that blessing comes in three forms.”

“The ability to spread the infection, regenerate bones, and awaken a special ability.” Those three powers were called the Witch’s Gospel, the Skeleton’s Grace, and the Embodiment of the Spirit, respectively.

“Right. As far as that last one goes, most people don’t actually awaken any special power.” The chance to awaken that power was granted upon being bitten.

“Why is that?”

“This is just a hypothesis, but...”

“Quit trying to act smart.” Actually, this was a dream. I was basically talking to myself—it only looked like Robert. Just another reason why I wished it was a beautiful woman.

“It’s possible that when those who have obtained the Embodiment of the Spirit kill others who have obtained it, they take their blessing.”

“Maybe so.” If the Eternal Witch’s aim was complete immortality, then there was no need to make all of humanity immortal—she could just obtain immortality for herself. However, ordinary undead weren’t good enough, which was why she had given curions the ability to evolve.

It was a power given only to those who rejected the happiness the blessing provided—a power to help them survive. She had set it up so those unsatisfied with the incomplete immortality the transformation gave them could obtain new powers. Assuming all of this was one big experiment for her, people like us were likely closer to her actual goal. She was waiting for someone with an ability that would be useful in obtaining true immortality to appear. And when that person showed up, she wanted a way to obtain their power more easily than trying to reproduce it—the powers were designed to be stolen from the start.

“I suspect that conflict among those who awakened these special powers wasn’t in her calculations.” Or she just didn’t consider a single individual gaining all the other powers to be a problem.

“While the princess’s family developed the barrier spell, it’s possible the witch’s research was used as a basis for it.”

“Indeed. I don’t think the Eternal Witch ever intended to destroy the world.”

“It would impede her other experiments if all of humanity died. Is that the idea?” Even the spell used to restore my flesh had undoubtedly been first developed by the witch for her own use. She’d wanted to be able to restore her form even if she became a curion and her flesh rotted away.

“In the end, I was never able to find any clues that might lead to the witch.”

“Given her capabilities, changing her looks is probably easy for her.” She had probably thoroughly prepared ahead of time. She might even have multiple identities. That would make finding her next to impossible.

“Be careful, brother.” My adoptive brother had a worried look on his face.

“Careful of what? If I do get closer to becoming a true immortal, that just means the witch will end up coming to me herself. That works for me.” I had no idea where in the world she might be, so having a way to lure her out was convenient.

“You may find yourself truly unable to die. And you know there’s no happiness to be found in eternity.”

I looked away, then flicked Robert on the forehead.



“Ouch.”

“That’s not for you to worry about. I’m gonna kill the witch. If I can accomplish that, I won’t have any complaints.”

“The witch was supposedly a beautiful woman. Can you really kill her?” While the word “witch” didn’t only mean a woman, all signs pointed to the culprit being a woman.

“Cutting down female curions doesn’t sit right with me, but before anything else, I’m a holy knight.”

“That’s my brother.”

“I don’t want a man praising me.”

Robert came to a stop. The path was cut off, as though a line had been drawn through the world. Everything beyond it was a vast white expanse. Did Heaven lie beyond? Or a path to Heaven? “One last thing, brother.” It seemed the dream was finally coming to an end.

“What is it, golden boy?” It had been three hundred years. I had to say it. Robert blinked with surprise for a moment, then a happy look washed over his face.

“Father is proud of you too, you know.”

“He is? I was just kidding anyway.”

“Well, I was serious.”

“That’s why I can’t stand you.”

“Ha ha ha.” Robert gave a sparkling smile, just like he had three centuries ago. It still pissed me off. “Thank you for saving me back then. It’s thanks to you that I was able to live a fulfilling life.”

“I was trying to get Milna out. You were just a bonus.”

“Mother wanted to see you too.”

“Then you should’ve brought her. And next time, bring Viola too.”

“It seems you made Viola mad by riding other horses...”

“Seriously? Stallions are out too?” I had even gone out of my way to specifically choose male horses to avoid making her jealous.

Robert smiled at me as I scratched my head, a troubled look on my face.

“Brother.”

“What?”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.” With that, Robert stepped into the white expanse—then disappeared.

“I feel like I just had a nightmare that only featured men.” To make matters worse, I actually felt pretty good. I woke up in the dorm bedroom, with a dirty copper coin on my bedside table. “Was it this thing’s fault?”

With a sigh, I got out of bed and left the room to get started on my morning training. When I finished and returned to the dorm, I saw the princess in our living room. Sitting on the couch, she looked at me. Her long, silver hair was tied up in two pigtails, and her eyes were as blue as the sky. Her beautiful face still had a hint of girlish youth to it.

“Good morning, Albert.”

“Morning, Princess.” I stared at her face, relieving my frustration from the dream. The princess tilted her head, her cheeks gradually flushing.

“D-Do I have something on my face?”

“Nah, I just had a weird dream, so I’m overwriting it with your beautiful face.”

“Wh-What are you talking about? B-Beautiful...” The princess put her hands on her cheeks and lowered her head in embarrassment.

“It truly is an honor to be able to serve one as lovely as you, Princess.”

“How am I supposed to be happy when you say that now of all times...”

“And the shape of your skull is quite wonderful.”

“There you go again! Jeez! I’m cursing you first thing in the morning!”

Her age-appropriate anger elicited a smile from me. “I beg your pardon, but

I'm afraid I'm already cursed."



Though it was technically a day off, the princess and I had been summoned to an auditorium in the academy. A man who had introduced himself as the dean called our names, so we stepped onto the stage. Orlaya and Myra of Black, and Palu and Ozias of Gold were in the audience, presumably alongside the rest of the academy's top twelve pairs. However, upon further inspection, there were fewer than ten pairs present, so maybe only the pairs who could find the time were in attendance.

"In acknowledgment of your contributions to the defeat of the Pestilent Guardian Dragon, the two of you are hereby granted the title of White," the dean stated, holding what seemed to be a certificate of achievement in his hand. The princess gave a polite bow, so I followed her lead.

We were apparently joining the top ranks of the academy. The upperclassmen in the audience gave us a round of applause. Palu looked happy, I skipped over Ozias because I didn't care, and Orlaya had her usual calm and collected expression. Myra was clapping the hardest out of everyone. How cute.

Nonetheless, it wasn't a situation we could be entirely happy about. When we had entered the academy, there hadn't been any vacancies in the twelve pairs known as the Colors. According to what I heard later on, the previous White's holy knight had died in battle and they'd lost their position. Apparently they'd had a run-in with one of the Twelve Corpses. That was the only reason there was an empty post.

Then, we had conveniently accomplished something great and slid right into that empty post. Still, I was happy to be recognized. I didn't wanna get promoted directly to being one of the Twelve Saints and skip a bunch of steps, but there was nothing wrong with being among the top ranks of the academy.

The rest of the award ceremony went off without a hitch. After that, the princess and I headed to the orphanage. Cuphea had told us to stop by since everyone was worried about us. We'd been so busy after the mission that we hadn't had time to visit. It seemed like that had made them anxious. On our way out, we ran into two familiar faces. One of them called out to us.

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Palu. Though I feel a little conflicted about it.”

“Don’t let what happened to the previous White get to you. The death of a friend who was studying next to you only a day earlier is just part of being a saint.” Palu had a pained look on her face.

“I guess.” In that regard, it wasn’t much different from being a holy knight three hundred years ago. It wasn’t uncommon to go into battle and for some of your colleagues to not come out. Those who allowed death to weigh them down would eventually lose heart. You had to be able to mourn the dead and keep looking forward to continue fighting. That, or be a psychopath who felt nothing for the dead.

Ozias was silently staring at me. “What?” I asked.

“I wanted to congratulate you, but I can imagine what you’d say in return.”

“Aha ha, give it a shot.”

“You accomplished a tremendous feat, Sir Albert.”

“I don’t want a man praising me.”

The look on Ozias’s face had “I knew it” written all over it. Still, he was a pretty nice guy to praise me anyway. I’d have to try my best not to forget his name. Although we had only exchanged a few words, Palu and Ozias soon left. It looked like they thought Orlaya might want to say a few words to her sister.

“Congratulations, Lady Astrantia, Sir Albert!” Myra was so happy it almost seemed like she was the one who had been promoted.

“Thanks.”

Since Cuphea wasn’t around to get jealous, I could pat her head to my heart’s content. Or so I thought, until I saw the princess pouting.

“Your accomplishments are deserving of far more, but I think this is a good compromise,” said Orlaya. Apparently her and the princess’s family had been hard at work behind the scenes dealing with this incident. Some people had wanted to promote Orlaya and Myra to the Twelve Saints, as there were currently several vacancies. There weren’t always twelve at any given moment

—it was just a title granted to a maximum of twelve deserving pairs.

“We get to remain students, and the princess won’t be forced to the front lines. Seems pretty good to me.”

“I won’t let these three years go to waste,” said the princess. “I’ll keep training to become the best holy woman I can.”

“That’s a good attitude, but don’t go overboard,” Orlaya replied.

“I-I won’t. Also...” The princess fidgeted.

“What? Out with it.” Orlaya’s tone was as harsh as ever, but that seemed to just be how she was. Now that it was clear she cared about her sister, I could watch their exchange without any worries.

“I was wondering if you’d be willing to oversee my magic training...”

“I’m not going to go easy on you just because you’re my sister.”

The princess immediately beamed at her sister’s reply. “Th-Thank you!”

Although she didn’t show it on her face, I suspected Orlaya was about to faint deep down. The princess’s smile had destructive power.

“S-Sir Albert!” Myra was looking at me with a nervous expression. I could guess what she was after...

“If it’s sword training you want, we can do it when the sisters schedule their own training.”

“O-Of course! I’m looking forward to it!” Her smile was every bit as enthusiastic as the princess’s.

*Can’t say I expected to be teaching swordplay to a bunch of kids, Cuphea, and now Myra.* All sorts of unexpected things had happened since I’d entered the academy.

We parted ways with Orlaya and Myra, then left the academy grounds. Also, I had returned the glowing purple bone greatsword to my body. I had always been able to deposit and withdraw the weapons I created, but I had been worried about the dragon’s power disappearing. Though I had no intention of getting attached to my weapons, I hadn’t wanted to risk Hector’s power

disappearing without a trace. However, my dream the other day had convinced me that his power wasn't in the sword—I had absorbed it. I finally took the plunge and returned the sword to my body, and sure enough, I could use the dragon's power as I pleased.

I could apply it to a greatsword, like I had before, or the one-handed sword I was familiar with. All the weapons I created had gained the power to emit fire. Calling them swords with the dragon's power was a real mouthful, so I had given them a name—Dragonflame Bones.

“Albert.”

“Hmm?”

“May I ask you a question?”

“What's up?” Since it was a day off, there were very few people on the campus as we walked. The path leading off campus was lined with trees, reminding me of the dream I'd had the other day.

“There's something that's always bothered me.” Her voice sounded somewhat gloomy.

“Yeah?”

“It's about your real reason for pairing up with a holy woman.”

“My real reason?” The princess stopped walking, so I stopped too.

“The day we first met, you told me you would kill all twelve special undead.”

“I sure did. And you told me that wasn't possible because I'm one of them.” Committing suicide was impossible for a curion, so that wasn't an option.

“I didn't realize it at the time, but you were including yourself on purpose, weren't you?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, and the princess frowned in response. “Once we kill the witch and all the undead, my revenge'll be over. But I can't kill myself, so I'll need a holy woman to send me off.” While I wouldn't particularly mind dying by the blade, I couldn't stand losing. I wasn't planning on getting killed by someone weaker than me, and most people who wielded swords were male, which I especially didn't want. If someone was gonna kill me, it had to be a beautiful

woman. That was all I had been thinking at first, but now I felt like it might be a little harsh. It would probably break the princess's tender heart when that day came.

"That's...an unbearably sad thought."

I figured as much. "Your family feels the same way, don't they? Once the problems we face are dealt with, letting a curion like me stick around is nothing but a risk."

"We wouldn't..."

"What would you have me do instead? Keep living on forever all by myself?"

"Once I completed my goal, I was going to see to it that you could live out your life as a normal person."

"So that I could grow old and rest in a grave without my bones continuing to move around?"

"Yes."

"You're too kind." *Does magic like that even exist? At the very least, it doesn't seem like it does right now.* She wanted to turn me back into a human, even if it meant she'd have to create a method herself. She was nothing if not ambitious.

"You deserve that chance."

"I'm a man from three hundred years ago. I've only survived all this time so I could achieve my goal. Once that's done, my life should come to an end. And if possible, I'd like you to be the one to put an end to it." Although this wasn't a conversation I'd wanted to have today, I wasn't going to lie to her.

The princess looked down in thought for a moment, then finally opened her mouth. "On one condition."

"Anything within my power."

"You have to keep your promise to me."

"What promise?"

"You said it just the other day! That you'd stay with me until the end!" she shouted at me on the verge of tears.

“Yeah, I remember. That was just until we completed our goal though.” It was a promise to stick together to complete our goal, no matter how long it took. Wasn’t it?

“No! I meant with me until *my* end!”

“You mean until you die?”

“Yes. I’m sure I’ll be a wrinkly old woman by then, but you said my youth isn’t my appeal!”

“I remember that too.”

The princess walked in front of me and put her hands on my face.

“Then stay with me, even when I’m an old granny. If you do that, I’ll help you pass on. When it comes time for me to depart from this world, I’ll set your soul free,” the princess declared. I wouldn’t be left behind after seeing her off from her deathbed. When she died, I could die as well. “I won’t let you die alone. So please, don’t make me survive alone.”

When we first met, I’d never expected things to turn out like this. I’d never expected to come to care so much about a girl I didn’t even consider a woman yet. And I’d never expected to become so important to her either. You really don’t ever know what’ll happen in life, even after you die.

I gently patted her head. “All right, sounds like a plan. We’ll die together.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“You promise?”

“I do.”

“You swear on the goddess?”

“I swear.” Although I couldn’t see her face with her forehead pressed against my chest, her voice was hoarse. She sounded like a child talking through tears.

“I’ll curse you if you’re lying.”

“I’m not lying. It’s my duty as your holy knight to protect you until the very end. That’s my new reason for living. So no more crying, okay?” As much as I



tried to avoid focusing on her flowery smell, for some reason I couldn't ignore it. I gently patted her on the back, careful not to break the delicate blossom.

"I'm not crying..." she sniffled.

"Surely a noble lady isn't gonna get her snot on a man's clothes," I teased. She sniffled again. "C'mon, have some shame."

The princess chuckled. "Please don't make me laugh."

I pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to her. Still looking down, she accepted it and stepped away from me a little while after. Her eyes and nose were red, yet her beauty was in no way marred.

"That's a load off my chest."

"Really? 'Cause my chest is still pounding."

"I-Is it?" She seemed both happy and a little embarrassed.

"Yeah. I mean, staying with you until you're old, dying together—you basically just proposed to me."

"Huh?" The princess's face froze up.

*I see. She spilled her guts without thinking about how it sounded.* "Can't say I ever expected to get such a passionate confession from a girl. This is the first time it's happened in all my three hundred years. My face is still burning up. Uh, Princess?"

"...forget it."

"Hmm?"

"Please forget it!" Her face was bright red with embarrassment.

"So the promise is canceled?"

"That's not what I mean! Just forget how I worded it!"

"No can do. In fact, I think I'll write it down like Robert did. That way, people in the future can know about my life. Let's see... 'Today, my master made me swear to love her for the rest of our lives.'"

"Ugh, why are you like this?!" Red to her ears, the princess pounded on my

shoulder. It seemed like she was back to her usual self.

“I don’t feel a thing.”

“I’ll curse you! I will!”

“I’m already cursed. Now I can’t die without you.” I’d feel bad teasing her any more, so I responded seriously.

“That’s an even stronger curse than the Eternal Witch’s. If you break it, your master will cry.”

“Well, I certainly don’t want that.”

We started walking again. The rows of trees finally came to an end and the gate came into view. The boundary between the campus grounds and the outside reminded me of my dream. Robert had been the only one to disappear then, but today I’d keep walking alongside the princess.

The holy knight Al was supposed to have died three centuries ago. I’d survived all that time by myself until I’d met a lone girl—a girl who had provided me with a purpose beyond revenge. This is the tale of a holy woman and a holy knight and the battle they face—the tale of a lone girl and the death of the skeleton swordsman.



## Extra Story

### The Princess's Worries

The princess had been acting weird lately. I'd given her a blue hair clip in the shape of a flower a while ago, and she kept picking it up and looking at it with a frown on her face. She seemed to think I hadn't noticed, but I'd caught her glancing at me from time to time and setting up a secret girls' meeting with Cuphea and Linum.

While she seemed worried about something, she clearly had no intention of discussing it with me. Should I get involved, or should I leave her be? After thinking it over for a few days, I decided to ask her directly.

"Hey, Princess."

"Oh, Sir Albert. What is it?" After finishing up dinner in the cafeteria, we'd retired to our dorm. I called out to the princess as she was once again pondering something on the sofa.

"You've been looking at that hair clip a lot lately."

"H-Have I?" The princess wouldn't look me in the eyes. She was really bad at hiding things.

I sat down next to her. Though it was only a two-person sofa, there was more than enough room for both of us. "Don't feel pressured to wear it if you don't like it." I just meant she didn't need to feel forced to wear it solely because it was a gift, but for some reason she puffed out her cheeks like she was upset.

"I do like it! Why would you think that?!"

"I mean, all you've done lately is stare at it deep in thought," I said, feeling a little overwhelmed by her response.

This time, the princess went silent and blushed. "N-No, that's not true." Flustered and at a loss for words, her eyes wandered the room.

“I’m not really following. Does that mean it has nothing to do with the hair clip?” It was possible she was just fiddling with it while worrying about something else entirely.

“It’s not unrelated, but I don’t think it’s something I should discuss with you...”

“Well, whatever it is, I hope you get it worked out soon. I don’t like seeing you worried.”

“Y-You’re that concerned for me?”

“But of course. As your loyal knight, it pains my heart to see my master’s adorable face wrought with worry.” I put my hand on my heart and made an exaggeratedly sad face, leaving the princess dumbfounded.

“Even I can tell when you’re saying something you don’t mean.”

“I really am concerned, though.”

“I appreciate your consideration.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Still, I don’t think it’s something I should tell the person in question— Ah!”

“‘The person in question’?” Realizing she had just dug her own grave, Astrantia’s entire face went red. She immediately looked away, but I didn’t move, staring right at her. Ten seconds passed. Twenty seconds. Finally, she gave in.

“Fine! I’ll tell you!”

“You don’t have to if you really don’t want to.”

“No, I don’t think worrying about it any longer will make me more confident in my answer. Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything you ask.”

“Y-You can’t laugh.”

“I wouldn’t so much as dream about laughing at my master.”

The princess seemed like she wanted to make a retort, but she swallowed her

words and changed her mind. She told me that she had been thinking about whether she should get me a thank-you gift for the hair clip. However, she had been alone for so long that she had no experience getting gifts for friends—especially friends of the opposite sex. She didn't know what would make me happy, so she had consulted Cuphea and Linum, the friends we'd made at the academy.

"I see. Can I ask you something now, Princess?"

"Wh-What is it?"

"Does smiling this hard count as laughing?" Even I was powerless to stop my mouth from curling into a smile after hearing that.

"Ugh." Tears in the corners of her eyes, the princess looked at me. She must have thought I was laughing at her worries.

"Sorry. I'm not mocking you. I just thought that was cute."

"You mean like how a parent thinks their child making a mistake is cute?!"

I guess being called cute for that reason wouldn't make you very happy.

"Not just that. I'm happy you've been thinking about me."

"I-I simply don't want to remain indebted to you."

"Anyway, getting me something in return, huh? You really don't have to, but I'd appreciate it if you did."

"Is there something you want?!" The princess immediately leaned forward, making her chest shake impressively.

"No, nothing in particular." I'd never paid much attention to physical goods.

"Oh..." She slumped her shoulders in disappointment. She was so crestfallen I could practically see a black haze forming around her.

"Well, hold on. I think I'd probably prefer making memories over getting something tangible."

"Memories?"

"Yeah. Unlike a gift, strong memories will stick with you even three hundred years later." Although many of my memories had faded, there were some I

could recall vividly even now: my adoptive father who had taken me in, my adoptive mother who had raised me like her own child, my adoptive brother who had looked up to me, and my beloved horse Viola.

“Strong memories... U-Um, I know I said I wanted to repay you, but we can’t do anything inappropriate...” Imagining something, the princess’s face flushed red, but I decided against pointing it out.

“As far as recent stuff goes, you were really cute in your festival outfit. I’m sure I’ll never forget that.”

“I-I see... Then, would you like me to wear that outfit again?” Astrantia looked down, embarrassed by her proposal. Even her ears were crimson.

“I certainly would, but if we’re going down that route, I’d rather see you wear something new.”

“A-All right then. If that’s what you want, I’ll think of something.” She gave a reserved nod.

“Man, I’m looking forward to it. The princess is gonna wear cute clothes just for me.”

“D-Don’t say it out loud!”

“Aha ha.” At any rate, I was glad we’d managed to clear things up. Later on, she would worry about what clothes she should wear, but that was a story for another day.

## Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book. I'm Hozumi Mitaka. This story was born from the idea of wanting to provide a reason for the shambling, groaning, and biting behaviors of the living dead. Several factors played a part in why I went with an action story rather than a postapocalyptic one, but as a result, many people read the web version and I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to have this story turned into a novel. I hope you enjoyed the battles and action at the academy and in the Forbidden City. Plans for a manga version are also underway, so I hope you'll read that adaptation as well when the time comes.

Now for my acknowledgments. I am deeply grateful to my editor, Ishida-sama. He delved into this work even further than I did as the author and provided many suggestions for revisions. Thanks to him, I believe the characters and story were given greater depth compared to the web version.

I would like to thank the illustrator, fame-sama, for drawing the characters so incredibly! Albert looks cool, and Astrantia is very cute. The characters' personalities show in both their appearances and outfits, down to even the smallest details. I love all the characters, but I'm especially fond of Cuphea's and Orlaya's designs.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to all the readers of the web version, as well as everyone involved in the production and sale of this book. And of course, to you, the reader who read it through to the end. Thank you very much!

Hozumi Mitaka













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by Hozumi Mitaka

Translated by Jarod Blackburn Edited by Elijah Baldwin

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Ebook edition 1.0: July 2024