TITLE:

Bones & Apples: A Wintry Pursuit of Prized Confectionary

LOGLINE:

After a simple pie delivery goes terribly wrong, a carefree baker must aid the dead soldier she accidentally brought back to life.

Word Count: 2,974 words

The stillness was haunting as Alice strolled through dozens of armored skeletons. Some standing, some kneeling, some just a pile of bones sunk into dense snow. They stood scattered across the frozen meadow perched like sinister scarecrows.

An icy breeze flared her long green cloak and tugged at the tangle of brown curls bound under her hood. Warmth radiated from the sweet treasure she carried as she gripped a basket closer. In the other hand, she picked up a gnarled stick.

With a *clackety-clack*, the stick hit against a row of ribs, taking the shortcut to Mr. Petermann's. Lucinda would probably give her a tongue lashing for venturing through the Meadow of Lost Souls, but Alice didn't care.

If she paid more attention in her schooling, perhaps she'd be more afraid of this place. Some ancient battle. Maybe a curse. And now the army was frozen in time.

There was a *dong* as she thumped one with a breastplate over sparse ribs. Alice traced her path marking each one, *Hi Doug, Hi Rufus, Hi Janet,* she thought.

One skeleton had a dented helmet, fused to its skull from a killing blow. It was kneeling, snow covering its knees. The visor of the helmet was gone, revealing its vacant face. Alice remembered as a kid her friends would dare each other to see who could steal the helmet. None succeeded.

She gave it a tap, heaving her basket with her. "Still a headache, Larry?" She chuckled, but tripped over its knee.

A flush of warm aromatic spices wafted from the basket as it tumbled from her grasp. It skidded across the frosty snowdrift, the lid

ajar. It was an apple cranberry pie today. Mr. Petermann wouldn't stop requesting pie ever since the snow began to stick.

When Alice strolled into the bakeshop to relay his request for the tenth time, Lucinda's brown eyes narrowed.

"A pie? If he asked in the Summer I could make him a thousand different pies." A few blond hairs broke loose from her bun as she kneaded dough. Her arms were a wall of muscle from years of technique.

Alice was next to her, plaiting raisin bread. Lucinda cast a sideways glance, "You sure he can't be swayed with biscuits?"

Alice shrugged, "He's *your* grandfather" She placed the loaves on the tray. "What about pumpkin?"

"Pumpkin is bland and mushy." Lucinda fussed.

She separated her dough into small balls and sighed, "Promise me you'll take Maple Grove straight to his house and back."

"I will" Alice put the tray in the oven.

Lucinda gazed through the open archway from the kitchen to the front of the shop. People outside passed by, peering at the treats on display in the large window. A 'Help Wanted' sign was set in the corner.

She elbowed Alice. "You're the only help I got."

"That's not true," Stefan called from the side door, dropping a large sack of flour at Lucinda's feet. "You got me and Simon."

He kissed her cheek, scraggly beard brushing her skin and Lucinda swatted him away with doughy fingers. Stefan's enormous stature took up half the kitchen.

"Family doesn't count," She laid a damp cloth over the neatly formed buns, "Now go tell your son I need him to peel apples."

The scent of apples hit Alice again, bringing her back to the present, where the biting wind ruffled her skirts.

She collected herself, snatched the basket, and tossed a wave.

"Later Larry," She called.

For a moment she thought its jaw moved.

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William Petermann lived in a cozy cabin deep in the woods. He sat by the fireplace in a tufted chair that was twice his size. Alice's entrance startled him, sending thick spectacles flying. He caught them and patted down his thin white hair before taking a deep inhale through his nose. He beamed.

"The pie!" Mr. Petermann marveled.

"Of course, special for you!" Alice heaved the basket onto the table by the door.

Mr. Petermann nearly got up out of his chair but Alice held up a hand, "One moment and I'll cut you a slice."

Muscle memory took over, she put a kettle on for tea and then unloaded the prized confectionary. Warm cinnamon apple and spiced cranberry scent filled the room.

"I'm thankful we haven't had much snowfall this week." Mr. Petermann stated, setting his glasses on the end table.

Alice sliced into the pie and handed him a plate. He took a bite and his toes wiggled with delight.

"Do you think Lucinda could make me a pie again next week?" He asked.

Alice tucked a blanket around his legs, "Sure, if you like mincemeat."

He snickered, "Biscuits are fine."

There was a loud clatter.

Mr. Petermann didn't even glance up."Probably that blasted raccoon again." He muttered.

Alice looked to the window.

Her face paled.

There was Larry, dented helmet and all, staring back at her with hollow eyes.

She shrieked.

Mr. Petermann looked up and squinted,"What is it?"

Larry tapped the window with a boney finger.

"I-It's the raccoon," Alice stammered, hastily grabbing the basket, "I'll take care of it and shoo it away."

Mr. Petermann went back to his pie.

"He looks beastly. Those big black eyes," He smacked his lips, "Be careful out there and stick to the road!"

Alice exhaled in relief, thankful for his poor eyesight. She gave Mr. Petterman a small hug.

"I'll come back with your next order." She said.

He spoke with a mouth full of pie, "Thank you Alice."

There was another tap, and Alice bristled, "Yes, of course, just stay inside today, okay, Mr. Petermann?" He huffed in agreement and Alice braced herself.

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As soon as the door shut behind her she waved her arms and jutted the basket like a shield.

"SHOO!" She yelled.

Larry stepped back from the window, moving with a jilted motion. Despite the hundreds of years, most of his bones were intact. A

couple broken ribs, splintered collar bone. No other armor remained except for the dull silver helmet with a large dent on the left side.

It turned to her.

"D....D.." It stammered, jaw clacking.

Alice took a step backwards, "Get out of here!"

The skeleton took a step forward, outstretching its hand.

"Die." It said.

Alice blinked. Did it say what she thought it did?

"DIE!" It repeated, taking another step forward and confirming her thoughts.

She screamed and started running as fast as she could.

She ran through the forest, and unthinkingly ran back into the frosted meadow. She cursed under her breath. What if more awoke? She gave the other cursed skeletons a wide berth. Her hood tumbled, brown curls flying, and she risked a glance behind her.

Larry followed, trudging uneven steps.

"D-DIEEE...DIEEE" It kept repeating.

Alice stumbled, faceplanting in the snow. She scrambled to stand, but Larry was already there. Its hollow dark eye sockets watching her and hands reaching like sharp claws.

This was it.

This was how she was going to die.

It lunged.

She closed her eyes, and–

Nothing happened.

Alice opened her eyes to see him poking at her basket, furiously.

"Die... Die?" Larry stammered.

He pointed to the basket again.

Her mind clicked and connected the dots. "...Pie?" she felt her lips form the 'p' as she did so.

The skeleton retreated and nodded. *He nodded!*

She stared back. "You don't have lips."

"Die..." Larry gestured to the basket again.

She sat up and opened it, "There's no more pie."

His shoulders slumped.

Alice rose and pointed to him, "You wait here. I bring pie."

The skeleton just stood, his vacant eyes watching her.

She took a step back.

He took a step forward.

"No, no, you stay." she said and then gestured to her chest, "I bring pie."

Larry stopped.

"Good, " she said nodding, "Stay."

And then she bolted.

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It didn't work. She made it twenty feet before Larry moved. He kept pace behind her until they were outside the walls of Highcrest. Alice leaned against a tree trunk, arms crossed inspecting her work. Larry stood in front of her unmoving.

He had a blanket from the basket hung over his head that did little to cover him. She grumbled, and yanked it off.

Larry pointed to the city, "Die?"

Alice rubbed her temples,"Gimme a second."

Frustration coursed through her realizing she couldn't just talk her way out of this. She unlatched her cloak and draped it over Larry.

Alice winced, teeth chattering while taking off her leather gloves, slipping them onto his gaunt hands.

The thin blanket offered little warmth as she inspected her work again. The cloak covered his tall stature but his feet were noticeably boney. Alice hoped no one would be looking at his feet. Larry stood awkwardly holding his hands up, bent at the elbow. The gloves were too short, exposing his wrists. It didn't bother Larry, who shrugged and dropped his arms to the side.

"Die?" His head gestured to the city wall.

The gloves slid off and hit the ground.

"Oh this is never going to work!" Alice whined.

She snatched her gloves, and yanked them back on his hands. There wasn't a way to strap them tighter, so she tucked his elbows in and used the cloak to cover his wrists.

Larry shifted his weight, sensing her nervousness,

"Die?Die?Die?" he pulsed.

"Alright, alright, calm down" she patted his chest.

Alice looked back towards the meadow, hoping a different solution would manifest.

"We can't go back, can we?"she said.

His hollow eyes followed her gaze.

"You'll just keep following me..." She shivered, tugging the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

Larry waited for a beat.

"Die." He affirmed.

Alice pivoted, pushing past him towards the city. "What are you even going to do with pie! Have you seen yourself? The pie is just going to drop to the floor when you eat it!"

Larry reached out a gloved hand and squeezed Alice's shoulder.

"Die..." He whimpered, *please*.

She shrugged him off and stomped to the road.

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Despite the dreary weather, the cobblestone streets of Highcrest were busy. Merchant carts passed through the large gate, and Alice was thankful for the distraction as she and her hooded friend walked through. A rotund paladin guard adorned in dark gold armor, was eating a chunk of bread while holding a tall spear.

"Oy! You there!" He called out to them.

Alice froze, feeling the hair on her neck rise. Larry stilled, hood covering his face.

"Yes?" Her hands trembled. Waking an undead soldier was sure to get her locked in the dungeons.

"You work at the Petermann Bakeshop?"

She nodded.

"Can you tell Lucinda we don't like the olive bread?" Flecks of bread flung from his mouth as he spoke.

Alice bowed her head, "Of course, I can update her on the Covenant's preferences."

He shook his head, "Gnarly stuff."

Alice exhaled and took a step.

"Who's your friend there?" The Paladin leaned on his spear.

She bristled, hearing the clank of his armor move. "Pretend you're old!" She whispered to Larry.

Larry shifted his weight and obliged. Alice wrapped her arm around his shoulder.

"It's just Mr. Petermann, from the wood."

The Paladin smiled, “Mr. Petermann, oh, been a while, eh?”

“His aches are awful, I’m taking him to the apothecary. He’s my guest today.” Alice said, shuffling Larry.

The Paladin’s mouth opened to respond, but a large ox cart rumbled to a halt behind them. The ox defecated in the middle of the road.

“Oh that’s just great. Paul! Gotta move some shit!” He waved at Alice, “Take care!”

Alice didn’t wait and pressed on.

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The Petermann Bakeshop was steps away from a stone bridge that connected the North and South Quarter of Highcrest. Flowing the length of the city, stalls lined up along the Danby river selling goods, meats, and hot apple cider. Enchanted street lamps fluttered on. The grey sun dipped low and the smell of fresh baked bread filled the air. Despite the arctic wasteland outside the walls, the city was vibrant.

The Bakeshop’s window had all kinds of golden pastries on display. Alice halted Larry short of the door to a narrow alleyway.

“You wait here,” she instructed.

Larry’s dark hollows glittered, “Die!” He shouted, waving his hands, “Die!”

The gloves fell off. Alice slammed a hand to her face and groaned.

“Yes, pie, P-I-E. You wait. I get. Understand?” She bent over, plucking them off the ground.

Larry cocked his head to the side and pointed to the shop.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” She said.

A soft *ding-a-ling* rang as Alice entered the bakeshop. The scent of sweet cinnamon hit Alice immediately. Lucinda appeared at the

archway, wiping her apron between her hands and rounded the counter in a swift stride.

She frowned. "Good grief Alice, where is your cloak? It's freezing out there!"

Lucinda embraced her and rubbed her shoulders. She took the basket from Alice's hands and set it on the counter as a high pitched chime rang from the kitchen.

"Oh! That's the cinnamon rolls. Simon! Can you get that?" She called out to her son.

Alice leaned against the counter, setting down her gloves, avoiding her gaze.

Lucinda continued, "Stefan brought a mechanical timer from Addersford! The new wizard in that town is marvelous."

Alice stared at the knotted wood patterns. "Do we have any more of those pies?"

"I don't think these are done, Mom." Simon called from the kitchen.

Lucinda's eyes remained fixed on Alice. "Then just reset the timer!"

"I don't know how!" He hollered.

Lucinda rolled her eyes, "Be right there."

She gave Alice another hug, "We have a pie in the back I can check on, but oh!" Lucinda stopped, pivoting on her heel.

"I have a couple slices left in the window and–OH SAINTS WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!"

Alice's stomach dropped as she followed Lucinda's gaze to the window where Larry had his head pressed upon the glass. His gnarled finger scraped slowly with a *screech* and yelled, "DIE!!!"

It was terrifying.

Lucinda screamed, "It's going to kill us!"

"Wait!" Alice cried, springing between Lucinda and the window.

She didn't listen, "SIMON! Get your father!"

"What? Where is he?" Simon called back.

"YOUR FATHER, Simon! Next door! GET HIM!"

Lucinda panicked, grabbing anything nearby–a spoon, a spatula, but settled on a set of metal tongs and snapped them, "Get behind me Alice."

Alice kept her feet planted, "Stop! It's okay."

As if on cue Larry tapped again, this time with both hands pointing at the delectable pie in the window, "DIE!! DIEEE!" he wailed.

Lucinda's eyes were wide, the tongs raised, "It is *not* okay, it's literally saying die!"

"He wants the pie! Not die!" Alice fired back.

"The pie?"

"Yes, the pie."

"Why does it want pie?"

"I don't know, it's a long story."

"Well tell it to go away!"

"He won't!"

"What's going on?" Stefan called, sprinting from the kitchen with Simon close behind, their matching wavy black hair bouncing.

"The skeleton wants pie." Lucinda said flatly.

Stefan's brows rose, "That thing? Wants pie?"

"DIEEEE." Larry tapped.

They all jolted.

"Is that one of the soldiers from the Meadow?" Simon asked.

"Yes, it is, but–" Alice stuttered.

"That's rad." Simon interrupted. His father shot him a glare.

Alice made eye contact with each of them. "I'm letting him in," she said calmly.

"What? No!" Stefan stood next to his wife, a spatula in hand.

Larry heaved his shoulders, the hood falling revealing his dented helmet. His chin dropped in defeat.

Lucinda lowered her tongs. "...Well now he just looks sad."

"I'm grabbing a knife." Stefan thundered back into the kitchen with heavy footsteps.

"What's a knife going to do? It's just *bones*!" Simon shook his head.

"I wouldn't have brought him," Alice said, moving to the window, "but he kept following me."

"I told you cutting through the Meadow would curse you someday." Lucinda stepped to the window and snatched the pie from the display. "And if we all die at least it we have pie!"

Larry watched as Lucinda left with the pie to grab plates and then shifted his gaze to Alice who gestured to the door. With a *ding-a-ling* Larry sheepishly walked in. Alice took her cloak back, hanging it by the door.

"Wow, look at the size of that dent! You must've been hit hard!" Simon marveled from the counter.

Larry touched his head.

"Die..." He said, his tone somber and Alice felt he actually meant 'die' that time.

Stefan and Lucinda returned with a heaping slice of apple cranberry. Breadknife in hand, Stefan stood watching the skeleton closely

while Lucinda gently handed him a plate in his boney hand. Larry stared at Alice who gave him an approving nod.

"Go on," she urged.

Larry stared at the pie.

Slowly, he picked up the fork and took a bite.

Alice looked at the ground, ready to hear the *splat* of the pie hitting the floor, but it didn't happen.

The room was quiet.

Larry took another heaping bite. Then another, until the plate was clean, the pie mysteriously vanishing with each chomp. When he looked up, white sparkles danced in the void of his eye sockets.

He handed the plate to Alice and gave a nod, "Die." *Thanks*.

A high-pitched chime sounded, the timer going off again, but no one moved. Larry sauntered with fluid movements to the kitchen, almost dancing as he walked. They all watched as he knelt before the oven and pulled out the tray of cinnamon rolls with his bare hands. As he set the tray down, he met their gawking stares with a toothy smile.

Alice hooked her arm around Lucinda's elbow, "Looks like we have a new baker."

THE END