

Making Mágic

The Sweet Life of a
Witch Who Knows an
Infinite MP Loophole

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6



MAKING MAGIC

THE SWEET LIFE OF A WITCH WHO KNOWS AN INFINITE MP LOOPHOLE

– Maryoku Cheat na Majo ni Narimashita –

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[J-NOVEL CLUB]

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“This is a cherry blossom tree. During the summer, its leaves are lush and green before turning red and falling when autumn arrives. Then, when winter is over, it blooms beautifully, but only for a short period of time. It bears a resemblance to the progression of a human life—with some exceptions.”

I wondered why I'd gotten so worked up over some flowers all of a sudden. Was it simply because I missed my previous life? Or was it that I was envious of other people, who aged normally and whose lives would end one day?



CHAPTER 0

THE FAKE STUDENTS

Yuicia's school offered a wide variety of classes. While practical classes were held in small groups, magic theory was usually taught in large auditoriums. Students also had to choose classes based on their affinity with each magic type, allowing them to develop skills tailored to their aptitudes. In a way, this was very reminiscent of how universities worked in my previous life.

Of course, it wouldn't do if all the students did was study magic, so Yuicia had also implemented general education and history lectures, which, just like magic theory lessons, were held in the auditoriums. However, some students didn't take these seriously, as they considered them less important than magic classes; as a result, most of them had to repeat a year despite their magic abilities being on par with their peers.

"So we're fake students today, huh?" I said.

Teto and I were currently strolling down the hallway of Yuicia's school, wearing uniforms. We had entered the school as guests before changing, and I had even used transformation magic to make myself look a few years older. Right now, both of us seemed to be around sixteen.

"Teto's super happy to be wearing the same clothes as Lady Witch!" Teto chirped.

I smiled at her cute comment and took a look at the pamphlet we had received to check when the next lecture we were interested in started. I thought that, with the sheer number of students and professors at that school, Teto and I wouldn't stand out too much.

"Wait, I've never seen these two cuties before."

"Wow, they're so pretty!"

"What department do they belong to?"

We passed by a group of students who started whispering excitedly among

themselves. I looked around, thinking that maybe something interesting was happening in the hallway, but I didn't spot anything special so I simply shrugged it off.

"Anyway, what should we do now?" I mused out loud.

"Lady Wiiitch, can we have some curry from the school cafeteria for lunch?"

"It's not lunchtime yet, though. How about we go to attend a lecture first? There's one about modern history starting right about now."

The two of us made our way towards the auditorium. As modern history was part of the core curriculum, it was packed with students. Teto and I picked seats in one of the room's far corners to keep folks' attention off of us.

"There are so many students in here," I whispered.

"It's kind of exciting!"

Some of the students were making small talk with their friends as they waited for the class to start, while others were reading books, taking naps on their desks, or eating snacks. This atmosphere made me feel some sort of nostalgia as I vaguely remembered my days as a university student in my previous life.

After a few minutes, it was finally time for the lecture to start. The lecturer grabbed a voice amplification magic device—a mic, basically—and introduced himself.

"Hello, everyone. I am Professor James Tollman. I specialize in historical studies, and in this class, we'll delve into the early modern history of the Ninth Continent. Let's start by pinning down precisely what we mean by 'early modern.'"

Professor Tollman grabbed a piece of chalk and drew a long horizontal line on the blackboard, which he then divided into smaller segments to represent all of the different historical periods.

"First, we have the genesis of the world, also known as the Origin Period. This is when the Creator God shaped continents, gave birth to the gods, and brought forth the first humans. It's worth noting that this epoch precedes the Age of the Gods, something a lot of people tend to get wrong. Unfortunately, we don't have any books or documents from that time, so we have to rely on the rare fossils and relics archaeologists have found, as well as the stories passed down by certain long-lived species who witnessed

those events. Next up is, as I mentioned earlier, the Age of the Gods. During that time, the gods took it upon themselves to guide the humans so they could expand and flourish. Now, while we do have a bit more information about this time period, mostly through oral traditions and folklore, it remains an ongoing field of study for us historians.”

Professor Tollman marked a pause to write “Origin Period” and “Age of the Gods” on the blackboard. Next to me, Teto was staring at the board with a blank look on her face; a quick glance around the auditorium told me she wasn’t the only one feeling perplexed.

“After several centuries, the Age of the Gods came to an end as humans became independent and learned the fundamentals of magic. This marks the beginning of what we call Antiquity. Antiquity is divided into four periods. The first is Early Antiquity, a dark period where humans had to adapt to life without relying on the gods, resulting in a decline in magical technology and civilization. The second period is Mid-Antiquity, marked by conflicts between nations as they developed new magical technologies. The third period is Late Antiquity, during which many of these conflicts began to subside. Lastly, we have the Ancient Magic Civilization Era, which, to this day, is still considered the pinnacle of industrial society.”

Professor Tollman wrote the names of the four periods of antiquity on the blackboard and began discussing the major polities and dynasties of those times, as well as the various transformations resulting from conflicts and monster stampedes—although I couldn’t help but notice that he left out a lot of very important details.

“As you’re all aware, the Ancient Magic Civilization Era came to an end when a huge catastrophe struck the world. The catastrophe caused almost all of the world’s mana to disappear, resulting in a steep drop in the human population. This also marks the end of Antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages also saw the introduction of the status system to help the few remaining humans navigate this new world. This moment of transition marks the shift from the old calendar to the new calendar—between these two ages is year zero.”

He explained that humanity basically had to start over from scratch, spending two thousand years rebuilding what they had lost and recreating the achievements of Mid-Antiquity.

I heard Teto sigh next to me.

"Are you okay, Teto?" I asked.

"I don't get anything he's saying," she whispered.

I had been listening intently to Professor Tollman's lecture, but Teto had never been a history girl. She was half lying down on her desk, and I could almost see smoke pouring out of her ears as her brain overheated. Professor Tollman's lecture must've sounded like total gibberish to her.

"As I said before, in this class, I will be teaching you about the Ninth Continent's early modern history, which precedes the late modern and contemporary periods, the latter running up to the present day. It's worth noting that these distinctions were created by human historians; different tribes have their own unique ways of categorizing their history. What we consider to be turning points might be nothing to them, and vice versa."

So, for example, a big turning point in human history might be a certain nation's transition from feudalism to mercantilism, a huge discovery in magic that completely reshaped industrial structures, or first contact with another continent, et cetera, et cetera. At least, that was what I was bringing to the lecture.

"Take elves, for instance. They have a much longer life span than humans. To them, four hundred years ago might be the time of their parents' or their grandparents' generation; the early modern period might feel like yesterday to them," Professor Tollman continued. "Moreover, if a significant decline in population and societal integrity were to happen now, our era might be considered a new Middle Age by future historians. As a cautionary lesson against that possibility, our first lesson will cover the Stampede War, a conflict between humans and monsters."

Professor Tollman paused, and I pondered his words. The early modern period was four to five hundred years ago, which meant that I had been alive at the time. I was probably already familiar with the topics he was going to cover, but his delivery was so engaging that I was engrossed in the lecture nonetheless.

"The Stampede War, also known as the 'Month of Chaos,' happened over four centuries ago, in the year 2075 of the new calendar."

I had participated in the Month of Chaos, so I still remembered everything quite vividly. On the one hand, I couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed about listening to

a history professor talk about something I'd been there for, even though I hadn't played that big of a role in the whole thing; on the other, I was interested to hear about it from an outsider's perspective. I grabbed a pen and listened attentively to Professor Tollman's lecture, taking notes like a good student.

This is a story where all the bonds the Witch has woven throughout the years come together into one tale. It is also the story of unsung heroes who fought in a battle unknown even to the Witch.

CHAPTER 1

THE ISLANDERS' DAILY LIVES

One day, a few months after Yuicia left, Teto, Beretta, and I found ourselves wandering the wasteland.

"Mana begets mana production, doesn't it? And the more mana there is, the faster natural changes happen," I noted as I looked up at a waterfall that hadn't been there before, a brilliant rainbow spanning its cascading waters.

"Wow, that's new!" Teto exclaimed. "It's amazing!"

"A little while ago, when the maids surveyed the wasteland, they deemed that this spot would become a good water source," Beretta told us.

The regeneration of leylines had caused significant tectonic shifts throughout the wasteland. What used to be a flat, barren land had undergone a dramatic transformation; there were now rocky mountains, small rivers, and wetlands, making it the perfect environment for mythical beasts to build their nests and burrows. Vegetation was spreading like wildfire too, all thanks to the new arrivals. The seeds of the fruits the monsters ate as well as the tree nuts they buried in the ground and the spores that accidentally ended up on their bodies all sprouted and grew incredibly fast thanks to the mana they produced. Judging by the recent changes, it seemed that in the next thirty years, the entire land within the grand barrier would be covered in vegetation.

"We need to be careful, though; we don't want the vegetation to encroach on our mansion or the demons' villages," I noted.

Teto nodded. "That would be bad!"

"I don't believe this will be a problem," Beretta said. "We are currently promoting vegetation growth with the land management devices, but as soon as we move on to the next phase and plant the rare seeds you entrusted me with last time, the mana consumption and production should stabilize, and the plants will stop spreading as fast."

I had made the seeds Beretta was talking about with my Creation Magic to grow all sorts of rare medicinal herbs: ambrosia, a mythical plant that only flowered once every fifty years; taros lotus, which had the power to cure even fatal ailments when grown in wetlands (yet was highly toxic in other environments); mandragora, an all-purpose magic ingredient that was sometimes classified as a monster; and hamaon, an essential component in both sacred wine and elixirs, the latter being a panacea for any affliction. If anyone wanted to put in a request for any of these herbs at the guild, it'd have to be a B-rank level quest at the very least. After all, all of these plants needed copious mana to survive, and mana-dense zones were often infested with monsters.

Beretta's comment reassured me, and I nodded as the three of us entered the forest. After a few minutes of walking, I noticed two shadows passing over us in the sky. They seemed to have seen us too, as they made a U-turn and came to land in front of us.

"Witch! Oh, and your attendants are here too. What are you doing here?"

"Did something happen?"

The two silhouettes had been none other than Shael and Yahad, two of the demons who had moved into the wasteland. The latter was riding a griffin, as, unlike the godkin Shael, he didn't have wings.

"Nope, nothing; we're just taking a stroll. I wanted to see the changes in the wasteland with my own two eyes," I replied.

"You're always so serious, Witch," Shael said, rolling her eyes. "You're the master of these lands. You should relax a little."

Yahad, horrified by Shael's blunt tone, quickly interjected, "Please forgive her rudeness, Lady Witch!"

A wry smile played on my lips. I didn't mind Shael's casual approach—it was a testament to how far our relationship had progressed—and Teto clearly didn't care either. As for Beretta, she had taken a step back when Shael and Yahad joined us and was simply waiting for our conversation to be over.

"I don't mind, Yahad. You know you don't *have* to be so polite with me, right?" I said.

"Of course we do! We owe you so much! I couldn't possibly take all the liberties Shael does."

Teto must've noticed my increasing discomfort at Yahad's overly reverent approach, as she changed the topic. "What are you two doing here?"

Shael puffed out her chest in pride and showed us the contents of a large bag she was holding. "We went to collect gemstones and raw ores!"

"I found these on the side of the mountain in the west a few days ago," Yahad explained. "It would've taken forever to get there on foot from the village, so I enlisted the help of the godkin and the griffins."

Their bags were indeed filled to the brim with raw ores and beautiful unpolished gems. The demons didn't have access to any metals back on the floating island, so this treasure trove was a valuable find for them. They were all smiles.

"That's great," I said.

Teto was salivating. "Oooh, these stones look so yummy!"

Shael took a step back. "H-Hey! They're not for you to eat! I'm going to polish them and give them to the Great Elder; he loves shiny stuff!"

We had helped the Ancient Verdigris Dragon—also known as the Great Elder—move into the wasteland along with the former islanders. With Yuicia's help, we'd cut the mana links that had tied him to the cavorite crystal at the center of the floating island. He could now freely roam the world again, just as he used to. He sometimes left the wasteland for several weeks at a time, but would always come back with something shiny. A dragon's got to have a hoard, y'know?

"How are you two doing? Getting used to life down here?" I asked the two demons.

"We've been sooo busy," Shael told me. "The other godkin and I spend most of our time delivering le— What was it again? Letters? Between the villages."

"We're all doing great too, thank you for asking, Lady Witch."

After the demons moved into the wasteland, there had been a huge baby boom, and they had to settle into three different villages. You had the one centered around the former floating island and the Great Elder's grotto. Then you had the first village the demons had built when they moved into the wasteland, which boasted several large fields. Lastly, they built another village near the edge of the barrier, close to where we

used to live with Selene back in the day. The demons who lived there were, for the most part, hunters and lumberjacks who ventured outside the barrier for their work, although they never went too far.

Just like Yahad did today, a lot of them asked the mythical beasts for their help with their daily tasks. For example, the hunters often had the cat-siths and the fenrirs chase their quarry, while the gaurens and the tanngrisnirs—mythical beasts that looked respectively like oxen and goats—helped the lumberjacks transport lumber and the farmers plow the fields. They could also rely on winged beasts—such as pegasus, griffins, and hippogriffs—to swiftly traverse the length of the whole wasteland. The demons had no shortage of materials thanks to the eikthyrnirs' antlers, the aries' golden wool, and the female gaurens' milk. And if someone got hurt, they could always rely on the purifying magic of the unicorns. In short, the demons lived in harmony with the mythical beasts, relying on but never killing them.

Now, not all of the mythical beasts wanted to live among the demons. While most of them settled near the villages, some preferred to live closer to nature. A few of them—the ones who didn't need as much mana to survive—even left the wasteland altogether and set off to explore the world.

I listened to Shael and Yahad tell me all about their new lives, nodding and throwing in the occasional “Is that so?” to show them I was listening.

“We'll bring you some meat, fresh vegetables, and mythical beast teeth and fur and whatnot next time,” Shael told me.

“Good idea, Shael! We're going to have to find a huge monster to kill for Lady Witch outside the barrier,” Yahad said, grinning at me.

“Thank you. I'm looking forward to it.”

I really was thankful, but I couldn't help worrying about the demons. Mythical beast loot was incredibly rare in the rest of the world, and it wasn't the kind of thing you'd just randomly offer to your neighbor. Besides, Shael, Yahad, and the other demons were fascinated by metal; I was afraid that, if they ever had to deal with merchants, they'd end up selling mythical beast parts for only a handful of silver coins—or worse, bronze. I needed to find a way to make them understand the value of things, and fast.

Currently, the wasteland was still surrounded by the barrier Liriel had set up two

thousand years ago after the catastrophe that struck the world. But it was getting weaker and weaker with each passing day. When I incarnated here, nothing could cross the barrier, but nowadays, it only stopped mana from flowing out and dangerous people and monsters from coming in. Animals and harmless monsters could already come and go freely, and it was only a matter of time before people would get curious and come to explore the area. And once merchants learned that people lived here, they would be upon us before we knew it, seeking trade opportunities.

"I'll need to find a way to deal with those, huh?" I muttered after quietly explaining my worries to Beretta.

"We will take care of that, Master," Beretta assured me in a hushed voice.

"Thanks, Beretta."

Still, time really flew by, didn't it? It had already been over ten years since Shael and the others moved into the wasteland. Demons had a longer life span than humans and usually lived for around two to three hundred years, so to them, it must've felt like they'd only barely settled in.

As I stood there, reminiscing with a smile on my face, Shael suddenly seemed to remember something. "Oh, by the way, Witch! The hunters near the southern border have a message for you. They said they found remnants of a campfire within the closest Demon Den."

"A campfire, huh?"

"Yep. Some branches in the forest had been stepped on too."

The hunters never strayed too far from the wasteland. They didn't need to go look for rare herbs, since there were more than enough inside the barrier, and on the rare occasions they *did* decide to venture a bit farther, they'd always have the pegasus and the griffins take them there. So if they spotted human activity inside a Demon Den near the border, it meant that people had gotten really close to the wasteland. It seemed the day when adventurers discovered this place might arrive sooner than I'd anticipated.

"Thank you for letting me know."

"I'll send someone to inform you if they see people again," Shael said. "Well then, we're

off. See ya!"

"Thank you for your time, Lady Witch; have a nice day."

The two of them and the griffin soared into the sky, and Teto and I waved goodbye.

"Be careful on your way home!" I said.

"Bye-bye!"

"Master, it is highly likely that these adventurers will cross into the wasteland in the near future," Beretta told me once Shael and Yahad were out of view.

I let out a sigh. "I know. There's no escaping it, is there?" I grumbled as the three of us made our way back to our mansion.

CHAPTER 2

THE RECONNAISSANCE TEAM

With the regeneration of the wasteland going smoothly and the local mana density slowly increasing, the barrier cutting the wasteland off from the rest of the world wasn't needed anymore; it was getting steadily weaker as the years went by. Liriel might've been a goddess, but there was a limit to her power, as she used the prayers from her worshippers to perform miracles. Since the wasteland wasn't a source of danger anymore, there was no point in keeping the barrier up when she could be using her powers to help people by protecting their crops instead.

This meant that, as time went by, more and more things found ways to enter the wasteland: plants, animals, monsters, mana... and people. Mana had also started leaking out, which caused a Demon Den to form near the border. When I heard the news, I knew it would only be a matter of time before people entered the wasteland.

And I was right; three days after we met Shael and Yahad in the forest, Beretta sought me out with an urgent message. "Master, do you have a moment?"

"Is something the matter, Beretta?"

"The 'guests' you have been anticipating have finally entered the wasteland."

I nodded, not feeling particularly surprised. Teto, on the other hand, was staring at us with wide, comprehending eyes.

"Well, I suppose we should go greet them. Do you know what kind of people we're dealing with?"

"They seem to be a reconnaissance team from Gald. It seems that one of them possesses some sort of unique far-sight skill and was surveying the wasteland from afar, so the hunters invited them into their village."

The three of us immediately made our way to the hunters' village in the south using our transfer gate. When we arrived, we saw that the adventurers and the hunters were chatting in the village square. The adventurer party was composed of four members,

all beastfolk. Since the godkin and the female dragonkin looked pretty much the same as birdfolk and dragonfolk respectively, they didn't seem too taken aback by the demons' appearances. Quite the opposite, in fact...

"What is this place? It's completely different from what I've been told."

While the leader of the reconnaissance team, a dogman, was looking around the village in shock and amazement, his friends had started chatting up the female demons.

"So pretty... Miss, may I ask your name?" One of them, a dragonman, asked one of the dragonkin ladies.

His friend, a birdman, had the same idea. "You look so graceful!" he told a godkin woman. "I've been watching you from afar."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but these two are married and have kids. Don't try to seduce them," I warned the adventurers as I made my way to the village square.

The leader turned towards us. "A human girl? And a maid?" he asked, surprised. "No, what am I talking about? This is a demon village; you two are obviously demons. If it's not too much trouble, could you please call the master of these lands over? We're a reconnaissance team from the Gald Beastman Nation and we'd love to talk to them."

I opened my mouth to reply, but Beretta beat me to it. "You are being disrespectful to my master," she said coldly. "She is the one who rules these lands."

"Beretta's right!" Teto chimed in with a triumphant grin. "Lady Witch is the most important person here!"

The man didn't seem convinced, though, so I decided to intervene. "I wouldn't exactly say that I 'rule' this area per se, but I'm the representative of the people here, yes."

The dogman's eyes shot wide open. "But you're so *young!*"

"I'm really not. In fact, I'm pretty sure I must be at least twice your age," I replied with a smirk.

The man's expression turned grave. It seemed that whoever decided to send this team to the wasteland, they made sure to include at least one person capable of rational

discussion in case they came across people.

Or perhaps they knew I lived here and they purposefully chose someone they knew wouldn't get on my nerves...

"Let me introduce myself; I'm Chise the Witch."

"And Teto is Teto! Lady Witch's bodyguard! Nice to meet you!"

The birdman and the dragonman were so heartbroken that I had stopped them from flirting with the godkin and the dragonkin that they didn't react to my words. On the other hand, the last member of the reconnaissance team, a dogwoman, looked like she couldn't believe her ears. "Chise the Witch and Teto the swordswoman... Are you two the Carpet Riders?!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, you know of us?" I asked.

"Of course I do! People in Gald tell stories of you two to their children in lieu of lullabies! But the rumors say that you two are either dead or that you'd gone back to your homeland. To think that you've been living here this whole time..."

"Is that so?" I said, awkwardly. "How about you guys tell me what you're doing here?"

Apparently, people in Gald had started noticing weird phenomena happening around the wasteland: repeated earthquakes, a mysterious beam of light in the sky, a dragon coming and going in the local airspace... This had caused the inhabitants of Gald a great deal of worry. People knew about the barrier around the wasteland, but not why it had been erected; a lot of them had started speculating that perhaps the goddesses had built it to trap an evil dragon, and that now that the barrier was breaking down, it'd made its escape.

"Duke Hammil sent us to survey the area to get to the bottom of this," the leader told me.

If there truly had been a threat, they apparently planned on having all of the countries bordering the wasteland get together and subjugate it.

"Our government knows that this place belongs to you. However, some people have started speculating that you asked for the rights to the Wasteland of Nothingness so you could hide a dangerous monster here," he continued. "These rumors, along with

speculation that both of you were executed by Lawbyle's former king, have led people to conclude that the dragon our citizens spotted was that very monster. They believe that your alleged demise weakened the barrier, enabling its escape."

"The monsters in the Demon Den near the Wasteland of Nothingness have been particularly active recently, and the weakening of the barrier has caused the Church of the Five Goddesses to worry," the dogwoman added. "The most zealous believers are convinced that the moment that barrier collapses entirely, it will herald a huge calamity."

I had no idea rumors *this* wild had been floating around.

I resolved to deal with the diplomatic repercussions myself by discussing things with the ruler of Gald, but I really wished Liriel could visit the head of the Church in a dream oracle and let them know everything was fine.

I can't, a voice echoed in my head. *There are very few people whom I can communicate with through dream oracles, and even if I could tell the head of the Church, there would be no way for me to contact the other believers to reassure them.*

"I-I see," I said. "By Duke Hammil, do you mean Duke Gyunton Hammil, perhaps?"

When we left for Lawbyle, Prince Gryunton had married into the Hammil family and inherited their dukedom.

"Yes. Our Lord told us that if we met you, we should do everything in our power not to anger you," the dogman said.

"Good grief, who does Gyunton take me for?" I muttered to myself with a sigh.

Still, hearing about our old friend made me want to go visit him.

For a little while, we sat and talked with the adventurers, getting them acquainted with exactly what was going on with the wasteland. Well, *almost* exactly; I couldn't tell them the whole truth.

The tale I spun for them went as follows: After the king of Lawbyle put a bounty on our heads, we ran away and traveled the continent for ten years, taking a few human children and mythical beasts under our custody. We then decided we should settle down somewhere and welcomed them in the wasteland, along with the godkin and

the dragonkin. I also told them that, while the wasteland used to be, well, a wasteland, we had spent a lot of time and effort refurbishing the place, and the area's mana concentration had skyrocketed. That process was what caused the earthquakes, but they didn't cause any damage outside of the wasteland. I also assured them that the huge beam of light had just been a spell we used to help the regeneration of the land. As for the dragon, I simply said that it was a deity worshiped by the dragonkin and a close friend of mine.

I hoped the adventurers would leave it at that, but unfortunately, they didn't fully believe me.

"It's a very thorough explanation, but, somehow, I can't help but think you're lying to us," the dogman said.

"You two might be A-rank adventurers, but we're not stupid; we're not going to fall for that nonsense," the dogwoman added.

They were still as suspicious as they had been when we first greeted them.

"Well, you don't have to believe me," I shrugged. "Anyway, can you make it back to Vil by yourselves? Do you want us to help you find your way back?"

"If possible, we'd like for you to go see Lord Hammil and tell him everything you just told us yourself," the dogman said, looking a little awkward.

They knew that my story had been utter nonsense, so they knew Gyunton wouldn't believe them, even if they told him word for word what I had said.

"Well, I didn't want to have to interact with the outside world just yet, but I suppose I can't postpone it forever," I muttered to myself. "Fine, I'll go," I said louder so they could hear me.

I couldn't send the maids there in my stead, since the mana density outside the wasteland was still too low for them to function properly, so I had no choice but to go myself.

"Beretta, Teto and I are going to Gald. Look after the place during our absence, please."

"Of course. I shall do my utmost to protect this place while we await your return."

"All righty then, let's go."

"I'm so excited to see everyone again!" Teto chirped.

"H-Huh? You mean now?!" the dogman asked, baffled.

Right after the words left his mouth, a few pegasus and griffins landed near us.

"You guys are going to help the adventurers find their way back? Thank you," I told them with a smile.

"Teto's gonna ride on Lady's Witch staff!"

We made all four of the dumbfounded adventurers ride on the pegasus and griffins, and once they were gone, I pulled Flying Jade out of my magic bag. Teto sat behind me, and just like that, we were off to Vil.

As I mused over how long it had been since we'd last gone there—over twenty years—we flew over the forest; before long, we landed in front of the town. The mythical beasts dropped the adventurers off before immediately heading back to the wasteland.

Adventurers and soldiers rushed out of the town one by one to confront us. As the scouting party had told us, everyone had been on edge ever since they saw the Great Elder flying around, and since we arrived from the sky, they must've thought it was a monster attack.

But as soon as they saw us...

"Th-Those robes! Miss Chise?! Miss Teto?!" one of the adventurers exclaimed, gawking at us.

A smile spread across my lips as I raised the brim of my witch hat. "Wow, so many familiar faces. Hello everyone, it's been a while."

"Heya!" Teto chirped.

I recognized a bunch of the adventurers Teto and I had helped train back when they were still kids. I couldn't remember any of their names at the moment, but they had all become veteran adventurers.

And so, amid a great mix of confusion and joy, we were welcomed back into the town of Vil for the first time in over two decades.

CHAPTER 3

REUNION WITH OLD FRIENDS

After arriving in Vil, Teto and I followed the adventurers to the guild to meet with the guildmaster.

"Ah, Fred! I see you've come back. I heard that there was a monster attack on the town; is everything all right?" the guildmaster asked the dogman—Fred—when we arrived.

"I-It wasn't a monster attack," Fred stammered. "It was, um, mythical beasts. They gave us a ride back here. More importantly, we brought the master of the Wasteland of Nothingness along with us."

He stepped aside, silently urging Teto and me to move forward.

"Hi there, it's been a while. How have you been?" I asked.

At the sight of us, the guildmaster's jaw plummeted, his expression so shocked that his glasses had slipped out of place. He used to be part of the guild's staff back when Teto and I spent a lot of time in Vil. Even though he was quite obviously older now—his hair grayer, his fur lacking its luster, and his face etched with more wrinkles—I still remembered him.

"Miss Chise and... Miss Teto?" he uttered, astonished.

"Yeah, we're back," I said. "We brought you some dried fish and alcohol. Where should I put it?"

"The fish is really yummy!" Teto chirped.

Before departing from Vil, we made him a promise to bring back souvenirs the next time we visited, so I used my Creation Magic on our way to town to replicate some of the yummy dried fish we often ate in Lawbyle, as well as a bottle of nice alcohol. However, he completely ignored our gifts and rushed towards us, collapsing to his knees.

"I'm—I'm so relieved... I'm so glad the two of you are all right!" He sobbed like a child, tears streaming down his scrunched-up face. I was a little taken aback by his sudden outburst, especially since we weren't alone in the room, but I forced a smile on my face.

"Well, we're A-rank adventurers, you know? We can protect ourselves from most things just fine. Besides, don't you remember my motto? 'Safety first.'"

"Of course, I remember!" he exclaimed. "But I'd heard you two disappeared after you got involved in some sort of political strife in Lawbyle. I was so *worried*!"

Well, I suppose being hunted by the king, his knights, and the court magicians so they could do experiments on me and figure out the secret to immortality counts as "political strife," I mused, a distant look on my face.

After the whole debacle in Lawbyle, we mostly kept to ourselves in the wasteland and didn't take on any more quests from the guild. We would occasionally go turn in potions and medicinal herbs in the towns we previously visited, but I would always do so anonymously. This was also when I did my shopping, sneakily buying books, new tableware, and art pieces.

"More importantly, Miss Chise, Miss Teto... What are you two doing in the Wasteland of Nothingness?!" the guildmaster asked us, looking like he was on the verge of a heart attack.

Once he calmed down, I told him the same white lies I'd cooked up for the party that found us.

When I was done, he let out a long, pensive "Hmm..." I sensed he, too, wasn't entirely sold on my tale. "So, let me get this straight. You've been working on regenerating the Wasteland of Nothingness? You caused those earthquakes and the huge beam of light we saw once? The dragon in our airspace is your *friend*? And you built some sort of settlement with some demons and abandoned human children you found during your travels?"

I nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty much the gist of it."

"G-Guildmaster, are you all right?" Fred inquired. "We didn't really understand everything either..."

The guildmaster let out a strained laugh. “I’m... I’m fine. Your birdman and dragonman pals, on the other hand, still seem a bit dazed from earlier. Are they okay?” he queried, gesturing towards the two still in a state of shock.

“They’re fine, don’t worry about them,” I said. “They fell head over heels for two women from the wasteland at first sight. I don’t know if I broke the news that they weren’t really *eligible* gently enough.”

“I... have even more questions now,” he muttered, exchanging puzzled glances with the dogman.

I deemed this was as good a moment as any for us to take our leave. “Anyway, we’ve been asked to go meet with Lord Hammil, so we’ll be on our way.”

“Actually, could you stay in town and wait for him here?” the guildmaster asked. “I’m scared the two of you traveling across the country might cause a bit too much chaos, you see... And, if possible, I’d like for Miss Teto to help us out again.”

“Help you out?” Teto echoed, her head tilted to one side in confusion before a look of understanding crossed her face. “Oooh, *that!* Of course, leave it to Teto!”

Teto nodded excitedly before dashing out of the room under the dumbfounded gazes of the other adventurers. Meanwhile, the guildmaster and I exchanged smirks.

“And just like that, she’s gone,” I said. “I’m going to go find her again. Can you turn up some accommodations for us in the meantime? Thanks.”

“Sure,” the guildmaster nodded.

And so, Teto and I stayed at the guild while waiting for Lord Hammil’s escort. Per the guildmaster’s request, we spent most of our time helping the other adventurers train and organizing mock duels with them. The adventurers we had sparred with in the past were beyond excited to train with us for the first time in twenty years. Well, to be fair, Teto was the one doing most of the training; I just cast the occasional *Heal* spell. Still, I couldn’t help feeling a bit nostalgic for our adventuring days here.

A month passed.

“I didn’t expect you’d come all the way here yourself. It’s been a while, Prince Gyunton, Rollwacca.”

"Hello!" Teto chirped.

Gyunton smiled awkwardly from his seat opposite us in the guild's reception office.

"I'm not a prince anymore," Gyunton said. "I'm just Duke Hammil, the current ruler's granduncle. You can call me Lord Gyunton if you want."

"And I haven't been Lord Gyunton's private secretary in some time. Now I am his estate manager," Rollwacca added.



While their titles had changed, their duties seemed much the same; thanks to his experience and the relationships he had built during his youth, Gyunton was still in charge of Gald's diplomatic relations.

"I'd heard you two went missing, but, just as I thought, you're alive and well," Gyunton said.

"I take it you never believed the rumors in circulation," I replied.

He'd even told the reconnaissance team not to anger me if they came across us—which was still an unnecessary comment in my opinion. But I supposed this was proof that he hadn't believed for a single second that something had happened to Teto and me.

"There's no way someone as stubborn as you would die so easily."

"But that's not the only reason you knew I hadn't died, is it?"

A smile curled on his lips. "Bingo. Your signature's still there on the magic contract ceding the rights to the Wasteland of Nothingness to you. It would have been erased in the event of your death. I concluded that you'd gone to ground to wait out whatever mess you got into, and that you'd show your face again sooner or later."

I felt a bit awkward learning that Gyunton had figured out my plan to hide away until people forgot about me, just like the immortal sages and witches of legend.

"But you were way too careless about it," Gyunton continued. "There have been sightings of 'two young girls' visiting glass and tableware workshops in the south of Lawbyle, art galleries in a certain port town, and even tea leaf plantations in Ischea. The same 'young girls' have also been seen buying books and alcohol in larger towns. Don't you think that's *a bit* suspicious? It was like you were everywhere and nowhere all at once."

"Lady Witch, that's all of the places we went together!" Teto gasped.

As a prince and a duke, Gyunton had a *vast* intelligence network; despite my efforts, we could never have slipped through the cracks in it. Still, I didn't want to admit my defeat, so I stayed silent and sullenly sipped on the tea Rollwacca had prepared for us.

After a few minutes of silence, Gyunton asked, "So how much of what you told the others was true?"

"Most of it," I replied.

His nose twitched, and a displeased look appeared on his face.

"Good grief, aren't you ashamed of yourself, lying with a straight face like that? Have you forgotten there's no point in trying to lie to me?"

Gyunton must've been at least sixty or seventy, but his literal nose for deceit was still as sharp as ever. In the end, I had no choice but to tell him the truth, including the fact that I could use Creation Magic and that I was Liriel's prophet. As I spoke, I saw the confusion on his and Rollwacca's faces deepen.

"It all sounds like utter nonsense, yet I can't smell a single lie on you," Gyunton said. "I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Me too, Lord Gyunton," Rollwacca admitted. "However, if it is the truth, then we are very lucky to count Lady Chise among our friends and not our enemies."

Gyunton nodded. "We are." He paused and turned towards me. "Chise, I have a question for you. Do you plan on becoming queen of the Wasteland of Nothingness?"

"Lady Witch, a queen? Hm... Lady Queen Witch? Lady Witch Queen? That doesn't sound right..." I heard Teto mutter next to me.

I threw Gyunton a suspicious glare. "I don't," I replied curtly.

"Think about it, Chise: you already have people and land. If the other countries acknowledge its existence, the Wasteland of Nothingness can become a proper country. And the person who rules that country—you—would be its queen," Gyunton explained to me slowly, as if I were a child.

But I had zero intention of becoming queen. I planned on staying Chise the carefree witch forever.

"Besides, you're Lady Liriel's prophet," Gyunton continued. "As such, you're her messenger and you're meant to guide people in her name, right? This instantly gives you sufficient legitimacy to build a royal dynasty."

"Ah, yes, the theory of the divine right of kings, huh? Well, I suppose that while I don't call myself the 'queen' of the wasteland, I pretty much act as such," I said with a wry

smile.

Gyunton shot me an anxious look. “If you’d like to become a noble in Gald, I can back you up. Unless you plan on allying with Ischea, since you have ties with Margravine Liebel?”

I shook my head. “Neither. I don’t want to become a noble; I really don’t need all of the responsibilities that go with the title.”

Besides, while the wasteland counted very few inhabitants, all of us were insanely strong: Teto and I, Beretta, the Great Elder, the demons... If we allied with any other nation, it would create a huge power imbalance on the continent, which was something I wanted to avoid; I planned on having the wasteland stay as neutral as possible.

“I’ll tell the king I met with Chise, the A-rank adventurer who settled in the Wasteland of Nothingness with her people,” Gyunton said. “Your rank should deter most people from bothering you in the future. Gald will respect your desire to remain neutral; we, too, are a patchwork nation.” He punctuated each sentence with sighs, as if the whole situation was giving him a headache.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“One last thing. Are you *really* immortal?”

He must’ve heard the rumors. The adventurers who came to the wasteland hadn’t mentioned it, which made me think that they might’ve been under some sort of gag order. However, as a noble and, most importantly, a member of the royal family, Gyunton probably had been authorized to inquire about it.

“I can’t age, but I wouldn’t call myself ‘immortal.’ I’m pretty sure that if someone cut my head off, I’d die,” I replied.

Gyunton made a face as if he had swallowed something bitter before releasing a long, deep breath out. We’d known each other for over thirty years and I hadn’t physically aged even a little bit since then; he must’ve had an inkling about my true nature even before hearing the rumors.

“I’ll send someone to the Wasteland of Nothingness again soon—a delegation this time, not a reconnaissance team,” Gyunton said.

“Sure thing. I’m looking forward to it.”

We exchanged a few more pleasantries, and Teto and I left the room. After a month spent training the guild’s adventurers, Teto and I could finally go back to the wasteland.

CHAPTER 4

SELENE'S VISIT

And so, my carefree days continued. Gyunton had said he'd send a delegation to the wasteland, but it'd probably be a while until they got here; he needed time to choose members, and they had to find a way to deal with the Demon Den too, so I knew we still had time before we'd have to entertain them.

But one day Beretta came to me with a message. "Master, a delegation from the Liebel margravate has arrived in the south of the wasteland."

"The Liebel margravate?" I echoed, surprised.

"That's the family Selene married into!" Teto said, looking just as shocked.

She was right. Liebel was quite close to the wasteland, but I didn't think they'd send in a delegation without organizing a reconnaissance mission first. Teto and I followed Beretta to the south of the wasteland, where the delegation from the Liebel margravate was waiting on the other side of the barrier. From what Beretta told us, it seemed that a few mythical beasts had spotted them loitering around the barrier. They told Beretta, and she stepped outside to ask the members of the delegation what they were doing there.

We soon arrived where the group was waiting. I instantly noticed the young knight standing at the center of the group; after all, I had already seen that face before.

"Master, this man is a knight of the Liebel margravate," Beretta explained to me.

"Nice to meet you, I'm—"

"Lyle of the Wind-Riding Falcons?" I interrupted him. I hadn't done it on purpose; I was just so surprised to see Lyle—an adventurer whose party Teto and I helped in the past—standing right in front of me that the words left my mouth without me realizing.

"Um, how do you know my grandfather and his party's name?" the young knight asked awkwardly.

"Your... grandfather?"

Right. Fifty years had passed since I met Lyle and the others. And taking a good look at the young knight, I realized they didn't look *exactly* alike.

"Brother, what's going on?" a young woman who appeared to be a cleric asked the young knight.

"This girl just said our grandfather's name," the knight told her.

"Our grandfather's name?" the young woman repeated.

She was wearing a mostly white outfit with a breastplate, and her hair was gathered in a ponytail. She looked a lot like Anna—another member of the Wind-Riding Falcons—although her eye and hair color differed.

"Grandkids, huh? Well, it's been fifty years, after all," I mused out loud.

"Um, can we introduce ourselves now?" the young knight asked awkwardly. "I'm Leyle Harrison, a knight from the Liebel margravate."

"And I'm Sienna Harrison. I work as a healer for the Liebel army."

"We've heard from Gald that the Wasteland of Nothingness was inhabited. On orders from the margrave himself, we came to greet you," Leyle continued.

Gyunton must've sent word to the Liebel Margravate to explain the bizarre phenomena that had been occurring in the wasteland these past few years. The margravate had discretionary power, which meant they were allowed to do a lot of things without having to wait for the go-ahead from the Ischea royal family. Therefore, they'd been able to send a delegation to the wasteland before Gald did.

"Do you know when we'll be able to meet with the representative of the people here?" Leyle asked.

"This is our master, Lady Chise," Beretta said, gesturing towards me.

Sienna's eyes shot wide open in shock. "Huh?! No way! That little kid?" she blurted out before hurriedly slapping a hand on her mouth.

I was already used to that type of reaction, so I just put on my smuggest face. But all of a sudden, I heard a few knights towards the back exclaiming loudly, “Please wait, madam!”

“You shouldn’t come out yet!”

“We don’t know what kind of people we’re dealing with!”

As I was trying to understand what was going on, a young woman at the back of the group used Body Strengthening to jump over the guards, landing a few meters before me. I instantly recognized her green hair, so dark it was almost black. Due to her large mana pool, she seemed to be in her midtwenties, but I knew for a fact that she was already over fifty. She was wearing riding clothes, and three rings hung from a silver chain around her neck: a mythril ring, a unicorn horn ring, and the protection ring I had given her.

“Mooom! Big sis Tetooo!” she exclaimed as she ran towards us like a little girl.

Teto and I spread our arms and embraced her under Beretta’s and the knights’ surprised gazes.

“I missed you two so much!”

“Jeez, Beretta and the others have no idea what’s going on,” I said with a fond smile.

“Selene, you’ve grown up sooo much! You’re so pretty!” Teto chirped.



Beretta and the others were staring in astonishment as a young woman who looked old enough to be my mother was calling *me* "mom." This young woman was, of course, none other than Selene, the Liebel margravine and my adopted daughter.

"Are you sure you can be here, Selene?" I asked. "You're a margravine now, after all."

"It's fine! I plan on passing my title on to my son very soon. Besides, my father and brothers have agreed to send me here as a negotiator," she replied enthusiastically. "And I really, *really* wanted to see you and big sis Teto!"

An awkward smile formed on my lips in response to her words. After all, Selene's father and oldest brother were respectively the former and current kings of Ischea.

"M-Madam, d-do you know these ladies?" Leyle asked gingerly.

A soft, refined smile appeared on Selene's face. "These women raised me and taught me everything I know about magic and combat. They're also the owners of the Wasteland of Nothingness, as recognized by both Ischea and Gald. Just so you know, any act of disrespect towards them will be considered an act of disrespect towards myself and the Liebel family!" she announced.

I couldn't help but be impressed by how regal she looked.

"Well, let's make ourselves comfortable then, shall we? Let me take you all to our mansion," I said.

"Please follow me, everyone," Beretta followed.

The group passed through the barrier, and Beretta, Teto, and I led them through the forest to a small hut the demons used whenever they wanted a break from hunting or gathering.

"The forest is a lot larger than before," Selene noted.

"We kept on expanding it even after we entrusted you to the king of Ischea," I explained.

Teto chimed in, "The golems are gonna be so excited to see you after so long!"

"I missed them too," Selene replied with a little chuckle. "The little bears."

There was a look of nostalgia on her face as she took in the surroundings.

"Mom, Teto, what about the house we used to live in?"

"It's still there, don't worry."

"We're keeping it clean too!" Teto added.

On hearing that the house she grew up in was still there, Selene muttered a quiet "Thank you," tears welling up in her eyes. The three of us walked slowly, a tranquil atmosphere surrounding us as we enjoyed the company of the girl we raised for the first time in several decades. The knights, on the other hand, seemed quite restless, gawking at their surroundings; I could hear them talking in hushed voices, wondering *how in the world* the Wasteland of Nothingness had turned into such a beautiful, lush forest.

"This way, everyone," I said, taking them to the transfer gate in the little hut. I had set this one up for the maids to use when they were afforesting this part of the wasteland.

"Oooh, a transfer gate! This brings me back," Selene said with a smile. "Let's go, then!" She passed through the gate without a sign of hesitation.

"Ah, madam, don't! It's dangerous!" one of her knights warned her, but it was too late.

Teto and I followed her through the gate; the knights went last, looking panicked.

"Welcome to our new home, Selene," I said.

This transfer gate wasn't connected to the ones inside I used on the regular, but to one out on the grounds; the sight of the mansion greeted us as soon as we stepped out of the gate. This little trip gave our guests their first glimpse of what our life in the wasteland was like; not only did we live in a magnificent mansion serviced by beautiful maids wearing matching uniforms, but we also had technology allowing us to travel from one end of the wasteland to the other in a single second.

If you asked anyone to picture the house of a witch living in a land cut away from the rest of the world, they'd probably imagine a hut full of weird herbs and suspicious trinkets. They'd also most likely assume I lived a very primitive life, with no modern technology. I figured that was what the knights had been expecting the moment they set foot in the wasteland.

As soon as they took in the sight of our home, their attitude changed altogether; in their eyes, we weren't these uncultured mystical beings scratching out a living in the wilderness anymore, but individuals of high status akin to foreign nobility. Not only that, but we were Selene's benefactors and were acquainted with both the former king and his successor. It was obvious from their expressions that they believed any hint of disrespect towards us would spell catastrophe for them.

"The knights can stay there, in the guesthouse," I said, gesturing towards a separate building near the mansion. "We will be talking with Selene in the main building. Sienna, Leyle—as her guards, you can come along."

"Beretta, can you please bring us some yummy snacks?" Teto chirped.

Beretta nodded before turning towards Selene. "Master, I believe Lady Seleneriel would like to change first. This way, Lady Selene. The other maids will help you get into more comfortable clothes."

Selene nodded. "Yes, please. I brought a spare dress."

In a matter of seconds, Selene was whisked away by the attendant dolls and taken to a separate room to change out of her riding clothes. She hadn't even batted an eye when Beretta said the maids would help her change; she really had become real nobility, huh? I never asked the maids to dress me; they *did* look like they wanted to help, but I could put my own clothes on just fine.

Sorry for being such an unrefined master, but I'll never change my mind on this.

"Well then, Sienna, Leyle, how about we have a nice little chat while we wait for Selene to come back?" I offered, turning back towards them.

For some reason, the two of them looked *terrified*.

C'mon, guys, I'm not going to eat you.

All I wanted was to ask them how the members of the Wind-Riding Falcons were doing.

CHAPTER 5

NEW BONDS

Sienna and Leyle were incredibly tense; in their minds, they were having tea with a noble from another country, so they were on pins and needles.

"This tea is really yummy!" Teto chirped. "Lyle, Sienna, have some of the sweet Beretta made!"

"Th-Thank you very much. Oh, you're right—this tea is very good."

"This blend actually comes from Ischea. It's called Roseleen. As for the scones, they come with jam we've made ourselves from the fruits we grow here," I explained.

Thankfully, the tea and the sweets—along with Teto's warm and inviting attitude—soon allowed the two of them to relax a little. I took that opportunity to ask them about Lyle and the others.

"I see... So Lyle and Anna are already dead."

"Yes... They loved each other until the very end. Well, Grandma Anna had Grandpa Lyle wrapped all around her finger, that's for sure."

"Your grandparents saved us a long time ago," I said.

If you asked Lyle and Anna, they'd probably say that we were the ones who saved them, but to me, it was the opposite; they were the first people I met after reincarnating into this world. They took us to a nearby town—Darryl—and even explained to us how currency worked. To me, they were my saviors.

"Is that so?" Sienna asked.

I nodded. "It is. That's why I accidentally called you by your grandfather's name," I told Leyle before turning towards Teto and Sienna, who were too engrossed in their snacks to participate in the conversation.

Teto had slathered bright red strawberry jam all over her scone, while Sienna had gone with prune jam. Even her choice of jam sparked nostalgia in me.

“What kind of life did your grandparents have?” I asked.

“A little after they got married and had our father, the Liebel margrave invited them to join his personal guard,” Leyle explained to me.

He then told me that that was how they got their last name—Harrison—and that his family had kept serving the Liebel margrave ever since.

“Sienna has a knack for healing magic, so Madam Seleneriel has taught her the basics.”

“The margrave has to deal with other nations and Demon Dens, so I’m working super-duper hard on my magic to help as many people as possible!” Sienna announced proudly.

She still had crumbs around her mouth from the scones she’d been enjoying earlier; I couldn’t help smiling at the sight.

“I see; Selene has been teaching you magic, huh? That makes you my grand-disciple, then.”

“N-No way! That’d be too much of an honor!” she exclaimed, her face a mix of happiness and embarrassment.

She probably felt awkward at the idea of me fussing over her like a doting grandmother when I looked younger than her.

“Aw, you all seem to be having so much fun. Let me join!” A voice said from the doorway.

“M-Madam!” Leyle and Sienna exclaimed at the exact same time.

Selene—done up in a fresh, clean dress—entered the room, a gentle smile on her face. She elegantly took a seat on one of the sofas as one of the maids poured her a cup of tea. I could tell just how much she had grown since the last time I saw her just by her bearing.

“May I ask how you’ve been doing?” I asked her.

"We wanna know eeverthing!" Teto chirped.

"Of course, mom, big sis Teto. Let me tell you everything about my darling husband, my children, and my grandchildren!"

She told us that she and Margrave Liebel, her husband, had had four children together.

"They were all so adorable when they were babies!" she said. "But I had no idea how I wanted to raise them... My husband and I debated a lot about what the best way to go about their education was. I knew that it was crucial for them to learn how to behave like proper nobles, but, at the same time, I also wanted them to live more freely. I'm sure you and big sis Teto must've struggled too when you raised me."

I nodded. "We did. You never run out of things to worry about, being a parent."

Selene continued to tell us about her family before pausing abruptly. "Mom? If I ever bring them to the wasteland, would you be willing to meet them?"

"Of course. I'm very much looking forward to it."

"We'll prepare tons of yummy food for them!" Teto said.

Back in the day, we'd been cut off from Selene entirely for reasons I don't want to get into here. I was so happy I could finally have tea with my beloved adopted daughter again, now that the circumstances were different.

When the conversation died down, Selene asked, "Do you plan on exchanging with the outside world now that the barrier is coming down?"

I nodded slightly. "We do. We can't keep to ourselves forever. But we plan to be very careful about who we interact with."

I didn't have enough free time on my hands to entertain everyone who wanted to come to the wasteland; I'd rather have other people deal with most of the guests so Teto and I could keep on traveling the world.

"Do you think you could consider putting us in that category?" Selene asked.

Selene had grown up in the wasteland; she knew about all of the rare and precious things we had here, from the World Trees to our magic items, like the flying carpet,

and even the bumper crop of medicinal herbs we grew. Once other countries learned how flush we were, there would undoubtedly be tons of people who'd come to the wasteland to seek them. With the Liebel margravate so close to the border, Selene could screen potential visitors and introduce the ones that seemed worth our while to us. This would allow us to reduce the number of individuals we'd have to deal with, all while still keeping connections to the rest of the world. In return, we could provide the Liebel margravate with exclusive goods, which they could then use as leverage when dealing with other families and nations. It was a mutually beneficial relationship.

"Sure. This must be why the king sent you rather than a random noble to deal with us; he knew we'd accept that proposition more easily if you were the one offering it," I said. "But let me tell you in advance: this arrangement won't last forever."

Selene nodded gravely. "Of course. If my son or my grandchildren ever disrespect you, you're free to cut any connection between the wasteland and the Liebel margravate."

She sounded so calm and collected. My little girl really was all grown up, wasn't she? I was proud of her. She knew that it was highly unlikely for the relationship between my territory and her family's territory to last forever; while I would most likely be the master of the wasteland for a very long time, Selene's title would get passed from generation to generation. We might not always get along with her heirs.

Somehow, that thought made me feel a bit sad.

CHAPTER 6

HOMECOMING, MEMORIES, AND FORGOTTEN THINGS

Selene and her guards had to pass through a Demon Den to arrive in the wasteland; there was no doubt they must've been exhausted. And so, I offered to let them stay for a little while, until they felt well rested enough to make the return trip.

"I can't believe you crossed the Demon Den on foot. That was way too reckless," I chided Selene.

"Lady Witch is right! It must've been really tiring," Teto added.

The three of us had taken Selene outside to show her how the place had changed since she'd last been around. We had used the transfer gate that led to the southern part of the wasteland and the hunters' village; at present, we were strolling through the forest as we listened with growing exasperation to Selene's account of her trip.

If one went in a straight line from Darryl to the great barrier, they'd have to walk at least fifty to sixty kilometers to reach the wasteland. Back when Selene was little, it already took us about an hour just to reach Vil by air, and that let us completely skip over the Demon Den. Going on foot meant one had to make countless detours around the local monster population and could only progress in broad daylight. The reconnaissance team from Gald had to make several attempts to reach the barrier, and when they did, it took them three entire days to cross the Demon Den, despite being a very small and mobile group.

"Part of the Liebel margrave's duty is to regularly monitor the Demon Den and confirm the integrity of the great barrier," Selene explained. "So we have a fixed route to the wasteland. It did take us a week to get here, though."

"Well, that can't be helped; the more people in your group, the slower you'll progress."

Selene was a very important person, so she'd been sent along with an escort party of thirty people. Larger groups naturally progressed slower than smaller groups, and

more people meant more chances of being spotted by monsters, so it came as no surprise to me that it took them so long.

"I'll lend you some of my griffins for the return trip," I offered.

"Thanks, mom."

All of a sudden, a familiar silhouette appeared from behind a tree.

"Mom, is that...?"

"Goh!"

"It's a clay golem Teto made," I said.

The clay golem had two lumps of mud on its head, making it look a bit like a bear. When Selene was small, she had plopped balls of mud on one of the golem's heads and affectionately called it a "bear golem." The other golems had seemed to like their friend's new look and had all plopped lumps of mud on their own heads. Selene excitedly waved at the bear golem, but it simply gave her a small wave before leaving to go plant the sapling it had picked up.

A saddened look appeared on Selene's face.

"What's wrong, Selene?" Teto asked her.

"Big sis Teto... Those bear golems, they're not the ones from back then, are they?"

Selene had thought the golem she saw was one of the ones who played with her as a kid. The wasteland was cut off from the rest of the world so the bear golems had been Selene's only playmates for a very long time. She probably missed them.

Teto must've reached the same conclusion, as she announced, "Teto's going to get your golem friends!" before dashing into the forest.

"Huh? Big sis, wait!" Selene stayed speechless for a moment before chuckling softly. "She hasn't changed the slightest bit."

When she was done laughing she turned towards me as if she had remembered something. "Oh, by the way, mom, can we go visit our old house?"

"Of course. That's actually where I was planning to take you all along."

The two of us continued making our way towards the southeast of the wasteland.

"Almost there," I announced.

"The trees have grown so much... This feels like a completely different place," Selene mused as she looked up at the trees.

Forty years had passed since she'd last been here; not only had the trees grown taller, but the forest was full of life now. On our way to the house, we could hear birds chirping and small creatures running through the bushes.

Finally, we reached the end of the forest and arrived at a small, one-story house.

"Ah, my home..." Selene breathed in surprise.

I had enchanted our old house with a preservation spell, so it had remained exactly as it was when Selene was little. Well, dust still accumulated, but the maids came to clean it on the regular, so it was always in pristine condition. The house was surrounded by a beautiful, well-managed forest, and vegetables were still growing in the small field we used as a kitchen garden.

"Let's go inside, shall we?" I offered and we did just that.

Just like outside, everything was exactly as we left it when Selene moved out.

"Ah, that's..."

"Harry, your stuffed dog. And that's a photo of the three of us."

Selene's favorite stuffed animal was exposed on the windowsill, along with a frame holding a photo of the three of us we took on a day when we had a picnic, as well as the magical camera I had gifted her on one of her birthdays.

"This really brings me back..." Selene murmured, holding out the stuffed toy and the picture frame, her lips curling up in a nostalgic smile.

"We thought of bringing these to you, but we figured bad people might come after you if they learned of your ties to us," I explained.

"I understand. Don't worry, mom. It's because of your Creation Magic and your Unaging skill, right? I heard that was why you'd run afoul of the king of Lawbyle."

She muttered under her breath that she was worried sick when she heard the news; I shot her an apologetic smile.

"Hey, mom? Can I take the magical camera back home with me? I'd love to take pictures of my family."

"Of course you can; it's yours. You can do whatever you want with it. There's almost no film left in it though, isn't there? Here, *Creation!*"

It wasn't exactly like there was anywhere she could go to pick up a couple fresh rolls to shoot with, so I figured I ought to spot her.

"Here," I said. "A thousand sheets should be enough for now. If you need more, I can make another thousand. Ah, what the hell, I'll make it ten thousand if you want; I'm not hurting for mana."

Selene chuckled. "That's too much, mom. Thanks."

The two of us sat down for some tea and reminisced over things and pictures from Selene's childhood while we waited for Teto to get back.

"Lady Wiiitch, I'm home!" Teto's voice came from outside the house.

Selene quickly raised her head from the photo she'd been looking at. "Big sis Teto's back."

"Let's go say hi."

My Mana Perception told me Teto had brought a few guests along with her, so I urged Selene to come greet her at the door with me. We stepped outside and saw her walking towards the house, a bunch of bear golems in tow. These golems were in charge of maintaining the house's surroundings so the trees wouldn't damage it, as well as growing vegetables and foraging for fruit and tree nuts that they'd bring to the hunters' village a little farther away. This was apparently where they had been when we arrived.

"The bear golems?" Selene whispered, her eyes blinking wide open in surprise.

The clay golems seemed just as shocked, stopping dead in their tracks when they saw her. Tears welled up in their eyes as they ran towards Selene.

“Goh! Goh! Goooh!”

Selene welcomed them all with open arms, tears of joy running down her cheeks.

“You remember me!” she said.

“Goh!”



Teto and I watched their reunion in silence. The golems were ecstatic; they'd been taking care of the house every day so that Selene could have a home to come back to if she so wished.

"I'm sorry for going away all of a sudden, everyone. I want to tell you all about my new life!"

The bear golems took her by the hand and led her to a chair they had installed in the front garden, where she proceeded to tell them about her life in Ischea. She talked about her husband, her new life as the margravine of Liebel, her four children and many grandchildren... The bear golems hung onto her every word, reacting to her words with their whole bodies. They couldn't speak, but their body language and excited cries were enough to make us understand how happy they were for Selene.

"If I bring my children here, will you become friends with them too?" Selene asked the golems.

"Goh!" they replied, puffing out and beating their chests as if to say "Of course!"

This showed just how reliable Selene's dear bear golems were.

After that, we decided to take a new photo together, this time including the golems. We compared it to the previous one and laughed with each other for what felt like hours.

Several weeks later, Selene sent me pictures of her children and grandchildren, and I used my Creation Magic to make copies to go in my photo album of Selene.

CHAPTER 7

THE MUSCLE-BRAINED BEAST PRINCE

We showed the members of the delegation from Liebel around the wasteland and even took them to meet the godkin and the dragonkin. They were quite surprised to see that their lifestyle was very similar to that of humans.

“Demons are much more similar to humans than I thought,” Selene mused as she watched godkin and dragonkin children playing together. A bunch of her guards nodded.

Well, godkin were beautiful, and dragonkin looked just like Dragonchanged dragonmen, so that might’ve been why they had such an easy time accepting them.

“There are so many different types of demons; no two races look alike,” I said.

Most of the population of Ischea was human, but they were still very accepting of half-human races such as beastmen, elves, dwarves, or dragonmen. There were, of course, dangerous demons in the world; some of them had become demons after dabbling in forbidden arts, like the devil cult that came after Selene some thirty-odd years ago, while others were dangerous by nature like the Hagle werewolves we subjugated in Gald. However, some demons lived among humans, including in the Liebel margravate—though, there were very few. While some of them stood out due to their unique appearances, a lot of them looked very similar to other demi-human races. Generally speaking, the only demon races that required subjugating were the ones that had been contaminated or driven mad by miasma, and the others were usually left alone. Though this was, unhappily, not the case everywhere; there were regions—especially on the western part of the continent—where demons were considered interchangeable with monsters and were either heavily discriminated against or straight-up murdered on sight.

“Mom, big sis Teto, I’ll come back, okay?”

I nodded. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Come visit us again soon!”

We bade goodbye to Selene as she and her retinue returned to Liebel on the back of the griffins and pegasus the dragonkin often rode. A few hours later, the mythical beasts returned and reported to us that everyone had made it home safely.

The month after Selene's visit, it was time for Gald to send their delegation to us. As we were familiar with the royal family, the second prince of the kingdom directly led the delegation, with Gyunton assisting him. A diplomat from Lawbyle accompanied them.

"Lady Chise the Witch, it is an honor to meet you," the diplomat greeted us. "I have asked permission to accompany the Galdian delegation to the wasteland to offer you my sincerest apologies for the affront my country committed against your person."

"Your apologies? Lord Gyunton, what's going on?" I asked my old friend.

Gyunton might've been elderly by now, but he had still managed to cross the Demon Den without a hitch.

"I used to be a diplomat, remember?" he said. "My friend here asked to join our delegation to apologize for what happened to you in Lawbyle."

He punctuated his sentence with a sigh. So that's why it took them so long to send a delegation.

I nodded and turned back towards the diplomat from Lawbyle, only to see him set down bags full of various goods. "Our country's parliament has decided to offer you reparations. Please accept them. Once again, I deeply apologize on behalf of our nation for what the previous king made you go through."

The bags behind him were full of all sorts of precious things; money, tableware and glasswork from my favorite workshops, and a few art pieces. I was taken aback by the whole thing and silently asked Gyunton for help.

"Well then, Chise, what are you going to do?" he said.

"I mean, even if you ask me that..." I muttered.

The diplomat had lowered his head, and it didn't seem like he would raise it until I explicitly told him I accepted his country's apology. I felt a bit bad for him, so I shrugged and said, "I wasn't even that offended in the first place. Let's let bygones be

bygones and leave that behind us."

"Thank you so much, Lady Chise. Our nation looks forward to dealing with you again in the future."

His change in attitude had been so fast that I almost got whiplash; one second he was looking like a kicked puppy, and the next he was all smiles. I was starting to suspect he had been sent here for his acting abilities alone.

"Lady Witch, you're too easy," Teto chided me. She tried to look angry, but she was so cute it wasn't very convincing.

"I'm starting to think the same thing," I said with a sigh. I didn't like thinking that I had been played, so I added, "Naturally, as Lawbyle doesn't share a border with the wasteland, we request that you use Gald as an intermediate when you wish to contact us."

"A-Ah, yes... Of course..." The diplomat said, his shoulders slumping dejectedly.

People often said that opportunities lie in the midst of difficulties; Lawbyle must've thought that, by sending a diplomat to "apologize" to us, they'd manage to secure a connection with us. My response, however, made it clear that I refused to be directly associated with them.

Gyunton must've been expecting my reaction; I could see his shoulders shaking with quiet laughter. Besides, I had just given Gald a leg up over Lawbyle.

After that, the second prince of Gald, a lionman named Reginton, stepped forward to greet us. "Nice to meet you, Carpet Riders! I'd love to take you two in a fight one day!"

"Lord Gyunton..." I trailed off, slowly turning towards him.

"Sorry. Prince Reginton has a strong warrior spirit, you see," he said sheepishly, his ears lying flat on his head.

Why in the world did they send that meathead as head of the delegation...? Scratch that, he's probably here to build up his track record as prince of the kingdom. Gyunton is probably the one who'll do the actual negotiating.

"Teto will take you on!" Teto said.

"Oh! You must be Miss Teto, the renowned swordswoman. Let us duel, then!" Reginton declared.

Reginton clearly wasn't much of a diplomat, but his enthusiasm for combat meant that he got along quite well with Teto and the dragonkin. They fought until they had their fill, then broke out the booze and got lost in their cups together. Reginton had been no match for Teto and Yahad, but his fighting abilities were on par with those of the other dragonkin. He could use both Beastchange and Body Hardening—although he couldn't keep them up for long, as his mana pool was quite shallow—and he could've easily become an A-rank adventurer if he hadn't been royalty.

"Prince Reginton is impressive," I remarked.

Gyunton nodded. "He is. He might be a bit rough around the edges, but he's a very clever fighter. It's a pity that he has so little mana though—especially as a member of the royal family. Mercifully, his skills as a commander will most likely make up for it in the future."

Many countries' noble families expected anyone marrying into them to have a large mana pool; therefore, noble children tended to have a lot more mana than their commoner peers. However, Gald was a nation of disparate races and tribes; in their early days it was common practice to marry strictly within one's tribe, but as they transitioned to a more unified government, the nation implemented a much more proactive policy to promote intermarriage—in short, Gald's nobles placed far greater importance on potential suitors' ancestral legacies than their mana pools.

As a side note, whenever a child was born to parents from two different beastfolk races—a catwoman and a dogman for example—the child typically only inherited the race of one of his parents. Reginton, for example, was the son of a lionman and a wolfwoman, and took exclusively after his father. Sometimes, one might even inherit an ancestor's race, as it had panned out for Gyunton, who was born a tigerman despite neither of his parents being tigerfolk.

I pulled myself back from my musings and shifted my attention back onto Reginton, who was pounding back another round of drinks.

"You guys fight good! You should work for me!" he told the dragonkin men he had sparred with.

"We can't. We have a great debt of gratitude towards the Great Elder and Lady Witch that we still have to repay."

"I see; that's a shame. If you ever change your mind, come find me, okay?"

Whatever else I could say about the guy, between his physical prowess and his basic approachability, I had to admit he had real chutzpah.

Once the celebrations drew to a close, the delegation packed up and went back the way they came. Their demon hosts waved them goodbye, asking that they come back soon. Meanwhile, I was preoccupied with how I was going to follow through on my end of the logistics behind the two trade agreements I'd signed with our neighbors.

"We'll be able to obtain a lot of the things I made with my Creation Magic through trade now. We're going to need to organize some kind of chamber of commerce, though," I said.

"I have already identified the maids with the highest intellectual potential. I believe they could manage the wasteland's trade activities," Beretta told me.

The wasteland's inhabitants lived a self-sufficient lifestyle, occasionally trading goods with each other. However, we were going to have to start introducing currency if we were to deal with the outside world.

"For starters, it'll be easier for us to go out and trade with them rather than force them to cross the Demon Den."

Besides, it'd cost us money to have the goods delivered all the way to us. It'd be much faster and less troublesome for us to go pick up the goods directly by air.

"We can use the money we got from Lawbyle to cover the initial costs of trading with the outside," I added.

Beretta nodded. "I will go and inventory our trade goods at once."

"Thanks, Beretta. Still, let's be mindful of what we don't want to set loose into the outside world and what we can only bear to part with in small doses. We also need to think about the kind of things we don't want to bring into the wasteland and set some hard rules to establish with our new neighbors."

There were a lot of things to take into consideration, but I decided to leave all of the decision-making to Beretta. I knew she would handle it perfectly. Still, the mechanoids would end up busier than ever. I thought it might be wise to create more attendant dolls—about fifty or so—to assist them with their new tasks. That, or we could maybe look for people among the former islanders who could take on those types of duties.

During the next few weeks, we worked on building a system to support our trade with Gald and the Liebel margravate. This also gave me an idea: eventually, when global mana concentration rose to a point where our resident demons could live outside of the wasteland, they could open shops selling specialties from the wasteland all over the world. As I set the terms of our relationship with the outside world, I couldn't help but feel excited by all the possibilities it would all open up in the future.

CHAPTER 8

DAILY LIFE

There were no roads linking Ischea and Gald to the wasteland—mostly because it'd mean having to go through the Demon Den—so for the time being we decided to deliver the goods to Darryl and Vil ourselves approximately once a month from spring to autumn.

"Griffins and pegasus can fly there just fine, and it'll give the godkin and dragonkin an opportunity to wander a bit farther outside the barrier" I said.

"But isn't that dangerous?" Teto asked me.

"I agree with Lady Teto," Beretta said. "Besides, if we're always the ones going to their territory, it might give the impression that we're overly accommodating."

Teto and Beretta's concerns made sense, but it'd be much, much riskier for the people of Ischea and Gald to come to the wasteland than the reverse.

"I'm sure you two have noticed, but the monsters in the Demon Den have gotten much stronger these days," I said.

"The magic stones are gonna be even yummier!" Teto chirped.

"They have, indeed." Beretta nodded. "Their average rank used to be D, but it is now closer to C."

"I'm just spitballing, but I think it might be our fault."

I explained my theory. The great barrier was getting weaker and weaker, meaning that some of our mana had started leaking out. We had also been working really hard on revitalizing the wasteland's dormant leylines, which could've prompted the monsters closest to the barrier to evolve. It was highly likely that, the further along the rehabilitation went, the stronger those monsters would get. I had also been told that the plants in the Demon Den regrew much faster now, making progress slow and tedious for ordinary explorers. It might still be a while before anyone managed to

create a proper road.

"I understand," Beretta said. "We will proceed with the commerce arrangements as per your suggestion, Master."

"Thanks, Beretta. I'd feel bad if anyone died trying to deliver things to us, after all."

"All of the demons own pendants made out of the Great Elder's scales anyway, so they should be fine!" Teto said.

These pendants contained traces of the Great Elder's mana, which could help shield them from basic attacks; they'd be all right even if they got attacked outside the barrier.

The wasteland was caught in a major turning point, but our daily life was still the same: we raised crops, strolled through the forest to see how much it had grown, watched over the mythical beasts, went to gather tree nuts, et cetera, et cetera.

"Oooh, Mister Great Elder is flying!" Teto exclaimed, looking up at the sky.

"I wonder where he'll go this time," I said.

It wasn't a secret to the neighboring nations that a dragon lived in the wasteland. That was fine by me; it meant that we probably wouldn't get attacked anytime soon. Still, I couldn't help but feel a bit jealous of how free the Great Elder was, being able to fly wherever he wished. But then I saw just how happy Beretta and the others were that Teto and I had been spending so much time at the mansion recently, and I instantly felt better.

The mythical beasts had also gotten attached to us, and they occasionally came to beg us to play with them.

"Look, I got you a ball. Go fetch!"

"Teto's going too!"

"Woof, woof!"

Today, two cù-siths and a fenrir had come to play fetch with us. I threw a ball as far as I could and they ran after it, competing with Teto to see who would get to it faster. All

of the cù-siths looked different from one another; one of our visitors today looked like a golden retriever—which, funny enough, always reminded me of Teto—while the other looked like a beagle. It had white, brown, and black spots and its little tail was always wagging.

There was a separate day of the week where we'd consistently get paid a visit by the other small creatures: cat-siths, bunny-like almiraj, ratatosks, carbuncles, you get the picture. We'd feed them little treats as we played with them. Feeling the cat-siths knead my thighs with their little paws and watching the almirajs' little noses twitch or the ratatosks' cheeks bulge with tree nuts always eased my fatigue. During the molting season, I used a brush to remove all of the shed fur from their bodies, which I'd wash and store for felting later.

Not only did I spend a lot of time with the mythical beasts, but I also worked a lot in the fields closest to the house with the mechanoids and the bear golems.

“Lady Witch, those tomatoes and watermelons look delicious! We should chill them and eat them later!”

“You’re right. Let’s go wash them in cold spring water and share them with everyone.”

Many water sources had formed while we were terraforming the wasteland; one of them was located quite close to the mansion. I had used Earth Magic to arrange the terrain how I wanted it and added a Japanese-style gazebo to give it a cozy look. Teto and I often went there to rinse our vegetables so we could eat them nice and cold; they were much tastier that way.

In the evening, Teto and I would help the mechanoids prepare dinner. They always looked disappointed when they couldn’t cook for us by themselves, but I liked to get my hands dirty once in a while. Besides, I was scared I’d lose my touch if I didn’t cook from time to time.

And so, our sweet, relaxed life continued day after day, unchanged.

“Lady Witch, we should go on an outing soon! Teto wants to eat magic stones!” Teto told me one day.

“Sounds good. Where should we go next? We could cross through Gald and explore even farther south, or visit the small nations in the west. And there’s the Mubad Empire in the north too, isn’t there?”

"If we ride on Mister Great Elder's back, we could go anywhere we want!"

"That's true. We could even leave the continent."

The two of us made plans for our future travels. But we couldn't find a real reason to leave the wasteland, so we never actually left. We would regularly go on little day trips to buy books or tableware, but that was the extent of our travels these days. Occasionally, we'd accompany the mechanoids and former islanders to deliver goods. It was during one of these trips that we finally got to meet Selene's husband, children, and grandchildren. One time, Prince Reginton even organized a mock tournament in Vil between his army and the dragonkin; Teto decided to join in just for fun. Sometimes the demons even made trade agreements by themselves—although there was a lot of trial and error involved. Among the goods we supplied Gald and Ischea, you could find: materials shed by the mythical beasts such as unicorn horns, eikthyrnir antlers, or gems from the carbuncles' foreheads; artisan crafts created by the godkin and dragonkin from the shed fur of mythical beasts; cheese made from gauren milk; golden fur from the aries; medicine made from fallen World Tree branches and leaves; loot from the monsters that lived right outside the wasteland; and so on and so forth.

We made sure to only export a limited number of mythical beast by-products to prevent price depreciation, as the elves living in the large forest on the eastern part of the continent sold similar goods. While our exports were almost exclusively high-end materials, we mostly imported simple commodities like metal, tools, salt, and livestock (chickens, geese, and pigs mostly), or luxury items like alcohol and works of art—and of course, magic stones for the demons to snack on. Most of the profits were shared among the demons, and I donated part of the money I made from trade to the Church of the Five Goddesses in Gald and Ischea.

As a side note, the demons were very reluctant to part with their newly earned shiny coins, as metals had been rare on the floating island. This even gave birth to a trend among the younger generation, who liked to show off all the silver in their collections as pendants.

CHAPTER 9

A DAY IN TETO'S LIFE

Teto's days always began next to Lady Witch.

"Good morning, Teto."

"Tee-hee! Good morning, Lady Witch!"

As soon as Teto opened her eyes, Lady Witch told me good morning. After that, Teto and Lady Witch ate the yummy breakfast Beretta had prepared, and we could start our day for real.

"What should we do today, Teto?" Lady Witch asked me.

"What do you want to do, Lady Witch?"

"Hm... I was thinking of mixing some potions."

Lady Witch said she wanted to try combinations she hadn't tried before. Lady Witch was always thinking about difficult things like that. Teto wasn't very smart, so Lady Witch always had to rely on Beretta for help with these sorts of things. But Lady Witch always said that Teto was very good at measuring out ingredients for her potions! Lady Witch's kind words always put Teto in a good mood.

"Lady Witch, Teto wants to help!"

"Ah, I'm working with some pretty weird materials today, so you're going to have to sit this one out, Teto. I'm sorry."

Teto felt really bummed that she couldn't help Lady Witch. But then Lady Witch seemed to remember something.

"Oh, that's right, can you go deliver the potions we made yesterday to the villages? The potions they have must be nearing their expiration dates, so they should stock up on new ones."

Teto raised her head and nodded vigorously. "Teto will do her best!"

"Thank you, Teto."

Teto put all of the potions into her magic bag and took the transfer gate to the village near the Great Elder's grotto after saying goodbye to Lady Witch, Beretta, and the others.

"Hello, everyone!"

"Oh, Lady Teto!" a godkin greeted Teto. "What brings you here?"

"Lady Witch sent me to deliver potions!"

"Ah, thank you so much, Lady Teto! Here, I'll take you to the storage area."

"Thanks!"

Teto followed the godkin to the village mayor's house.

"Oh, Lady Teto! What brings you to our village today? Is Lady Witch not with you?"

"Teto came to deliver potions for Lady Witch!" Teto replied energetically.

The mayor smiled and took the potions, then brewed some tea and gave Teto dried sweet potato slices to go with it. They were so sweet and chewy, it was delicious! She told Teto she had made them using the sweet potatoes Lady Witch had given to the villagers. They were so yummy that Teto ate them all without thinking. When she realized she hadn't left any for Lady Witch, she felt sad again.

"Would you like me to pack up a few as souvenirs?" the mayor offered.

"Please!"

With Lady Witch's souvenir secured in her magic bag, Teto headed to the next village. The weather was beautiful and she wasn't in any rush, so she walked there rather than going through the transfer gate.

"Hello, everyone!" Teto greeted the mythical beasts who approached her when she entered the forest. "Wanna race against Teto? Or do a contest of strength?"

Teto often raced against the horsey mythical beasts in the forest and did contests of strength against the bull mythical beasts. Lady Witch had once said Teto was “just like Kintaro, but with a bull for an opponent.” She had also said Teto looked like a sumo wrestler. Teto didn’t understand what any of those words meant, but it was fine. Lady Witch read lots of books, so she knew a lot of things Teto didn’t. When Teto tried to read books, her head always felt tired. Ah, but she loved it when Lady Witch read stories to her!

Teto came out of the forest and went to deliver the potions to the second village. *One more to go!*

“Teto,” Shael greeted her when she arrived in the hunters’ village. “Where’s the witch? Isn’t she with you?”

“Lady Witch sent Teto here alone today!”

At first, Shael had been really mean to Lady Witch and Teto didn’t like her at all, but now she was a lot nicer. Lady Witch had said she had “cooled off.” It hadn’t been that hot on the floating island, so Teto didn’t really understand why she had to cool off, though.

“Hey, care to duel the dragonkin warriors later? They’re much more motivated when they’re fighting against you,” Shael said.

“Um... Sure! Teto’s going to deliver the potions and she’ll be right back!”

Teto did just that and went to find Shael and the dragonkin warriors to help them train. Teto loved moving her body, and she always had lots of fun whenever she did mock duels with the demons. The godkin were very fun to fight against since they could fly and they were really fast. They’d come to attack Teto and then fly back. It was really fun to try to find ways to hit them.

“Teto’s sword doesn’t reach you in the sky!”

“Our wings are our only advantage. If you’re so mad about it, you should just learn how to fly too!” Shael teased.

In the end, Teto won the duel anyway.

Still, she was a bit jealous Shael could fly and she couldn’t.

"Could you please duel me next, Lady Teto?" a dragonkin asked.

"Of course!"

The dragonkin were really strong and had a lot of stamina, so they could fight for a really long time. They could also attack with their tails, which Teto always forgot!

"You're so strong, Teto," Shael said. "How did you get that strong?"

She let herself fall to the ground, panting in exhaustion. The dragonkin were staring at Teto as if they were waiting for her to answer, so she did. "You gotta sleep lots and eat lots! And you can't be picky with your food!" she said, puffing out her chest.

But the demons looked at her suspiciously, as if to ask "Is that really all there is to it?" But that was what Lady Witch had said and Lady Witch was always right! If Teto was this strong, it was because she had eaten lots of magic stones.

"Speaking of which, it's almost lunch. Wanna eat with us?"

"Ah, thank you, but Teto is going to eat lunch with Lady Witch! Time to go!"

Teto was ready to run all the way back to the mansion, but the maids in the village told her to take the transfer gate instead, so that's what she did.

"Welcome back, Lady Teto."

"Teto is home! Teto is sooo hungry!" she said as she headed to the dining room, only to be stopped by a maid in front of the door.

"Master likes cleanliness. I cannot let you inside in that state."

"But Lady Witch will clean me up with magic," Teto pouted.

"Please go have a bath and change."

It was true that Teto had gotten a bit dirty after fighting with the mythical beasts and the demons, but still. She got whisked to the bathroom by three maids. Teto could've easily shook them off, but the maids looked so determined to get her clean that she didn't dare. They looked a little scary.

"Are these clothes to your liking?" one of them asked, presenting a clean outfit to Teto.

"Can't Teto just wear her normal clothes?"

"We have put them out to wash. These are the only clean clothes you have left."

The maids had put her in a frilly dress which Teto didn't like at all.

"Teto can't kick properly in this!" she complained. "Actually, if Teto tries to kick things in this dress, you'll see my underwear, and Lady Witch will be mad at me."

"Lady Teto, you cannot fight in these clothes. You have to be more ladylike," one of the maids told her.

Teto still didn't like the outfit.

"Lady Teto, do you not want to see Master wearing cute clothes?" another maid asked.

"Teto does!"

"But Master always wears the same thing, doesn't she? Well, if you come to find her while wearing this cute outfit, it should convince Master to wear something similar as well."

"Is that so?!"

"Yes. We actually have made a matching dress for Master. I am sure that Master will wear it if it means she can match with you."

"That's amazing!" Teto said.

Teto couldn't help but feel like they were playing a trick, but it must be her imagination!

"Oh, there's actually something Teto wants to wear!" she said, remembering something.

"What is your request, Lady Teto? We will use it as a reference the next time we make clothes for you."

"Teto told Lady Witch before that she wants to wear a maid uniform! They're just so

cute! And Lady Witch said she'll wear one too!"

As soon as those words left Teto's mouth, the three maids fell to their knees.

"The innocent and adorable Lady Teto wants to wear a maid uniform... She's too precious!"

"And Master has agreed to wear one too! We might be able to see her, Lady Teto, and Miss Beretta in matching outfits... Argh! I have to keep it together!"

"We apologize for the unsightly display, Lady Teto. Please follow us to the dining room."

Teto didn't really understand what just happened, but when she entered the dining room, Lady Witch said that she liked Teto's outfit. She praised her for delivering all the potions and, after that, the two of us ate the sweet potato slices the mayor of the dragon village had given Teto for dessert.

That afternoon...

"Lady Witch, you're so cute!"

"I can't believe the maids managed to get you on their side to force me to try on all of these outfits..."

Teto and Lady Witch spent the afternoon trying on what the maids had whipped up for us. Lady Witch was so cute!

Today was a very happy day for Teto.



CHAPTER 10

A DAY IN BERETTA'S LIFE

After Master sent Lady Teto to deliver potions to the demons' villages, I accompanied her to a separate building of the estate. Certain potion ingredients released bad smells and poisonous fumes, so Master had decided to install her potion mixing room away from the main mansion.

"It's been a while since just the two of us spent time together, Beretta."

"Indeed. It cannot be helped, though; many more people live here now."

"How have you been recently? Are you having fun?" Master asked me cheerfully, her back turned towards me as she mixed her potions.

I started telling her about some of the recent events of my life. Most of our conversations consisted of me reporting changes and news in the wasteland to her, so it was quite rare for me to tell her about such personal matters.

"There has recently been a change in my and the other mechanoids' status," I said.

"Huh? In your status?" Master stopped what she was doing and turned towards me.
"Did you learn a new skill or something?"

"My race changed from 'mechanoid' to 'original mechanoid,' and the first twenty attendant dolls you created changed to 'high-end mechanoids.'"

Our overall abilities had improved as well, and I had put all of the other nineteen high-end mechanoids into ten separate groups:

- The "internal affairs group," which monitored the mana production in the wasteland and oversaw all of the matters related to the inhabitants' daily lives.
- The "cleaning group," which was in charge of looking after Master's mansion.

- The “cooking group,” which prepared Master’s food.
- The “agriculture group,” which was in charge of growing crops, looking after the fields and fruit trees, and maintaining the gardens.
- The “animal husbandry group,” which was in charge of looking after the farm animals and aquaculture of the river fish, as well as monitoring the mythical beasts.
- The “external affairs group,” which monitored the entries and exits in and out of the wasteland and communicated with the outside.
- The “trade group,” which was in charge of commerce.
- The “defense group,” which dealt with threats foreign and domestic.
- The “assets group,” which looked after and organized the books and art pieces Master bought, as well as the tools she created.
- And lastly, the “maid group,” which helped the other groups take care of their tasks whenever necessary.

The nineteen high-end mechanoids were in charge of these groups, and they each had ten of the newer attendant dolls Master created working under them. I was able to confirm that Ai, the mechanoid who went to work for Master’s disciple had evolved into a high-end mechanoid as well.

At first, all maids used to perform the same duties by following a rotating schedule, but I had implemented this group system to take into account the fact that each mechanoid developed different aptitudes and quirks during their evolution.

“I see. I had no idea.”

“I believed it was much too unimportant of a matter to trouble you with, so I hadn’t reported it to you until now,” I explained.

“You could’ve told me! This calls for a celebration. I need to come up with a gift for you.”

Master must’ve been done with her potion-making, as she started cleaning her

equipment and turned towards me.

My eyes shot wide open at her words. “I cannot accept; I am merely a servant.”

“I wish you’d tell me more about the things you want, though.”

I hesitated for a moment. “That... would be difficult. There are not many things I desire.”

I was content as long as Master and Lady Teto lived a happy, carefree life. However, if I had to think of something that’d made me happier...

“I have... two requests, then.”

“Shoot. If it’s something I can do, then I happily will. Even if it takes me a while, I’m sure I’ll probably be able to make it with my Creation Magic,” Master replied with a smile.

I tried to stay as composed as possible as I uttered my request. “I would like you to replenish my mana by patting me on the head like you do to Lady Teto.”

“You want me to pat you on the head?” Master repeated, adorably tilting her head to the side. “Are you sure that’s all you want?” she asked before beckoning me closer.

Master’s growth had stopped at twelve years old, which meant that she was much shorter than me; I crouched down in front of her.

“Thank you for everything you do for us, Beretta,” she told me softly while patting me on the head. “But don’t push yourself too much, okay? Don’t forget to take a breather from time to time.”

Her gentle, calming mana spread through my body, replenishing my attendant doll core.

“Thank you, Master, that’s enough,” I murmured after a moment. “My body has absorbed all of the mana—the Chisenium—you gave me.”

“Sometimes you say such weird things I have no idea if you’re joking or not,” Master replied.

Having gotten my fill of Chisenium—Master's calming mana—I felt like I was on top of the world. I wanted to go back to work, but Master had told me not to push myself too hard so, in the end, I decided to think about how to spend my day off to most efficiently replenish my energies.

Besides, I still hadn't told Master my second request.

"If possible, I would like to request a weapon like Lady Teto's magic sword to better protect you, Master."

"A weapon? You usually fight without one, right?"

We mechanoids mostly used hand-to-hand combat and magic. In my case, I also had the ability to shoot long-distance attacks thanks to the eight swords Master gave me that I controlled with Gravity Magic. However, these swords had no special properties.

"I would like a way to protect my hands," I explained. "If I get injured while protecting you and Lady Teto with my bare hands, I might not be able to perform my duties to the best of my abilities."

I wanted a weapon that would allow me to freely use my hands but protect them from injuries.

"I see; so you want some sort of armor, basically," Master said, looking deep in thought. "Back in the day, I found a pair of gauntlets of the earth in a dungeon. I sold it, but do you think something like that would work if I tweaked it a bit?"

"I am sure you can make it work, Master."

She nodded. "*Creation: gauntlet of the earth!*"

Her magic activated, and a pair of gauntlets appeared in her hands. Apparently, these had the effect of making anything one touched feel lighter, but it seemed that Master still wanted to add onto them.

"I've been experimenting with this bad boy recently, let me give this a spin..." she said, producing a chunk of bluish metal out of her magic bag.

"Master, that's..."

"I spent the past few months using my leftover mana to create this as I could only make ten grams at a time."

It was adamantium—the hardest magic metal in the world. It had a very high magic resistance and was incredibly difficult to work with. Yet Master had no problem manipulating it, molding it almost like clay as she replaced the gauntlets' metal parts with it.

"Phew, I haven't made something this cool in a while," she said.

"Master, you went a little too far," I said as I inspected the gauntlets' status.

Protector of the Earth:

A magic item created by remodeling a preexisting pair of gauntlets with Earth Magic. Anything one touches with these gauntlets will feel completely weightless. On top of that, it can adjust the weight of any item the wearer touches, and the adamantium will absorb and redirect a set amount of damage to the enemy.

Between being made of one of world's rarest and most valuable metals and having such beastly powers, these gauntlets stood above national treasure level in terms of rarity.

"Master, are you sure you want to give these to me?"

"They're already yours. They might be a bit bulky for casual use, though... Sorry about that."

"Please, do not apologize. I will treasure them," I said as I put the gauntlets away for safekeeping.

After that, Lady Teto came back home, and she and Master got whisked away by the other maids, who started playing dress-up with them. Master told me to let them do as they pleased, and I begrudgingly complied. But, after a few hours, I could see the light fading from her eyes, and I quickly put a stop to it. I made a mental note to warn the maids not to go overboard with the dress-up next time. Most young noble ladies

loved dressing up and would spend hours upon hours trying on new outfits, but Master wasn't too concerned about what she wore. Of course, she had her own preferences in terms of clothes, but she wasn't fussy and never complained about the outfits we prepared for her. Besides, she was immortal; she would most likely experiment with different clothing styles at least a few times in her life, which meant that she would end up trying on more outfits in her lifetime than any noble lady. I believed it would be best not to overwhelm her with too much at once and let her experiment little by little. I made sure to relay my thoughts to the maids, who reluctantly agreed that they wouldn't do it again.

That evening, I put on my new gauntlets and headed to a deserted part of the wasteland that served as a training area. I focused my mana into the gauntlets and punched the ground, which split open and immediately erupted into a burst of dust.

"I didn't even punch it that hard..." I said in shock as I gazed at the crater I had left.

The adamantium had both absorbed the shock of the attack and replicated it with added force, which had allowed me to unleash an extremely powerful blow without hurting my hands in the slightest. Not only could they soak up massive damage, but they could easily knock out most targets with a single blow simply by returning their own attack.

"On top of that, they allow me to manipulate the weight of anything they touch, meaning I can make my own fists heavier or my opponents lighter, so I can throw them more easily. Hmm, or I could bank a series of attacks before returning them to my opponent all at once... What a truly formidable weapon."

In terms of performance alone, these gauntlets were much superior to anything from two thousand years ago. That comparison made very little sense, though, as magic items back then not only had to be powerful and versatile, but also manufactured simply and from common enough materials to mass-produce for general use. No, if I had to compare the gauntlets Master created to something, it would be the unique masterpieces crafted by famous artisans throughout history, or the one of a kind artifacts bestowed to humans by the gods.

"With these, I will most certainly be able to get rid of anyone who threatens Master."

I took off my gauntlets and headed back to the mansion.

Later on, people would come to know the names of the Witch of Creation's two closest companions. The first was her unwavering guardian, the swordswoman Teto, who never left her side. The second was her trusted attendant, Beretta, responsible for overseeing the Forest of the Witch of Creation in her absence, who it was said could trade blows with the gods themselves so long as she wore her signature gauntlets.

CHAPTER 11

TRESPASSER PROBLEMS AND MAGIC COMMUNICATION DEVICES

Ten years had passed since we started trading with Ischea and Gald. While the people of both nations had been a little freaked out to see demons coming to their countries on the back of griffins and pegasus to sell weird items, they had gotten used to it since the initial shock. The scale of our trade with both nations had also gradually expanded to match increasing demand for the unique products we cultivated in the wasteland.

I had recently turned seventy-three, and my life was still as relaxed as before. On this day in particular, Teto and I were planting fall vegetable seeds to prepare for the upcoming season when Beretta came to find us.

“Master, we have caught trespassers again.”

As it turned out, our opening of the wasteland to the outside had caught the attention of some unsavory characters.

“This is what, the second time this month?” I sighed. “Between the merchants trying to buy out our rarest goods, the poachers, and the thieves, we have our hands full enough as it is.”

This wasn’t even touching on the Mubad Empire scouts posing as adventurers that had come to survey the area.

“Teto caught some bad people the other day too!”

They’d tried to cross the Demon Den in small groups so as not to get spotted by monsters. However, in recent years, our regenerating leylines and the great barrier’s mana leaks had *seriously* beefed up the monster population, and most of the folks trying to sneak in never made it past the Den. They’d just end up as fertilizer for the plants or a snack for the more ambulatory critters.

"It'd be a pain if too many of them died in the Demon Den, though," I said.

Too many dead people in the same place—especially ones with regrets and grudges—could lead to miasma pooling, which in turn would give birth to much stronger monsters. To avert such a headache-inducing event, we decided to apprehend anyone who seemed like they wouldn't make it out of the Demon Den and either send them back to Darryl or Vil or simply plonk them back at the Den's entrance.

"Lady Witch, shouldn't you pass judgment on the people we capture?" Teto asked me.

"That would be a huge pain. We'd need to write laws and a code of due process," I explained. "I'd much rather foist that responsibility on people who know what they're doing."

There was some semblance of a legal system in the wasteland, but we had devised it specifically with the islanders in mind, so it differed radically from those of other nations. For instance, on the floating island, residents had very few personal possessions, making it impossible for them to compensate for any damages they caused. A lot of situations were often resolved simply by lecturing the person who committed the offense. Speaking of which, certain things that were considered "crimes" in the rest of the world were permissible on the floating island. Thus I had tasked Beretta and the other mechanoids with devising specific rules for the islanders, but the implementation proved to be a lengthy and gradual process.

As a side note, the most severe punishment one could be sentenced to in demonic society was called the "stone purge." The magic stones would be gouged from the perpetrator's torso, effectively killing them, and the victim would receive them as compensation for their loss. Magic stones were extremely important to demons, as they couldn't survive without them. Apparently when one of them died, their relatives would receive the magic stones left over after their body was cremated, and they would consume them to inherit part of their deceased kin's powers. In a way, magic stones had been one of the only forms of personal property on the floating island.

I guess it makes a certain amount of sense that demons have a bloodthirsty reputation, considering how grisly their customs get... I mused.

But I digress.

"I'm just glad no one with actual combat skills has attempted to raid the wasteland

yet," I said.

Whenever Yahad and the other dragonkin traveled to Vil and Darryl to sell our goods, they always got challenged by adventurers and martial artists looking to test their skills. Thankfully, to this day, no one had tried to cross the Demon Den to come spar with them. However, in recent years the number of challengers had gotten way out of hand, so we had to set some restrictions on how many opponents they could take on in one day. It had come to a point where a prospective fighter had to reserve a time slot beforehand if they hoped to get their duel in.

"Teto got challenged to a fight too! It was so fun!" Teto chirped.

"We're going to have to seriously consider adding some safety measures around the place, huh?" I mused out loud.

The sheer quantity of mana that leaked from the wasteland into the Demon Den made the plants there grow rapidly, which rendered the idea of reclaiming the land completely unfeasible. On top of that, the great barrier was getting weaker and weaker, and it was only a matter of time before it disappeared altogether. When that happened, we would need to come up with safety measures to bar any potential bad actors from the wasteland.

"Still, I hadn't expected the demons to enjoy exchanging with the outside world so much," I added.

"We don't allow people from the outside to meet with you directly, so a lot of them end up chatting with the demons," Beretta said.

I had planned on slowly opening the wasteland to the outside, but as it turned out, the islanders' interest in the outside world grew stronger and stronger with every passing day.

"Liriel's barrier repels anyone with ill intent or carrying hazardous goods, but it won't last forever. We'll need to strengthen our defenses to prevent scammers and other unsavory people from sneaking in and swindling the islanders."

The demons had lived very secluded lives up until now and they were, for lack of a better word, extremely naive. It'd be a piece of cake for anyone who knew what they were doing to coerce them into signing disadvantageous trade agreements. I couldn't bear to see that, and I wasn't the only one; the Great Elder thought of the islanders as

his children. Who knew what he'd do if he learned that they got conned? It was too dangerous to risk it.

"Either way, it's a good thing there are very few adventurers ranked B and above this far out in the sticks," I added.

The stronger one's opponents were, the more damage it'd cause if they fought. The people of the towns around us knew that, so none of them dared attack us. If a strong but dangerous or ill-intended individual arrived in Vil or Darryl, they'd instantly get kicked out. Up until now, no one had attempted to *actually* harm the demons when they went to sell their goods in the towns or when they were sparring.

"Well, for now I suppose all we can do is wait and see what happens," I concluded as I finished planting my vegetable seeds.

When I was done, I watered the fields and poured some mana into the earth to help them grow before heading to the Japanese-style gazebo a little farther away, where I enjoyed some sweets the maids had prepared, all while thinking of all the yummy vegetables I'd get to enjoy come fall.

The next month, I decided to finally tackle our trespasser problem and had the islanders give Selene and Gyunton communication crystals so I could talk to them both directly.

"Ah-ah, mic check, mic check. Can you hear me?" I said in my crystal.

"Can you hear us?" Teto piped up next to me.

There were several ways to communicate with someone from afar in this world; obviously letter-writing was still a thriving institution—mostly the mail was delivered by humans on foot or birdmen, depending on the distance involved—and certain magic items could play prerecorded video, but aside from certain prized treasures of individual adventurer's guilds, there wasn't any established form of real-time telecommunication. And so I decided to make my own magic communication devices, which were much more efficient than even the ones used by the guilds. I had used Light and Wind Magic to make it so that an image captured by one of these crystals could be projected onto other crystals, no matter where in the world they were, and had embedded them with a spatial enchantment to eliminate time lag and maximize audio quality.

Teto and I were huddled in front of one of those crystals, waiting for it to connect to the ones we gave to Gyunton and Selene.

“‘Mic check’? What’s that? Some sort of incantation?” Gyunton’s response came first. “Mic check, mic check. I can hear you two clearly. Still, I can’t believe you sent us such high performance communication devices for free.”

“Mic check, mic check,” Selene’s voice came next. “Well, it’s mom we’re talking about; she’s always been way too generous.”

I could see both of their faces clearly. Gyunton’s definitely had a few more wrinkles than the last time I saw him, while Selene—who had recently passed her noble title down to her son—still looked as youthful as ever.

I couldn’t help but chuckle seeing them so confused by the phrase “mic check,” which earned me a dirty look from Gyunton. I cleared my throat and decided to move on to the real reason I called them today: to milk them for advice on how to beef up the wasteland’s security measures.

“Do you two know what I can do about all of the bandits and poachers who’ve been trying to sneak into the wasteland lately? None of them have managed to make it through the Demon Den yet, but I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before someone does.”

I had the rights to the Wasteland of Nothingness—that is to say, everything that was located inside the great barrier. The Demon Den didn’t belong to me or to anyone else for that matter. And even if it did, I couldn’t just ban people from entering it altogether; many people came and went to the forest inside the Demon Den, be it adventurers, woodcutters from the nearby villages, or simply people gathering edible plants for sustenance. I couldn’t deprive them of their livelihoods.

A frown appeared on both Gyunton and Selene’s faces as they tried to come up with a solution to my problem.

“We’re trying to keep an eye on the forest, but even when we spot suspicious people going in there, we can’t always capture them,” Gyunton said.

“I’m not blaming you. Besides, it’s not just your two nations; we’ve caught our fair share of bandits from the Mubad Empire.”

"We're also trying to be mindful of who enters the forest, but we simply don't have enough people to watch it at all times," Selene said.

I understood her point. Besides, it wasn't as if they could differentiate between civilians and bandits themselves.

"Besides, you're only getting more bandits because you don't kill the ones you catch," Gyunton continued. "Since they know they won't die, they keep sending more people to try and abduct the demons and the mythical beasts along the way to Gald and Ischea."

"That's news to me," I said, turning towards Beretta, who simply shook her head.

Judging by the reaction, it seemed that none of the demons had mentioned anything of the sort to her either.

"Well, last time that happened, all of the bandits got defeated by a single dragonkin on a griffin," Gyunton added.

"Your people are so strong, mom," Selene chirped excitedly. "My knights love sparring with them."

"I see. Thanks for letting us know, Gyunton."

It seemed that the demons hadn't reported these attacks because they managed to repel their opponents just fine, but I was still worried. What if they weren't so lucky next time?

"What to do, what to do...?" I muttered.

"What about building a wall with Earth Magic around the wasteland?" Selene suggested.

I shook my head. "I can't do that. It'd have terrible consequences for the wasteland's environment."

"Right now, it seems you don't have that many options," Gyunton said. "All you can do is keep arresting trespassers on a case-by-case basis and hope they'll stop coming on their own."

"I suppose you're right..." I mumbled with a sigh.

"Teto's gonna try to think of something too!" Teto offered next to me.

I smiled. "Thank you, Teto."

And so we said goodbye to Gyunton and Selene with no concrete solution for our bandit issue. To be fair, even if either of them did have an idea, we wouldn't have been able to act on it; they were both retired from their official duties. If we ever wanted to implement a solution that involved Gald and Ischea, we'd need to contact government officials and convince them to cooperate with us.

Several days later, what was bound to happen happened... along with a couple of unexpected twists along the way.

CHAPTER 12

ERADICATE THE INTRUDERS!

THE BEAR GOLEM ALERT SYSTEM

Beretta and I were relaxing after our call with Gyunton and Selene when, out of nowhere, Teto came to me with a request.

“Lady Wiiitch, I need lots of magic stones!”

“Magic stones?” I blinked in surprise. “I mean, sure, but what do you need them for?”

A huge grin broke across her face. “Teto wants more friends!”

“More friends?” I repeat ineloquently.

But Teto simply nodded with vigor.

“Master, I believe Lady Teto might want to increase the number of clay golems in the wasteland,” Beretta supplied.

I had created fifty more attendant dolls to help Beretta and the others take care of their duties ever since we started trading with the outside and the demons and mythical beasts also had steadily been giving birth to more children. Perhaps this was the reason for Teto’s sudden request for more “friends.”

Teto nodded even more enthusiastically at Beretta’s explanation.

“Sure thing,” I said before chanting, “*Creation: magic stones!*”

One after the other, magic stones appeared in Teto’s held-out hands.

“Thank you, Lady Witch!” she chirped before running off to the mansion’s backyard, a huge grin on her face.

I decided to follow her to see what she was up to.

“Golem Maker!” she chanted as she released some dirt and stones from her body. She buried a magic stone in it and used her magic to turn it into a bear golem, complete with two lumps of mud on top of its head.

Teto then gave the golem a handful of magic stones, and the two of them proceeded to create more golems; two, four, eight, sixteen... When Teto was done, an army of over a hundred golems was standing in the backyard.

“Get in a line, everyone!” she ordered. “Teto has a mission for all of you!”

“So cute,” I commented, looking at the bear golems fumbling to stand in a line.

“Each bear golem Lady Teto created is as strong as a D-rank adventurer,” Beretta noted. “And with so many of them, their strength is equivalent to that of a small platoon.”

Normally, clay golems were E-rank at best. But the ones Teto created were about as strong as ordinary soldiers. They might have looked all cuddly and cute, but they were quite resilient, making them the perfect candidates to take care of the menial tasks around the wasteland, and they even looked after the forest for us.

“I wonder if the forest has gotten too big for the existing bear golems to look after,” I said.

“I will start stockpiling magic stones so that Lady Teto can make more in the future if the need arises,” Beretta assured me.

“Please do,” I replied absentmindedly as I watched the golems head off to wherever Teto had told them to go.

A Group of Mythical Beast Poachers’ Side

A group of men had sneaked into the forest separating the north of the wasteland from the Mubad Empire.

“Hey, are you sure we’re gonna find a unicorn in there?” one of them asked, a look of suspicion on his face as he peered deep into the forest.

"We know they're around," one of his comrades replied. "I heard that the demons that live here have been selling unicorn horns to their neighbors in the south and east."

"If that's really true, we're gonna get filthy rich!"

Mythical beasts tended to live in mana-dense areas, such as Demon Dens, and just like the wasteland, there were a few countries and organizations that ensured their protection. As a rule of thumb, hunting mythical beasts was strictly prohibited all over the continent. But mythical beast materials were rare and precious, and demand for them was high, which spurred poachers to hunt them despite the consequences. Unicorn horns in particular were highly sought-after and went for astronomical sums among nobility due to their purifying and soothing effects.

This particular group of poachers had heard rumors of unicorns living in the Wasteland of Nothingness and had decided to take their chances there.

"I've heard there are tons of mythical beasts in the region. Even if we don't find a unicorn, we'll manage to catch something good for sure," one of the men explained before getting interrupted by the little girl he was carrying over his shoulder, who started squirming and groaning.

She had been gagged and her hands and feet were tied, but that didn't stop her from trying to escape the poacher's grasp.

"We went through so much trouble to abduct this kid, it'd be a shame not to have a taste, wouldn't it?" one of the men said, leering at the little girl, which prompted her to squirm even harder.

The man who was carrying her shot his comrade a glare. "Are you dumb or what? You need a pure maiden to catch a unicorn! Don't go and ruin her now."

"Tsk, too bad. Guess it'll have to wait until after we're done here, huh?" the other said, licking his lips vulgarly.

Tears started running down the little girl's cheeks as she let out more muffled cries. The only reason her chastity was still intact was because the poachers needed her that way to achieve their goal. She knew that once they didn't need her anymore, the poachers wouldn't hesitate to violate her before either killing her themselves or leaving her behind in the forest, where she would undoubtedly get killed by monsters. That thought made her blood run cold, and she couldn't stop her tears.

The group proceeded slowly and, after a few days, reached a clearing in the forest where they lowered the little girl to the ground.

"All righty, let's set up our trap here. Once a unicorn comes, we'll flank it from both sides and shoot it dead, okay?"

The men went to hide in the thickets surrounding the clearing. The little girl felt a cold sweat run down her back. She couldn't see them from where she was, but there was no doubt they had their bows and arrows at the ready, prepared to shoot the second a mythical beast appeared.

The girl's thoughts were running wild. What if they missed and shot her instead? What if monsters suddenly appeared? The poachers surely wouldn't save her.

All of a sudden, she heard a rustling sound coming from deep into the forest, and soon after, something pushed its way through the thickets.

Something's coming.

She twisted her body to try and see what it was.

Please, whatever you are, save me, she begged silently.

"Goh."

The creature stopped right in front of her. It looked like a bizarre lump of mud with holes where its eyes and mouth should be and two protuberances growing from the top of its head. She had never seen anything of the sort before.

She eyed the creature with suspicion. It seemed way too gentle to be a hostile monster, but at the same time, she couldn't say for sure it'd help her. The poachers had a similar reaction to the girl; they were momentarily stunned by the bear golem's appearance but quickly pulled themselves together.

"Wh-What the hell's that thing?" one of them roared. "Kill i—! Ugh!"

"B-Bro?! Aaah!"

The sounds of hard clay pummeling soft flesh echoed throughout the clearing as the men let out pained cries. Then, when the poachers were out cold, the bear golem

approached the little girl again, who shut her eyes.

I-It's going to kill me!

But the bear golem simply removed the girl's restraints and the gag covering her mouth.

"Huh? A-Are you helping me?" she asked.

"Goh!" the bear golem replied, giving a thumbs-up.

The girl stood up and approached the now unconscious poachers; more bear golems had shuffled out of the woods and begun to tie them up.

"Th-Thank you," she said. "Are you spirits of the forest, perhaps?"

The bear golems didn't reply, tilting their heads to one side in confusion. That display elicited a little chuckle from the little girl, but it was short-lived as tears welled up in her eyes once again.

"These men kidnapped me. I want to go back to my village, but I have no idea where I am," she explained.

Most girls like her never left their village in their lives. For that reason, not only did she not know the name of her home, but she couldn't point out its location either.

The bear golems looked at each other before picking her up all of a sudden.

"H-Huh? What are you doing?!" the girl asked, panicked.

"Goh!"

The bear golems held her up over their heads and started walking towards the entrance of the forest. The little girl was taken aback, but she wasn't worried; after all, the bear golems were carrying her much more gently than the poachers had ever bothered to.

"Goh! Goh! Goh!"

A chuckle slipped out of the girl's mouth as the bear golems carried her like a holy

relic through the forest. They took a few breaks, during which the golems fed her fruits and nuts before resuming their course. They didn't stop even when night fell and the girl fell asleep. After an entire day of retracing the girl's mana signature, the bear golems made it out of the forest.

"Ah! That's my village!" the girl pointed out excitedly.

"Goh!"

The bear golems gently lowered her to the ground and watched over her as she ran back to her home. Once they were sure she was safe among her family and friends—who had been worried sick about her—the bear golems headed back into the forest, though not without waving the little girl goodbye one last time.

Other strange things happened in the forest around the Wasteland of Nothingness; rumors spread that bizarre, short, stout creatures with lumps on their heads roamed around the premises, beating up any ill-intended individual and rescuing people in trouble.

The Witch's Side

"Lady Witch, Teto caught a group of poachers!" Teto announced, her chest puffed out in pride as she made her way towards us, a squad of bear golems carrying a bunch of tied-up men.

"Um... Teto? What's going on?" I asked, puzzled.

"Master, I believe that Lady Teto has decided to use her newly created bear golems to fight off the intruders in the wasteland," Beretta surmised.

After asking her, Teto confirmed that she had sent bear golems to patrol the Demon Den and catch any unsavory individual they came across. Not only did bear golems not need to sleep or eat, but they were strong and resilient and could merge with the ground to hide while waiting for potential intruders. I had to admit, Teto's idea was pretty genius.

"And so... how many golems did you make, Teto?" I asked.

If her plan was to have bear golems cover the entirety of the Demon Den, she must've created a boatload of them.

"Um... They kept multiplying, so Teto lost count of them," she admitted sheepishly.

"Well, you did tell them to use magic stones to make more bear golems, after all."

This meant that they could use the magic stones they found on the monsters they defeated in the Demon Den to create even more bear golems. In a way, I was happy Teto had come up with such an efficient solution to our problem, but on the other hand, the thought of thousands of bear golems roaming around the Demon Den was kind of terrifying.

Still, thanks to Teto's bear golem alert system, no intruder made it past the Demon Den, and soon bandits gave up on sneaking into the forest altogether.

CHAPTER 13

THE TILTED TOWER AND PLANAR DRIFTWOOD

Three years had passed since the poacher incident. Teto's bear golem surveillance system had completely rid us of the trespasser issue and things were back to normal. One day, as Teto and I were sipping on some tea in our mansion, Shael came to report something unusual to us.

"Yesterday, I went to the mountain at our western border to look for precious stones to offer to the Great Elder. On the way back, I saw a weird tower that hadn't been there earlier that day. Did you build it?" she asked me.

"A tower?" I echoed, unconsciously tilting my head to one side in incomprehension.

Shael nodded. "Yeah, a tower. You're the only one here who can build a tower in a matter of hours, so I thought it was your handiwork. But then I saw that the tower was tilted to one side, which I thought was weird since the things you make are usually pretty neat," she explained as she dug into her pancakes—the snack the maids had prepared for us that afternoon.

I thought about her words for a little while before shaking my head. "Nope, I have no idea what that could be. What about you, Teto?"

"Teto doesn't know either!"

"Is that so?" Shael ate the last of her pancakes before standing up. "Well, that's all I had to report, so I'll be on my way."

"Okay. Be careful on the way back."

The next day, I decided to go check out this whole leaning tower situation for myself. My current theory was that the tower was some precursor relic that one of our scheduled earthquakes had unburied. I straddled Flying Jade and told Teto to mount behind me, and the two of us made our way towards the western wasteland. Sure

enough, a tilted tower loomed over the trees.

"There really is a tower," I mused out loud as I came closer.

It was, as Shael had mentioned, very much leaning to one side, but it seemed to be pretty sturdy. There were a few bricks missing here and there, but the tower was clean otherwise, which definitely wouldn't have been the case if it had been buried in the ground for thousands of years. A quick look inside told me that there had been human activity inside at some point, although it must've been a while since it had last been used, as most of the stuff inside was decayed.

"Lady Witch, what's this tower?" Teto asked me.

"No idea," I said. "Let's see... *Search!* Hm, that wasn't very useful."

Even my appraisal spell couldn't tell me what that tower was. It did tell me that it incorporated alchemical components and monster materials, and that its components had all been enchanted, but that was pretty much it. The tower was in such good condition that I couldn't even try guessing its age. My *Search* spell hadn't detected any traps, at least, which meant that we could most likely explore the tower without immediate danger.

"Teto, how's the ground around the tower?" I asked.

She put her hands on the ground and replied, "It's not the same as the rest of the wasteland at all! It's almost like someone brought it here from somewhere else!"

That made me think. Perhaps someone had moved that tower here using a similar technique to the one I'd moved the floating island with.

"A Teleportation Magic experiment?" I muttered to myself. "Or maybe it just ended up here by accident... Either way, we should check out what's inside."

Neither of my theories really made sense to me. After all, if someone was experimenting with Teleportation Magic, why would they need to move an entire tower? And if it was an accident, there should have been traces of recent human activity inside. I decided that the best course of action would probably be to look for clues inside the tower, so Teto and I got to work.

Despite the slight damage on the outside, the interior was relatively clean and tidy. If

I were to fix the foundation, fix the tilt, and repair the walls, I could most likely repurpose this place.

“What should I use it for, though?” I mused out loud.

Perhaps it could become a site for my larger-scale experiments—the ones I couldn’t do near the mansion for fear of damaging it. Surely walls made from monster materials wouldn’t break *that* easily. Besides, wasn’t it kind of an unspoken rule that witches and old sages should live in towers?

As I tried to think up future uses for the tower, Teto and I kept on exploring the interior. For now, I decided to pick up everything that was lying on the ground and stuff it into my magic bag; I’d go through it all later.

After a few minutes, Teto found a book, which she brought over to me. “Lady Wiiitch, I can feel mana coming out of this book!”

“Thanks, Teto. There’s probably some sort of conservation spell on it. Let’s see...”

There weren’t any enchantments preventing me from opening the book, so I got to work and started leafing through the pages. Thankfully, the language abilities I had been granted when I first got reincarnated into this world seemed to work, and I could understand most of everything in it.

“Looks to be someone’s diary,” I said. “There are a few words I’ve never seen before, but that’s no huge surprise, talking about a book several centuries old.”

“Teto can’t read any of it!” Teto chimed in.

Teto could technically read anything written in the tongue spoken on the Ninth Continent—the continent we lived on—which meant that this book either came from another continent or was much older than I had thought.

“Well, I’ll give it a read later.”

There was no knowing what clues the diary might hold pointing towards the tower’s origin, so I stored it in my magic bag and decided I’d read it cover to cover when we got home.

This tower sure is full of mystery, huh?

“Lady Witch, you should ask the goddesses for help!” Teto suggested.

“You mean Liriel and the others? I wonder if they’ll be up for it...”

Besides, I didn’t even know if they would accept my dream oracle request or not. Well, it was worth a shot, wasn’t it? I quickly put up a barrier around the tower to make sure no one—be they demon or mythical beast—would accidentally wander inside; then I headed back to the mansion with Teto, collecting a few medicinal herbs on the way while we were at it.

When night came, I requested a Dream Oracle and drifted off to sleep, only to wake up in a familiar black space. It seemed that the goddesses had accepted my request. Unlike the last few times, though, it was only Liriel and me.

“Is something the matter, Chise? You said you had something to ask me,” Liriel said.

“A weird tower I’ve never seen before has appeared in the wasteland.”

Her brows furrowed. “A weird tower? Tell me more.”

Her expression grew graver and graver as I explained the situation to her. When I was done talking, she let out a long sigh. “I see. So that’s what it is.”

“Um, did we do something bad?” I asked nervously.

Liriel shook her head and shot me an awkward smile. “No, you didn’t do anything wrong. I told you before, I want you to live freely and enjoy your time in this world. That tower’s the only problem here.”

“It’s really weird, huh? I know for sure it wasn’t there before Shael and the others found it. It’s almost like it sprouted up overnight.”

“It did, in a way. You see, that tower is what we call planar driftwood.”

“Planar driftwood?” I echoed.

“To put it simply, they’re things and beings that arrive in this world from beyond, a bit like shooting stars, if that makes sense.”

Planar driftwood was a category of objects and beings that involuntarily passed

between realities. Just like shooting stars are attracted to a planet due to the gravitational pull, these artifacts were drawn to different worlds and could materialize there by passing through holes in space-time. According to Liriel, these artifacts were either things that used to exist in this world before they were spirited away or objects that came from other worlds that had since been lost.

"Leriel is the one in charge of our continent's driftwood," Liriel continued. "She usually redirects it to the mountains, the Demon Dens, or just underground so that no one gets injured when they appear."

"Were the ruins I went to visit way back in the day also driftwood?" I asked, thinking back on the ruins in the village where I met Sayah, the rural doctor.

Liriel nodded. "It's highly likely. Planar driftwood tends to appear out of nowhere, just like dungeons. Leriel sometimes repurposes the smallest specimens into materials for dungeons and large ruins," she explained.

I felt my face heat up as I listened to her. I had theorized that the tower had been built around eight hundred years ago by a gifted magician, but as it turned out, I was *completely* off base. If it truly was planar driftwood, as Liriel claimed, my theory made absolutely no sense. Yet I had been so proud of my reasoning... How embarrassing.

"Um, Chise? You're making a weird face. Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine, just a bit frustrated at my own stupidity."

"I-I see... Anyway, Leriel usually drops that stuff far away from civilization, but perhaps she made this one appear near you on purpose."

Well, it wasn't as if we could know without asking her directly. At least now I had an idea where the tower came from.

I nodded. "So the ruins people usually find in Demon Dens..." I trailed off.

"They're usually planar driftwood, yes. Time passes differently in the limbo between coherent space-time manifolds; sometimes, objects from thousands of years ago appear in this world with little to no deterioration. People from this world can fall through the fabric of the universe too, but Leriel usually intercepts them in a sort of 'cosmic waiting room' she put together so she can send them back before anything too terrible happens."

Apparently, all of the legends and children's tales like that of Urashima Taro, the boy who visited an underwater palace and came back centuries later when he thought he had only been there for a couple of days, were based on real people who lost time to a slip between worlds.

"This world sure is full of surprises," I said.

"Isn't it just? As for that tower in particular, it doesn't seem to be dangerous. Perhaps some higher-dimensional tide washed it away in the days of the great calamity, and it's only bothered to wash back in just now."

"Maybe. So do you figure I can repurpose it?"

"Most likely, yes. But be careful; the weather's been screwy in higher-order reality of late. I suspect this won't be the last bit of driftwood to turn up in the wasteland during your tenure."

"Thanks, Liriel. That was really helpful."

"You're welcome. I'm hardly an expert on the matter, though," she replied with a strained chuckle.

I started feeling my consciousness slip; I would most likely wake up soon.

"Well then, Chise, I'll see you again another time."

"Bye! Invite Teto too next time."

"Planar driftwood," huh? What a strange concept, I thought to myself. At the time, I didn't know that our off-kilter new guest was an omen of something much, much bigger.

CHAPTER 14

REHABILITATION OF THE TOWER

Some time passed since we found the tower, and it was finally time for us to refurbish it.

“Lady Witch will use this tower as her new research site. We are counting on all of you to make this place look its best.”

“Yes, Miss Beretta!”

“Uh... Why are you all so motivated? Especially you, Beretta,” I said, slightly taken aback by Beretta and the maids’ fervor.

“Give up, Lady Witch; they probably can’t hear you,” Teto told me.

When I told Beretta I planned on refurbishing the tower and using it as a lab facility for my more hazardous and high-energy experiments in alchemy and artifice, she had immediately gathered all of the mechanoids and new attendant dolls I had created to start working on it.

“Leave it to us, Master,” she had told me, stars shining in her eyes. “We will make the ideal space for you to enjoy your new hobby. Now, go get some rest.”

The maids used their Gravity Magic to fix the tower’s tilt, rebuilt the foundation with Earth Magic, replaced all of the missing bricks, and cleaned and rearranged the interior. They didn’t give me a chance to try to help.

“I’m bored,” I grumbled.

“Lady Witch, it’s good to be bored from time to time!” Teto chirped.

I hated sitting around and doing nothing, so I couldn’t help but feel restless as I watched Beretta and the others fix the tower.

“Lady Witch, you should go do something you enjoy!”

I let out a sigh. "You're right. Guess I'll go fish for a bit."

"Then Teto's going to swim around!" she said before removing her armor and plunging into the river in her undershirt and shorts.

"You look like you're having fun," I commented with a smile as I watched her splash around. I retrieved my fishing rod from my magic bag and cast my line into the river.

"How peaceful..." I muttered, pushing up my wide-brimmed hat and looking at the sky.



After a few minutes, I felt a tug on the line. “Ah, we got a bite.”

I reeled up the rod and saw a little fish biting at the hook.

“Hm. It’s a bit small. We probably can’t eat it. I’ll just set it free,” I said, attaching a fresh bit of bait to my hook and casting it into the water once again.

Fishing idly like this was a luxury I didn’t allow myself often; I had to say it was rather nice. Also, fun fact: the sages of legend are so often pictured fishing because it’s a great way to train one’s mana control.

“Fishing sure isn’t easy, huh?”

Having a mana pool as large as mine had its drawbacks. See, while I could use my mana to help the medicinal herbs and mythical beasts get all the nutrients they needed to grow strong and healthy, even letting out the littlest bit of mana into the air drove away most small critters—and fish were no exception. And, well, I had so much mana I couldn’t stop it from flowing through my fishing rod altogether, meaning that I scared off all of the fish. I had to focus really hard on controlling it so only a small amount leaked out, and then as soon as I got a bite, I’d have to let it all flow out through the rod to pull it out of the water as swiftly as possible. This technique was a bit more advanced than regular Body Strengthening—inert matter in your hands is way tougher to reinforce than your own flesh and blood. All in all, it made for pretty strenuous exercise, especially since my fishing rod was made out of a World Tree branch, which conducted and amplified mana much better than regular wood. If I accidentally let out a tiny bit more mana than I needed, all the fish would swim away.

“This is still pretty relaxing, though,” I mused out loud.

I wasn’t fishing out of necessity, and I pretty much had all of the time in the world to do all the things I wanted to—you know, with being immortal and all that. I could enjoy an afternoon of fishing-slash-mana-control-training. And since it didn’t require much concentration, I could even read a book as I fished.

“Oh this reminds me, I still haven’t read the diary I found in the tower.”

I produced the diary from my magic bag and started reading. I quickly understood that this diary had belonged to someone who had fallen through the cracks in space-time after my predecessors’ rampage.

One day, everything disappeared all at once. I seem to be the only one left alive. When I look through the windows of my tower, all I can see is a vast expanse of black.

This is such a strange place... I'm so lonely I feel like I'm going crazy. I want to go home. I want to see my family. I want to see my hometown's flowers again.

I'm losing my mind in here. I'm going to throw myself into the darkness. I know I probably won't ever come back here if I do, but this is my only chance at escape.

I'm going home.

I closed the diary and shut my eyes. I must've spent quite a while with my nose in it as the sun was setting. I had gotten much better at my fishing-slash-mana-controlling training; since I started reading, I'd caught ten fish steering my fishing rod with *Psychokinesis* so I'd have both hands free.

Teto had gotten tired of swimming around quite a while ago and was now sitting beside me, staring at my side profile.

“Lady Witch, the sun is setting. Let’s go home!”

I nodded. “Sure. Where are Beretta and the others?”

“It looks like they’re done fixing up the tower!”

The maids really work fast, huh? I thought, forcing a smile on my face as I returned to the tower. Sure enough, Beretta and the others were waiting for us there.

“Master, I am pleased to announce that you will be able to use this tower to conduct your experiments as early as tomorrow,” Beretta said.

“Thanks, Beretta. Let’s go home, then, shall we?”

Teto and I set up a transfer gate in the tower, and we all returned to the mansion. I listened to Beretta and the other maids’ reports about the day’s events and headed to bed.

But right before falling asleep, I found myself thinking back on the diary.

“I hope you got reunited with the ones you love,” I whispered to myself.

From what they wrote, it seemed that the owner left the tower to try and find their way back home. It was extremely unlikely that they survived the trip; even if they did, they might've suffered some grave injuries. The space between worlds was unstable; perhaps that person had already arrived somewhere, or perhaps they were still roaming through the darkness. Maybe they had died there. I prayed that they had safely made it back regardless.

That night, I dreamed of my past life.

CHAPTER 15

PAST LIFE AND CHERRY BLOSSOMS

I had very few memories of my previous life on Earth, yet everything was extremely clear and detailed in my dream, from the high-rise buildings to the cars running on the road, and even the feel of the concrete under my feet. There was barely any greenery at all, except for the occasional patch of weed growing from between the concrete and the tiles.

I don't belong here.

Looking down, I noticed that I was in my usual body from the other world. I supposed I didn't remember what I had looked like in my previous life. Besides, it was likely that I had spent more time in the other world than I had on Earth by now.

Feeling out of place, I roamed the concrete jungle, yearning for the calm and tranquility of nature. The passersby didn't bother to pay the weird girl dressed as a witch out in public any mind; I felt invisible.

All of a sudden, despite not having been able to smell anything up until that point, a nostalgic scent reached me.

It smells like flowers... Like spring.

Following the scent, I arrived in a park. It was covered in trees, including a single vibrant cherry blossom tree, its petals scattering around in the wind.

How could I have forgotten about cherry blossoms?

I felt tears running down my cheeks as I looked up into its boughs. Over half a century had passed since I'd been reincarnated, and I had somehow completely forgotten how beautiful cherry blossoms were.

When I was still new to my second world, I had been so busy I didn't have time to try and think about my past life. Cherry blossoms used to be my anchor, but I had Teto now; I hadn't needed to remember them. The Wasteland of Nothingness was my new

home. While I occasionally drew on my knowledge of my previous life, there had been no reason for me to hold on to my memories. But reading that diary had somehow dredged them back up.

I was surprised, but I wasn't going to run away from them. Quite the opposite actually: I found myself thinking that I would love for Teto and Beretta to see the cherry blossoms.

Why not? It's not like they're bad for the ecosystem or anything. We could plant a few in the wasteland.

And just like that, I woke up.

When I opened my eyes, I saw that Teto was staring at me, a concerned look on her face. "Lady Witch? Are you okay? You're crying."

"I just had a dream that reminded me of a thing or two," I replied.

It seemed that the tears had carried over. I wiped them away and shot Teto a reassuring smile, but she still looked worried.

"Teto, I'm going to go get some fresh night air for a bit. Wanna come?"

"Yeah!"

We changed into our regular outfits and slipped out of our room, only to be met with Beretta. It seemed it was her round of night watch.

"Is something the matter, Master? It is very late."

"We're going on a night walk; do you want to tag along?" I offered.

Beretta nodded. "I shall accompany you."

The three of us left the mansion and headed to a small hill nearby. When we reached the top, I turned around and gazed at the night view of the mansion and the fields behind it.

"I always forget just how huge this place is. Isn't it hard to look after it?" I asked Beretta.

She shook her head. “Not at all. The mechanoids and the bear golems are very helpful.”

“I see.” I said and paused for a moment. “Thank you for always cooking for us and everything, Beretta.”

“There is no need to thank me, Master. It is through interactions with you and the others that we mechanoids got to develop a soul, after all,” Beretta replied with a smile. It seemed that she really enjoyed her current life. “Master, may I ask why you decided to go on a midnight walk?”

“Lady Witch was crying in her sleep!” Teto supplied.

“I had a bit of a nostalgic dream and I remembered something—flowers from my home world. They might exist in this world too, but I can’t be bothered looking for them, so... *Creation!* Cherry blossom tree!”

I stabbed my staff into the ground, and a single cherry blossom tree appeared atop the hill. The tree itself seemed to be about thirty years old and was in full bloom. Just like in my dream, the flower petals scattered around in the moonlit night.

“Flowers from Lady Witch’s home world!” Teto exclaimed. “They’re as cute as you!”

“I agree,” Beretta said. “It is a beautiful sight—although seeing the flower petals scattering in the wind makes me feel a bit melancholic, somehow.”

“This is a cherry blossom tree,” I explained. “During the summer, their leaves are lush and green before turning red and falling when autumn arrives. Then, when winter is over, it blooms beautifully, but only for a short period of time. It bears a resemblance to the progression of a human life—with some exceptions.”

I wondered why I’d gotten so worked up over some flowers all of a sudden. Was it simply because I missed my previous life? Or was it that I was envious of other people, who aged normally and whose lives would end one day?

All of a sudden, Teto wrapped her arms around me from behind, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Lady Witch, what did you usually do in your previous life while watching the cherry blossoms?”

"I don't remember," I admitted. "But a lot of people do hanami."

"What's that?" Teto asked.

"A little party beneath the cherry blossom trees," I explained. "They eat yummy food and drink alcohol while watching the petals scatter in the wind. It's a way to celebrate the arrival of spring."

"What a lovely tradition," Beretta commented.

"Some people do hanami under the plum or peach blossoms too," I continued. "And this whole 'celebrating the arrival of spring' has kind of been forgotten now; most people only see hanami as a celebration to get drunk and have fun."

There were many different types of trees in the wasteland—the World Trees for instance—but most of them were here for practical use. We had nut-bearing trees to feed the small animals living in the forest, trees that were good for making timber, fruit trees, tea trees, trees with medicinal properties, and so on and so forth. For that reason, having a cherry blossom tree felt a bit like an indulgence, as it didn't serve any particular purpose other than being pretty for a couple of weeks.

The more I talked about cherry blossom viewing, the more I started thinking that it would be fun to celebrate it with everyone in the wasteland.

"Then let's do it!" Teto chirped. "If we all have fun together, you won't be sad anymore, Lady Witch. You won't have to cry again!"

"Why not?" I said. "It sounds like a lot of fun, actually."

The three of us spent some more time watching the cherry blossom tree. And so a few days later, we organized our very own hanami festival with the maids and the demons.

CHAPTER 16

CHERRY BLOSSOM VIEWING FESTIVAL

Our sudden announcement of the cherry blossom viewing festival stirred some excitement among the residents of the wasteland.

"Lady Witch is organizing a festival for all of us to celebrate spring together!" I heard them muttering excitedly among each other.

Everyone was talking about it: the maids, the demons—even the Great Elder and the mythical beasts.

At last, the day of the festival was upon us.

"I didn't think there would be so many people," I said, blinking in surprise.

"Whoa! Everyone's here!" Teto chirped.

Most people had brought food and were already eating while the children played tag. And, of course, the mythical beasts were also in attendance. The Great Elder was here too, curled up on himself so he wouldn't take too much space. He was sitting alone, a little farther away from the party, gazing at the cherry blossom tree.

"So these are flowers from your home world, hm? They're rather beautiful indeed," he said.

"Great Elder," I smiled. "You came."

"Of course, I did. An immortal's worst enemy is boredom. No death is quite so final as the death of the spirit," the Great Elder said. "So I will never refuse an opportunity to enjoy myself."

It seemed like the Great Elder's spirit had been rejuvenated ever since Yuicia had severed his ties to the cavorite crystal and given him free rein to fly as he pleased.

"Mister Great Elder, drink with Teto!" Teto said, carrying two large caskets of alcohol

on her shoulders and setting them down in front of the Great Elder.

"Oh, is that Lady Witch's aged brew? Sure, I'll have some."

Teto opened the lid of the caskets and handed one to the Great Elder.

"Jeez, that was aged for twenty years, but you two knock it back like water," I said.

As I had the body of a twelve-year-old, I couldn't drink, but I had a lot of free time. I had taken to making aged spirits by buying or creating alcohol with my magic and storing it in the mansion's basement. I had brought a lot of alcohol to today's hanami festival, but I had underestimated how many people would show up... and also how much Teto and the Great Elder could drink. We were almost out already.

"Good grief." I sighed. "*Creation*: booze! Beretta, can you distribute these to everyone?"

I had decided to make some pre-aged Japanese sake—about three years old—with my magic. Just to be safe, I created twenty barrels and asked Beretta to go lay them out for everyone.

"Master, is that the rice-based alcohol you were telling me about last time?" she asked.

"Yep. Ah, but it's not the same thing as the mirin you occasionally use while cooking."

The maids always gave one hundred percent to anything they did around the mansion. "We will do everything in our power to re-create the food from your previous life!" they had told me once.

They'd made it their mission to re-create seasonings and condiments from my previous life, such as soy sauce and miso, but unfortunately, I couldn't help them in their quest. While I did remember how they tasted and could easily re-create them with my magic, I had never learned *how* to make them. The maids didn't mind, though, and they spent a lot of time experimenting to try and get something as close to the seasonings I had made with my Creation Magic as possible. I'd been told that it was their dream to make the perfect seasonings and condiments for my palate.

"Master, one day, we'll be able to serve you meals made exclusively out of ingredients from the wasteland!" one of them had told me one day.

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to it," I had replied. "But I assure you, I'm already

plenty satisfied with the food you're making."

"You're too kind, Master!"

As Beretta and the other maids distributed the alcohol to the demons, I went to spread a blanket a little farther away from the party, where I sat down and enjoyed the cherry blossoms. It was a different experience than when I was watching it with only Teto and Beretta, as it was much noisier, but I didn't mind—it was enjoyable in its own right. People came to say hi to me from time to time and the mythical beasts came to beg for a little mana treat.

The party was in full swing. At first, the demons had been very interested in the cherry blossoms, as they had never seen anything of the sort before, but they quickly forgot about them, focusing their attention on the food and drinks instead.

No matter the world, people are more interested in food than flowers, huh? I thought with a smirk.

"What do you mean, you don't want to drink?" I heard a maid ask a demon a bit farther away.

"Ah, it's just... I can't hold my liquor," the poor demon replied.

"But Master made it! If you refuse to drink it, I will have to punish you."

"But... But..."

And just like on Earth, sometimes people got rude when they put a little too much away.

"Beretta," I said to grab her attention.

"Ah, one of the second-generation dolls," she said, watching the maid who was causing trouble. "Please give me a moment."

She silently went to stand behind the maid and swiftly put her in a choke hold.

"As a maid, you should be able to make the distinction between offering something and forcing it upon people," Beretta said, as calm as ever, but I could tell she was torqued.

"M-Miss Beretta?!" the maid squeaked. "I-It hurts! You're going to break my neck! I'm going to puke!"

"I believe you need an overhaul. Let's see... I think I will recommend to Master that she dismantle your body and dispose of it."

"N-No! Don't kill me!"

While Beretta and the first twenty mechanoids had developed a soul and a personality over the years, all of them were rather calm and composed. The attendant dolls I had created after Yuicia left, on the other hand, had more opportunities to socialize with people; they turned into mechanoids much faster than Beretta and the others, which resulted in them having much more humanlike personalities. I was all right with that... as long as they didn't cause trouble.

"You may drink alcohol, but you need to know your body's limits! I shall now punish you for drinking excessively," Beretta said.

"Hold on a minute. You're drunk too, Miss Beretta!" the maid replied.

Beretta had started throwing things at the maid, which caught the attention of the demons, who started laughing and cheering. Meanwhile, some of the other mechanoids were petting the mythical beasts, and one of them was so drunk she had even started rubbing her face in their fur and sniffing them. A little farther away, another one had taken it upon herself to look after a little godkin boy, but I was a bit concerned by how much she was fussing over him. I had to admit, it felt a bit weird seeing her mother some stranger's kid so closely.

"Fixing whatever's going on there is *well* outside my job description," I muttered to myself.

Demons were long-lived creatures, so I supposed age gaps weren't as much of an issue to them. It looked outright criminal now (because, let's be real, in my old world, *it was*), but in a couple years they'd even out and spend an age of the earth looking ambiguously youthful; by local standards, I was pretty much obliged to look the other way. And y'know, I wear a lot of hats, but I am *not* a social worker.

The party went on and we ran out of food before long, but that didn't put a damper on the festivities. Emboldened by the alcohol, some of the demons started taking their clothes off and engaging in half naked brawls. Again, I decided to give them a pass; I

could hardly blame anyone for blowing off steam every once in a while.

"Whoa, there's five Lady Witches!" Teto slurred as she joined me.

"Teto... Are you drunk again?"

"I'm not druuunk."

She had downed an entire casket of the alcohol I had been aging for ten years *and* had some sake on top of that. She was *definitely* drunk. Plastered, even. Utterly shellacked.

"I'm going to take Teto home and turn in for the night. Make sure the others don't go overboard, okay?" I told the Great Elder.

He chuckled. "I will."

Using *Psychokinesis*, I carried Teto all the way to our room and put her to bed. She came to rest her head on my lap, and I gently combed through her hair as she drifted off to sleep. Looking at the cherry blossom tree through the window, I spent a few minutes thinking back on how fun today's party had been.

I had a lot of years ahead of me, barring a truly exceptional accident or an unparalleled moment of violence. I could tell these little celebrations would become my anchor in this life, keeping me from completely losing my head as time, the great apex predator, ate everything I loved.

I would cherish these memories forever.

CHAPTER 17

PUTTING THE TOWER TO GOOD USE

With our little cherry blossom viewing festival now over, we all resumed our daily lives—though a couple of things weren't quite the same as before.

Firstly, it turned out that the cherry blossom tree had some special properties I hadn't been aware of. For starters, its mana production was much higher than most regular trees—although it was nowhere near that of a World Tree. It also somehow had the ability to calm aggressive monsters. I had been surprised at first but, after giving it some thought, it did kind of make sense; you see, I had created that cherry blossom tree based on my memories of the ones from my previous life, and cherry blossom trees in Japan were thought to chase away evil and disperse negative energy. Apparently the same principle applied here.

"I believe we should study the cherry blossom tree, Master," Beretta said.

We used the World Trees' leaves to make medicine and stored their branches to make magic items, such as wands and staves, which meant that the trees didn't get to spread and reproduce. The cherry blossom trees, on the other hand, served no purpose other than producing mana and calming monsters, so we decided to start making cuttings of the tree and planting them around the wasteland.

"The cuttings still haven't grown all that much, but perhaps in a few years, I'll get to see a bunch of cherry blossom trees in full bloom again," I mused. I was looking forward to the sight that awaited me in ten or twenty years when all the trees would be grown.

We *also* had a new tower at our disposal to conduct our more dangerous experiments in.

"There are so many things I've wanted to try out but didn't dare to before."

For the past fifty or so years, I had been focusing all of my efforts on refurbishing the wasteland and increasing the region's mana production. But I had reached a point where I didn't really need to do anything other than wait around for the mana

concentration to go up and the leylines to regenerate, so I decided I would start carrying out my more personal experiments in this tower.

"I wonder what would happen if I grafted World Tree saplings and fruit tree saplings together... What effect would it have on the fruits?"

I decided to do just that, planting a few World Trees near the tower, grafting apple, orange, and pear tree saplings onto them, and using Healing Magic to consolidate them together. With the faint exception that my test subjects were plants, the process was basically identical to the method for making chimeras. Not that I had any intention of making the real thing in the future.

The results of my little tree experiment were... surprising, to say the least.

"So the tree itself produces less mana, but the fruits carry a mana load, huh?"

"Lady Witch, they're just like the strange fruits you eat every day!"

Teto was right; eating one of these fruits could make one's mana pool grow slightly. This meant that I could now produce strange fruits without spending any mana. I was really excited to have some variety; the strange fruits I made with my magic were all the same pear-looking things.

"I've heard before that high-ranked adventurers and nobles eat monster meat to grow their mana pools. This makes me wonder if monster meat and strange fruits work similarly..."

It was said that eating things with a high mana concentration could help one grow their mana pool—although there was no conclusive evidence to back up these claims. A lot of adventurers ate part of the monsters they killed, and certain nobles commissioned adventurers to slay monsters for them so they could eat them in the hopes of growing their mana pools. But if that was true, there must have been something else at play there. After all, mana potions contained mana, yet they didn't grow one's mana pool. Perhaps monster meat and strange fruits contained some other substance that gave them these properties. I noted all of my thoughts down, determined to get to the bottom of this.

A few maids were also conducting their own experiments in the tower, and I would occasionally chat with them. At one point, a group of three of them came to ask me something. I noticed that they were all carrying small boxes.

“Master, might I please raise magic silkworms to make new garments for you?”

“Master, this red-eyed spider produces very sturdy elastic fiber. Do I have your permission to raise a few?”

“Master, may I use the tower to treat the mythical beast fur the demons gave us?”

I guessed that the three of them were in charge of cloth making. Magic silkworms were some of the easiest monsters to tame, and their fiber was considered high-quality everywhere on the continent, so I didn’t have an issue with raising them. As for the fur, it was indeed best to use certain chemicals to wash and treat it, which would be done best in the tower’s alchemical lab, so I permitted that maid to do so.

As for the second maid’s request...

“Red-eyed spiders are D-rank monsters, right? Wouldn’t keeping several of them around be a little dangerous?” I asked.

Red-eyes spiders used their elastic threads to jump from one tree to another and shoot down flying prey; for that reason, they were occasionally called the “hunters of the forest.” The demons would probably be fine, as they were good fighters, but I couldn’t help worrying about the children.

“The mythical beasts had spotted the red-eyed spiders first, and we tried training them. It seems to be working so far.”

The red-eyed spider in the box the maid was carrying rubbed its front legs together as if begging me to take it in.

“This one had spun its web near the cherry blossom tree, which seemed to have highly reduced its aggression,” the maid explained.

At first I thought the spider might just have been a very good actor, but upon further inspection, I couldn’t feel any hostility or malice from it.

“Could this be a mutant strain?” I muttered before saying louder, “I’ll allow it for now. However, if something happens, you’ll have to deal with the situation yourself.”

“Understood!”

“Master, could we have honey bees too, then?”

“Master, what about treants?”

“And fungoids?”

“Please let us raise monster plants!”

After I accepted the first group of maids’ requests, I got swarmed with demands to welcome more monsters into the wasteland, but there was no way we could introduce so many all at once. Besides, they would probably end up moving into the wasteland by themselves once the barrier had fallen. The maids were particularly eager to raise monster plants, as these ate smaller monsters and condensed their magic stones, making them basically magic stone farms. However, they were way too dangerous, so I vetoed it.

Meanwhile, I continued with my own little experiments in the tower.

“Hm, this combination didn’t work. I’m going to extract the mana and then discard it. Let’s see, this time...”

I was currently experimenting with three different things. The first one was potion-making; while I was still mixing normal potions and remedies to send to the demons’ villages, I had also started trying out the weirder potion recipes written in some of the books I owned.

Whenever I wasn’t mixing potions, I was making magical trinkets.

“The dragonkin fly on mythical beasts’ backs a lot, so I should probably make some sort of small item they can carry around to protect them if they fall, huh?” I muttered before chanting, “*Forming! Enchant! Charge!*”

I shaped the favorite fragments I had salvaged when we broke the mana ties that linked the Great Elder to the floating island and combined them with iron before putting an enchantment on the whole thing. Lastly, I poured a ton of mana into the iron to transform it into magisteel and made a bunch of little accessories out of it.

“Hm... This spell should make me look older. *Imitation!*”

The third and last thing I was doing in my tower was creating new spells. The one I

had just cast on myself was a mix of Light and Dark Magic; it allowed me to create an illusion around my body to make me look like an adult.

"Teto doesn't like it! It looks weird!" Teto said, looking at my newly transformed body.

I spun around on myself and made a face.

"You're right, it kind of does..."

My illusory self was about Teto's size, but its movements were sluggish and its expressions incredibly awkward, almost as if they were painted on. It looked like I was wearing a mascot costume of myself. On top of that, it felt like I was wearing very tall Japanese-style sandals made out of mana so that I could be eye-level with the illusion, which made me a bit unstable on my feet. Besides, if one touched the illusion, they could immediately tell it wasn't a real body.

"Well, this clearly isn't the way to go to make myself look like an adult," I said.

"Too bad, Teto really wanted to see Lady Witch looking all grown-up." Teto pouted.

I wasn't about to give up; I really wanted the option to present as an adult. Besides, that spell wasn't *completely* useless. From afar, it wasn't *that* obvious that it was an illusion; maybe I could use it to create decoys. Since the illusion sheathed my body, I could even make it act like a protective barrier.

I was spending most of my days working on my potions, magic items, and spells, and Teto usually kept me company.

"Lady Wiiitch, are you almost done? Come play with Teto!"

"Right, I should probably wrap it up for today."

When I was alone, I tended to spend days on end working on my experiments, so I was glad Teto was here to drag me out to take a breather and put some variety in my life. The two of us would do mock duels so that my magic and combat instincts wouldn't get rusty, take long strolls in the forest to play with the mythical beasts and pick some fruits, go farm monsters in the Demon Den so that Teto could eat their magic stones and I could get materials to use in my experiments, or on occasion, teleport to some of our favorite towns to take care of a few quests at the adventurer's guild and go shopping.

CHAPTER 18

CALAMITY ANNOUNCEMENT AND CRISIS IN THE NORTHWEST PART OF THE CONTINENT

I was going about my usual business when, all of a sudden, I—along with all of the people close to the goddesses—received a divine oracle.

“Aaah!” A pained cry resonated in my brain. “Crap... He... With my...”

“Huh? What’s that voice in my head?” I asked out loud.

I started hearing a crackle, almost like TV static; all of a sudden, an explosion echoed through my brain, making me drop my teacup on the floor.

“Lady Witch?! Are you all right?”

“Master!”

Teto and Beretta, who had been drinking tea with me, rushed to my side and lent me their support so I wouldn’t collapse to the ground. The static noise still hadn’t stopped; it felt like thousands of thoughts were being thrown at my brain all at once.

“Whose voice... is this?” I asked, to no response. Instead, whoever the owner of that voice was—a woman, it seemed—kept casting their thoughts into my brain.

“I’m... divine message... goddess... riel... Northwest part of the continent... sacrifice... power...” the voice said solemnly. Was it one of the goddesses?

Cold sweat broke out on my forehead as I channeled my mana to heighten my focus and clear the static as best I could, almost as if I was tuning the frequency of a radio.

“Souls... wander space-time... guided... the sacrifice’s resentment... in this world...”

After a few seconds, I could finally hear the voice more clearly.

“A stampede... in the dungeon... Hundreds of thousands... monsters are escaping...”

“Hundreds of thousands of monsters have escaped from a dungeon?!” I exclaimed in shock.

“The stampede won’t stop! Prepare yourselves to fight!” the voice concluded, and the flood of foreign thoughts stopped all at once.

But then one last, much quieter thought reached my brain. “Dear sisters, the rest is in your hands,” the voice said, sounding frail and frustrated at the same time.

The message was over.

I must’ve used a ton of mana to decipher it all; my legs immediately gave under me.

“Lady Witch, what happened?!”

“Master, you look unwell!”

Teto and Beretta tried to guide me to the sofa to rest but I didn’t let them.

“Beretta, send someone to ask the demons if anyone else heard the same thing as me and contact Selene and Gyunton to ask if they know anything,” I instructed. “The situation is dire; something really bad is going to happen soon.”

Beretta seemed to hesitate for a split second before replying, “Understood. I will issue your instructions to the other mechanoids right this instant.”

She did just that while I hurriedly committed everything I remembered from the message to paper before moving to the sofa and lying down for a bit. I felt like I’d come down with a bout of vicious seasickness.

After a little while, Beretta came back with news from the other mechanoids.

“Master, I have received the other maids’ reports. Please stay lying down.”

“Thank you, Beretta. What did you learn?” I asked.

“Around the same time you started hearing the voice, the statue of Lady Leriel in the church started glimmering. I surmise it might have been a divine message addressed

to everyone who is close with the goddesses or who serves them.”

The only church in the wasteland was the one Shael and the other godkin looked after. The fact that the statue of Lriel started shining must have meant that the message was from Lriel herself.

“We have also found someone else who had heard the voice,” Beretta continued.

All of a sudden, a voice came from the window.

“Lady Witch, it seems that that little divine message nearly knocked you out of commission.”

“Great Elder...” I turned my head; sure enough, the Great Elder was standing right outside, a worried look on his face as he took in my situation.

“I have ties with Lady Luriel, and Shael and her kin are descended from one of her angels, so it must’ve been easier for us to receive that message,” he said.

“That makes sense. What exactly did you manage to pick up?” I asked.

“Only about half of it, I’m afraid. It was impossible to focus on everything at once.”

He added that Shael had also received Lriel’s message, but she hadn’t understood most of it so she wouldn’t be able to help us. The clarity of a divine message varied greatly based on one’s affinity with the sender, as well as their own disposition and the nature of that message. In this case, it seemed that Lriel had contacted a large number of people all at once, resulting in a fragmented message. When that happened, people would usually find someone else who had received the message, and they would try to piece everything together. The Great Elder and I did just that; our little collaboration proved quite successful.

“So someone in the northwest of the continent made a living sacrifice to a dungeon, releasing a huge quantity of mana, which is most definitely going to result in a stampede,” I summarized. “Can it get any worse than this?”

The absolute worst part was that we only had a fellow human being to blame for all the horror to come.

“I know nothing about any ‘wandering souls lost in space-time,’” the Great Elder said.

"But one thing is certain: the stampede cannot be averted; it will be upon us, and sooner than we think. You humans will need to work together, or the consequences will be disastrous."

My nausea had ebbed considerably by now; I was ready for my call with Gyunton and Selene.

"Master, we have reached Lady Selene and Lord Gyunton," Beretta announced to me.

"Thank you, Beretta. I'll take care of it. You and the others can go check our stock of supplies and provisions."

We didn't have much time before the stampede started... Scratch that, it might have already begun.

I sat in front of my magical communication device. We needed to find a way to deal with the situation fast.

"What's with the sudden call?" Gyunton asked, a puzzled look on his face. "And why do you look so grim?"

"I suppose it's related to that message—right, mom?" Selene said, much calmer.

Gyunton clearly had no idea what was going on, but Selene was a saintess; she had received the message too. Though I imagine that she, like me, had only picked up fragments.

"The goddess Lriel has sent a message to clergymen all over the continent, along with anyone who has ties to the goddesses," I told Gyunton before explaining what the Great Elder and I had deduced after pooling our information. As I spoke, I couldn't help but notice Gyunton and Selene's faces looking graver and graver.

"Blood sacrifice—all to *induce* a stampede?! It's madness!" Gyunton exclaimed as he stood and kicked his chair.

I had never seen him so worked up before.

Normally, dungeons turned the mana from the leylines into material and magic stones within the dungeon before slowly releasing that mana into the air. However, when a dungeon remained unexplored, or if there was some sort of imbalance in the leylines,

mana would stagnate inside the dungeon. When that happened, the dungeon used the excess mana to birth monsters, which were then forcefully released into the world. This was what we called a “stampede.” This world had no shortage of its own taboos, and inducing a stampede was prime among them.

“If what you’re saying is true and there are truly hundreds of thousands of monsters being released into the world as we speak, I can’t help but wonder what *purpose* it’s all meant to serve,” Gyunton said. “No one can control that many monsters.”

“It’d help if we knew which dungeon’s been set off,” Selene pointed out. “Give me a minute, please.”

She pulled out a map of the countries located west of Ischea and started looking through the dungeons marked on it. This was a good idea on paper, but dungeons could appear randomly without anyone noticing, so it was possible that the one we were looking for might not even be on her map. But after a couple of minutes, Selene seemed to have spotted something.

“Mom, Lord Gyunton, I believe it could be the dungeon in the free city right here,” she said, pointing at an independent city that shared a border with three other countries in the northwestern reach of the continent. “I’ve heard that there has always been a lot of tension in that area.”

As these countries were rather far away from the wasteland and Gald, Gyunton and I weren’t aware of the political climate there, but according to Selene, it seemed that all three of these nations were scheming to take control of the independent dungeon city.

“There have actually been quite a few rumors about the Duchy of Droog in the west being involved in human trafficking. I’m only theorizing, but perhaps they diverted some fraction of their stock into this plot to set off a stampede. They could sweep in and take control in the midst of all the chaos,” Selene surmised.

“Or perhaps they plan to herd the monsters towards the other two nations to weaken them,” Gyunton suggested.

I was about to warn them not to put the cart before the horse, as we didn’t even know if the stampede was coming from that dungeon when one of Selene’s knights rushed into her room.

“Madam! A stampede has started in the dungeon city located between the Kingdom of

Krista, the Drug Duchy, and the Londell Kingdom! The city has already been entirely destroyed!"

Upon hearing the news, Selene and Gyunton looked up at the ceiling, frustrated. We were too late.

"During a stampede, the weakest monsters pour out of the dungeon first. We're talking about people who'd spent generations living on top of that dungeon; they should've handled the first few waves easily, so why has the city fallen already?" I muttered, my brows furrowing.

"Perhaps what Lady Leriel meant by 'the stampede won't stop' wasn't that she couldn't prevent it from happening, but that it had already started and wouldn't come to an end anytime soon," Selene suggested.

Worst-case scenario, the stampede would last for months and cause irreparable damage all over the northwestern part of the continent. Judging by their expressions, Selene and Gyunton had also realized that the situation was much more dire than we thought and we'd have to prepare ourselves for the worst.

"Either way, we need to work out a plan, and fast. I'll send you all the supplies and provisions as I can, Selene," I told my adoptive daughter.

Gyunton nodded. "From a geographical standpoint, the Liebel margravate is most definitely going to be first in the line of fire. I can't dispatch any of our nation's soldiers to help, but I'll ask the king to send some of our adventurers your way, along with emergency supplies."

"Thank you so much, mom, Lord Gyunton. I'm going to contact my father and my brother at once so that they can help us handle the situation."

I ended our call and let out a long, deep sigh. I regularly called Gyunton and Selene to discuss recent events over tea, but the matter at hand this time was much more serious, which left me feeling exhausted.

I started thinking about our next steps. If I left now, I could get to the source of the stampede in a matter of hours by riding on Flying Jade or on the Great Elder's back. But the city had already been destroyed, so there wasn't any point, was there? Sure, I could put a damper on the damage they'd cause if I jumped in and put on my whole 'you shall not pass' act, but that would leave me with barely any mana or energy for

when the stampede reached its peak. That'd be way too dangerous.

"I suppose all I can do now is wait and see how the situation evolves," I muttered.

I had learned my lesson the first time I had to participate in a stampede, decades ago, in Apanemis—another dungeon city. I had only been C-rank back then; Arsus, an A-rank adventurer, taught me the importance of pacing myself so I could always be ready when the time to fight came. So I decided to patiently wait for that moment and focus my efforts on preparing supplies to send to Selene, using my Creation Magic to replenish whatever we were low on.

I knew it was the logical thing to do, but I still felt a pang of guilt when I remembered how frail Lriel had sounded at the end of her message.

CHAPTER 19

STRONGER TOGETHER

I was spending most of my days preparing for the impending stampede and using my magic to create emergency kits—which contained rations, tents, and medical supplies—to send to Selene.

NAME: Chise (Reincarnator)

CLASS: Witch

TITLE: Goddess of the Pioneer Village, A-rank Adventurer, Black Saintess, Carpet Rider, Lady Liriel's Prophet, Friend of the Ancient Dragons

LEVEL: 92

HP: 4,000/4,000

MP: 17,890/757,900

SKILLS: Staff Martial Arts Lv 5, Origin Magic Lv 10, Body Hardening Lv 3, Mixing Lv 7, Mana Regeneration Lv 10, Mana Control Lv 10, Mana Isolation Lv 10, various others...

UNIQUE SKILLS: Creation Magic, Unaging

I hadn't gained a single level in about twenty years, but since I still diligently ate my strange fruits, my mana pool had passed the 700,000 MP mark. Creation Magic had a really bad mana-to-spell conversion rate, though, and one single emergency kit cost me 1,500 MP, which meant I could only make about five hundred a day. It wasn't ideal, but thankfully the demons helped me by gathering food in the forest, and I had asked the few maids who knew how to make potions to put together as many healing potions as possible. When I deemed I had made enough kits for a day, I had Beretta send the

demons to deliver them to Selene. We kept this pace for about two weeks.

The stampede hadn't reached Ischea yet, but when I heard about all of the casualties in the countries closest to the dungeon, my expression turned grim. Beretta noticed and looked at me with concern.

"Master, you have done everything you can. Please go get some rest."

"Thank you, Beretta, but I still have a bit of mana left; I'll—" I started, but the stern look Beretta gave me made me change my mind. "*Fine*, I'm going to take a break," I said with a sigh.

"Good. I will return to preparing the supplies for the demons to deliver," Beretta informed me before leaving the room.

"I wonder what Teto is doing right now? She's probably busy too, huh?" I muttered to myself.

It was all hands on deck in the wasteland to prepare for the stampede, and Teto had slipped away without me noticing, taking a good chunk of the magic stones from our stock with her. She still hadn't returned.

I had sent a maid to bring her some food—and snoop on her while she was at it—and she told me that Teto was making more clay golems in the forest to protect the wasteland in case the stampede arrived at our doorstep. I was a bit moved by how dependable Teto was, but at the same time, I missed her an awful lot.

"For now, I should prioritize restoring my mana," I mumbled, slipping under the covers of my bed for yet another lonely night.

But sleep wasn't coming easily to me that day, my thoughts keeping me awake.

What should I do about the monsters? Were the guards in the fortress at the border of Liebel ready to fight? Should I ditch this whole being patient thing and go fight the monsters directly in the dungeon city myself?

I eventually fell asleep, wondering how I could be of help to Leriel and the others.

A Knight in Ischea's Side

News about the goddess Lriel's message spread like wildfire through the continent; every nation left standing was mobilizing to mount a defense in case the stampede reached their doorstep. Ischea was no different, its people rallying to consolidate the regions' fighting strength and wartime goods. The lord of Apanemis had instructed his knights to handle procurement for supplies like potions and iron rations.

"This should be the last pharmacy..." the knight, who had been tasked with going around the pharmacies to ask for potions, muttered as he arrived at a pharmacy near the church's orphanage.

The pharmacy was quite big, most likely having been expanded and renovated several times throughout the years.

"Excuse me, is the owner here?" the knight asked as he entered the building.

"That'd be me. Dan's the name," a vigorous man—whom the knight would never have guessed was over seventy—replied. "I was waiting for you, sir knight."

"How did you know I was coming?" the knight asked, blinking in surprise.

"One of the priests at the church, a good friend of mine, told me that he received a divine message announcing that a significant conflict was imminent, and I've heard rumors at the adventurer's guild of a stampede in the northwest," the shopkeeper explained. "I guessed that the lord would expect us apothecaries to prepare potions to help support the soldiers. It seems I was right," he said, raising an eyebrow as if to ask the knight what he thought of his deduction.

The knight let out a sigh. The former Liebel margravine, the saintess Selene, had collaborated with the kingdom's cardinal and the city-state of Palma—the Church of the Five Goddesses' headquarters—to decipher the meaning of the divine message, which they had then communicated to the rulers of the other countries on the continent. They had tried to keep the whole thing a secret from the citizens of Ischea, but the most perceptive ones—like this shopkeeper—had already caught on.

"You're spot-on," the knight said. "I'd really appreciate it if you could keep it to yourself, though. We would rather not raise a panic."

The shopkeeper nodded. "Rest assured, I wasn't going to tell anyone. After all, it

wouldn't do if some greedy bastards started hiking up their prices to take advantage of the situation. We'll do everything we can to keep the kingdom flush with healing potions."

The knight nodded, and Dan produced the potions he had made in preparation for this day.

"For now this is all I have," he said.

"Hm, it's less than we had anticipated. Can't you add a few more?"

Dan shook his head. "We need to add mana to my potions, so the number we can make in a day is limited by the size of our mana pools. Besides, it's just me, my son, and a few apprentices working here. By the time the adventurers and the townsfolk have gotten everything they need, this is all we have left. We can't make more," he said, his tone definitive.

The knight didn't know what to do; he had visited all of the pharmacies and apothecaries in town but hadn't managed to secure enough potions to meet his lord's quota.

"Do you know of another potion maker with a few potions to spare?" he asked Dan.

Perhaps the man knew a retired apothecary who'd be willing to help. The situation was too dire for him to give up so easily.

Dan crossed his arms and pondered on the question. "Doesn't the lord have a personal potion maker? Can't they help?"

The knight shook his head. "They're helping, but it's still not enough."

Seeing the grave expression on the knight's face, Dan racked his brain for ideas.

"Hm... Do you know about the technical school at the orphanage?" he asked the knight.

"Of course. Who in Apanemis doesn't?"

Before, the orphans used to be tossed into the world without any practical skills once they were old enough. Most of them couldn't even write. A certain aghast adventurer had donated some of her private funds to the orphanage to build a workshop so that

the orphans could learn potion mixing and papermaking. Things had evolved in the sixty years that followed, and the orphans could now learn all sorts of other things there.

"A lot of retired craftsmen teach their craft to the kids there. I'm sure there must be a few skilled potion makers among the lot," Dan said.

The knight's face lit up. "What a great idea! That should help me meet the lord's quota!"

He was about to rush out of the pharmacy when Dan quickly stopped him.

"Hey, hold on, sir! I'm not done! There's a village not too far from here where I buy my medicinal herbs. Ask for Granny Sayah and her apprentices; they're really good too."

"Granny Sayah and her apprentices?" the knight echoed, puzzled.

Dan nodded and explained, "They're healers."

"You're telling me that some village out in the sticks has *multiple* people who can brew a decent potion?" the knight asked, dumbfounded.

To make potions, one needed the Mana Control skill, or they wouldn't be able to add mana to their concoctions. It was totally unheard of for the skill to crop up in so many people at once in such a small and isolated community. In recent years, the church had started dispatching the kids who had graduated from the orphanage's technical training institution to the nearby villages that didn't have any healers. But there were so many villages and so few potion makers that most villages remained without a skilled healer and had to rely on regular apothecaries who couldn't use magic.

"Unlike us, the healers in that village are more interested in creating new medicine than selling potions," Dan explained.

That village mostly sustained itself through agriculture, but they also sold the medicinal herbs they collected, and the healers would very occasionally travel to the neighboring villages to sell potions. That income funded their research.

"Makes for some damn good product," Dan continued. "Though, keep in mind that they don't run a pharmacy or anything; they're researchers above anything else."

A nostalgic smile curled on his lips as he thought about Sayah and her apprentices. A lot of his friends from the orphanage used to spend their time mixing the potion ingredients they were given at random to try and come up with new potions, and a few of them had actually gone to that very village to become Sayah's apprentices. They would create new potions and have their friends assess them, sometimes even testing their work on themselves. This resulted in potions far superior to anything one could find in the other towns, even the bigger ones.

"So where does that Granny Sayah live?" the knight asked.

"Give me a minute, I'll go get a map."

Dan did just that and pointed out Sayah's village to the knight.

"Hm, it's going to take me about ten days to make the round trip," the knight muttered. "It might be best if I invite the potion makers to stay in the city for the time being, so we won't need to trek there every single time. Plus, potion ingredients are readily available here."

"Then you should probably discuss this whole thing with the church's head priest when you go check out the technical school. Some of the kids who graduated from there work for Granny Sayah now. My third son has actually become one of her apprentices."

Dan wrote a short letter addressed to Sayah and his own son and handed it to the knight.

The knight returned to the lord's mansion to make his report before heading to the mysterious Sayah's village.

"Could you please lend us one of your apprentices?" he asked the old woman.

Age had put a slight hunch in her posture and wrinkled her face, but she was a cute little old lady.

A nostalgic smile curled on her lips. "When I was young, a kind traveler taught me how to make potions. I wanted to be just like her and travel the world, but I never got the opportunity and, well, as you can see, my body won't let me go anywhere now. I want my apprentices to have the chance I never had and see something other than this village. I'm leaving them in your care, sir knight."

"I will personally make sure they're well taken care of," the knight replied.

He returned to Apanemis with Sayah's apprentices, who agreed to help prepare potions for the stampede. These were then shipped to the fortress at the frontier of the Liebel margravate, which would be first in the line of fire if the monsters reached Ischea.

The Wasteland of Nothingness had been supplying the fortress as well, but there was a limit to the supplies Chise could produce with her magic. Thankfully, about two weeks after Lerie's divine message, supplies started arriving in Liebel from all around the kingdom. These not only supported the knights and adventurers, but also the refugees who had escaped from the neighboring nations. The potions from the Wasteland of Nothingness and Apanemis were particularly popular among the soldiers, who claimed they were the best potions they had ever used. As a result, Granny Sayah's and her apprentices' names became well-known across the kingdom for the quality of their craft.

CHAPTER 20

THE WITCH OF CREATION AND HER COMPANIONS PREPARE FOR BATTLE

Having been *strongly* advised to go to bed early by Beretta, I woke up in complete darkness. Liriel was standing in front of me, a grave expression on her face, and I quickly realized I was in a dream oracle.

"Thank you for your hard work preparing for the stampede, Chise," she told me.

"I couldn't just sit around and do nothing—not after what Leriel said," I said. "Liriel, can I ask you something? Why didn't you tell me about this whole thing sooner?"

My blood boiled.

Not even twenty-four hours after I had received Leriel's divine message, Selene had gotten news that the stampede was already on its way. A city had been destroyed; who knew how many had died by then? The stampede had ravaged farmland and livestock as it went; for the foreseeable future, anyone still scratching out a living in the smaller towns and villages would struggle to make ends meet.

If I had known ahead of time that anyone had been *planning* this, maybe I could've stopped them and prevented this whole situation altogether. People wouldn't have had to die.

"It's not that I didn't want to tell you earlier; it's that I couldn't," Liriel said, apologetic. "That dungeon is outside of my domain. By the time I noticed how bad the situation had become, the sacrifice was already finished. The dungeon couldn't absorb all that mana all at once, and the leylines suffered for it. I've been running myself ragged trying to deal with that. But you're right, an apology is in order: I'm sorry, Chise."

She rattled off everything that had fallen out from the damaged leylines: earthquakes, fissures, landslides, volcanic eruptions, crop failure—the list went on and on. And setting all of it right where it could be and mitigating the harm where it couldn't had all fallen to her.

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken out my anger on you," I said with a sigh.

It clearly wasn't her fault she couldn't have told me ahead of time. Besides, what was done was done; there was no point in dwelling on it. My responsibilities lay in the present.

"Can you tell me more about the stampede?"

There were still so many things I didn't know. Why was the stampede so *huge*? What kind of monsters dwelled in that dungeon? What was the current situation at ground zero? I couldn't help but think back on the last few bits of Liriel's message that had never quite made sense: What were those "souls that wandered space-time"? And what did she mean by "sacrifice's resentment"?

A worried look appeared on Liriel's face. "I don't mind, but I have a question first. Why do you want to know? You've already done so much by arranging supplies for the other nations' armies. No one will blame you if you decide to focus your efforts on protecting the wasteland until the stampede is over."

I could tell by her expression that she didn't want me to do anything risky. While it was true that whatever was going on in the northwest didn't affect me directly, I just couldn't bear not helping when I knew there was *something* I could do.

And more importantly...

"I know that. But Liriel was so desperate that she went out of her way to send a divine oracle to all of us. Not to mention, she's your sister—my friend's sister."

An exasperated smile appeared on Liriel's face. "You're doing all that just because you want to 'help your friend's sister,' hm? You truly are a kind soul, Chise."

"Don't worry, I don't plan on doing anything rash. I'm still planning to live for a good long while," I said playfully, which earned me a chuckle from Liriel.

She took in a deep breath and schooled her expression into a more serious one. "All right, then. I'll tell you everything that Liriel couldn't fit in her message. As you've guessed, someone organized a human sacrifice in that dungeon. This created a volume of mana so large that it messed up the dungeon's subspace, which caused a hole to open in space-time."

"A hole in space-time? Is Lriel all right?"

Lriel had once told me that the calamity from two thousand years ago had caused Loriel, the goddess of the underworld, to fall into a long slumber. I was worried something similar might have happened to Lriel, but Lriel quickly reassured me, a gentle smile on her lips.

"She's fine, I promise. But she needs to focus all of her force on closing that hole. She used up a lot of her power to send that message to you and the others, but other than that, she's doing all right. Unfortunately, as long as she's occupied with the hole, the root of the problem can't be solved."

"The root of the problem..." I echoed.

"The resentful cries of the rite's victims resonated through the dungeon's subspace, which attracted lost souls who can't reincarnate," she explained.

"Lost souls?"

"Remember that tower that appeared in the wasteland?" Lriel asked me.

I nodded. "Y-Yeah. It's a building from two thousand years ago that got washed away during the calamity, right?"

"Precisely. But it wasn't only objects and buildings that got spirited away then."

It all made a lot more sense now. "So that's what those 'souls wandering space-time' are."

Not only had the calamity of two thousand years ago drained almost all of the world's mana, but it had also washed away every building and living being in its blast radius, ejecting them outside of normal space and time. Direct exposure to the naked firmament of creation annihilated the bodies of the calamity's victims and trapped their souls outside the flow of life and death.

"That specific dungeon's subspace is quite close to the outer bounds of this reality," Lriel continued. "So when those wandering souls heard the sacrifices' resentful cries, they ripped a hole in space-time to join them."

"And this is what led to such a large-scale stampede," I concluded.

Liriel nodded. “Leriel is fixing that hole as we speak, but, until she’s done, the souls will keep streaming into the dungeon, turning into undead monsters and causing mayhem wherever they go,” Liriel said with a deep sigh. “Maybe the planar driftwood that appeared in the wasteland was some sort of omen.”

Normally the fabric of reality wasn’t so fragile as to break under the pressure of anything as feeble as a swarm of human souls, but Liriel had told me that things had been a little weird out there recently, and the incident with the sacrificial rite in the dungeon had been the straw that broke the camel’s back. I supposed it was just a streak of bad luck.

“This is everything I know,” Liriel said. “What do you plan to do now, Chise?”

I had a better idea of what was going on, but, as I feared, it seemed that there really wasn’t a whole lot I could do. Keeping Selene’s army well stocked was the safest option, but I had another idea now.

“I’m going to fly to the heart of the stampede,” I said, resolutely.

Liriel frowned. “You won’t be able to stop it alone—or with Teto, for that matter.”

“I know that. We’re going to need as many people as possible in our ranks if we want to exterminate these monsters. So for now I’m going to buy us time. I’ll go afield, see how deep I can make it and what’s waiting for us there, and kill everything I can. Maybe I’ll open a path to safety for someone here and there along the way. And if there are a few who can fight among the lot, that’s just gravy.”

I might have had a crap-ton of MP, but there were limits to what I could do alone against a monster army. But if I managed to prevent a few skilled fighters from meeting an early demise, it’d provide us a vital boost to our fighting strength.

An amused smile curled on Liriel’s lips. “Good thinking, Chise. Go ahead, I know you can do it.”

On those words, the dream oracle came to an end, and I slowly felt myself waking up.

Teto’s Side

While Chise discussed the stampede with Liriel, Teto remained in the forest, as she had for the past few weeks.

"Looks like the place is clear..." she muttered before taking a deep breath and yelling, "Everyooone! Come here!"

Her voice echoed through the night sky, and moments later bear golems emerged from the bushes one by one. These were the latest recruits, freshly crafted by Teto and her fellow golems.

"Time for a secret strategy meeting, everyone!" she whispered, crouching down. "Soon there are going to be lots and lots of monsters coming, and Teto wants to find a way to help Lady Witch deal with them!"

"Goh."

"Goh."

"Goh."

The golems goh-ed their ideas one after the other in hushed voices, and Teto listened to them intently, nodding from time to time. After a while, she seemed satisfied and stood up, smiling like a fiend.

"All righty everyone! Let's do our best to help Lady Witch!"

"Goooh!" The golems all raised their fists to the sky as they cheered in unison before scattering off into the forest to relay what they had discussed to the other bear golems.

Teto's secret strategy meeting was a resounding success.

CHAPTER 21

WHAT EVERYBODY WAS UP TO THESE PAST TWO WEEKS—FIRST PART

Beretta's Side

"Have you all gotten your emergency supplies?" I asked the godkin and dragonkin in front of me as I watched them store the emergency kits Master had created in their magic bags, weapons in hand.

Over the past two weeks, they had undertaken a total of four trips to deliver supplies to Lady Seleneriel's army in preparation for the stampede. However, this time, they were not in charge of deliveries—rather, they would be assisting the soldiers at the frontier with warding off monsters.

"C'mon, we deliver goods to the other towns all the time; we're gonna be fine," Shael assured. "Those monsters won't know what hit them!"

"Shael, you know we can't fight for too long outside of the barrier. Don't push yourself," Yahad chided her.

"I-I know that!"

Per Master's instructions, I had selected the most proficient fighters to send as reinforcements to the other nations' armies. There were over two hundred of them, with Shael and Yahad in command. However, while the demons significantly outmatched the threat ahead of them, the low mana environment outside of the barrier might prove to be a bigger challenge, especially since their mana regeneration was quite slow. They would need to take plenty of breaks.

"Do not, under any circumstances, cause Master chagrin," I warned them.

"Yes, yes," Shael replied dismissively. "Anyway, we're off! We'll protect you guys, okay?" she said, waving goodbye to the demons who were staying behind.

The godkin unfurled their wings, and the dragonkin mounted griffins and pegasus, taking flight just as the sun began to rise.

"Are you worried, Miss Waiting Maid?" Lord Great Elder inquired.

I shook my head. "I am not. As long as they do not die, Master will be able to heal them."

Even if they were to lose a leg or an arm, Master could use her magic to patch them back up. Besides, I trusted that Yahad would keep a vigilant eye on his companions and prevent them from doing anything rash.

"Everything has been arranged. Our role is to prepare the field for when Master and Lady Teto make their move."

In the two weeks following Lady Lerial's divine message, monsters from the dungeons had spread like wildfire; some nations already found themselves with the creatures right at their doorstep. We had to act before the stampede picked up speed and set the stage for Master's intervention.

Shortly after the demons departed, Lady Teto returned, accompanied by a few bear golems.

"Berettaaa, I'm back!" she greeted me.

"I hope you have been well, Lady Teto. Master was starting to miss you."

"I'm sorry! But I'm back now!" she said.

The bear golems behind her greeted me with a bow and a collective "Goh!"

It appeared that Lady Teto had spent the past couple of weeks reinforcing the bear golem defense network around the wasteland in case the monsters managed to sneak past the other nations' fortresses, or if anyone came by looking to get away with something unconscionable while the arm of the law was preoccupied with defending against the external threat.

As the two of us were catching up, Master woke up and joined us outside.

"Good morning, Master."

"Morning, Beretta, Great Elder. And welcome back, Teto. What were you up to for so long?" she asked Lady Teto.

"I had something to talk about with the bear golems!"

"Goh!"

A small smile curled on Master's lips when she saw the golems; she didn't ask any further questions.

"The demons have already left, huh?" she asked, looking up at the sky.

"Just as planned," I confirmed. "When we have enough resources to make more emergency kits, I'll send the delivery team to take the supplies to the fortress."

I took a good look at Master's face; it was clear that she felt much more relaxed than she'd been the day before. She announced that she had something to tell us.

"I think we've made enough emergency kits for now. I'm going to take a break from making those and go survey the scale of the stampede; I want to see what we're dealing with with my own eyes. I'll try to save as many people as I can while I'm at it. We need to start recruiting if we want to keep pace with the stampede."

"Teto will come with you, Lady Witch!" Lady Teto immediately offered.

I closed my eyes and sighed inwardly. I would have much preferred it if Master stayed safely inside of the great barrier, far away from all of the monsters, and carried on supporting the soldiers and adventurers from afar. Going out there, even with Lady Teto, was taking useless risks. However, I knew my master; she would hate herself forever if she let others die out there for the sake of her own safety. Staying home would ensure she remained physically unharmed, but I knew it would crush her spirit.

"Understood," I replied. "I agree; you have already prepared more than enough supplies. Besides, Duke Gyunton and the Ischean royal family promised to send reinforcements and resources to the front lines as well. I believe this plan will not be an issue."

"Thanks, Beretta. And sorry for always causing you so much trouble," Master said.

"You always think about all those difficult things so Teto doesn't have to worry!" Lady

Teto chirped.

At least I knew Lady Teto would do anything to protect Master. Once that was settled, Master took her flying staff out of her magic bag, and the both of them took off.

“All righty then, we’re off!”

“We’re gonna save everyone!”

Lord Great Elder and I bid them goodbye, and they were off.

“Miss Attendant, are you *sure* you’re not worried?” he asked me, a concerned look on his face.

“To be quite honest with you, I wish I could go stop the stampede myself so Master would not have to put herself in such a dangerous situation, but alas...”

“I see. How about I go lend Lady Witch a hand in your stead?” he suggested, spreading his wings. “I can’t stop the stampede altogether, but I can stem the tide a ways. It’ll take a load off my children’s shoulders too.”

“I would greatly appreciate it, Lord Great Elder.”

“I’ll be back again before the stampede starts picking up speed,” he said before asking the maids to secure a magic bag containing a transfer gate to one of his front legs.

When everything was ready, he soared into the sky to follow Master and Lady Teto. I watched the sky until I couldn’t see him anymore; I was about to return to the mansion to resume my duties when, all of a sudden, one of the maids under my direct supervision rushed to my side.

“Miss Beretta! We have a problem!” she exclaimed with urgency.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Some of the bear golems started running off towards the west all at once!”

“What did you say?!”

Master—no, Lady Teto was the one who had created the bear golems, meaning that

they were supposed to follow her orders at all times.

"And you cannot call them back?" I asked.

"We tried, but they will not listen to us! It does not seem that they are running wild or anything of the sort, though. They are moving out of their own volition."

"Perhaps they are following Lady Teto's instructions..." I muttered, glancing at the bear golems who had been following Lady Teto earlier.

"Goh?" they said, tilting their heads to one side in perfect sync. It was quite a cute spectacle.

Perhaps Master and I had misunderstood Lady Teto's intentions. Could it be that she had not created all of these new bear golems to strengthen the wasteland's defenses, but to send as reinforcements to the Ischean border? I wondered how many she'd sent. No one in the wasteland knew exactly how many bear golems she had created, after all.

"The bear golems are under Lady Teto's command. For now, send a couple of maids after them to monitor the situation. I will report everything to Master once she returns," I told the maid.

It was highly unlikely that my deductions were wrong; the situation hardly required my input at this point. Instead, I sent a few maids to follow the bear golems and went back to my own duties.

Selene's Side

As soon as I had received the news about the stampede, I had made my way to the fortress at the border of the margravate and started preparing for the impending refugee crisis.

"I can't believe this is happening," I muttered.

It all started around two weeks ago. I, along with a few others, had received a divine message from the goddess Lriel. I hadn't even had time to fully process the message before receiving news that a stampede had started in the northwestern part of the

continent, completely wiping out the independent city built around the dungeon at ground zero. The unleashed monsters poured out, amplifying their numbers by assimilating others in nearby Demon Dens. Their path of chaos and destruction swept through village after village in the three countries nearest to the former dungeon city. The bigger towns shut their gates completely, meaning that the poor villagers whose houses were destroyed had no choice but to try crossing into the neighboring nations to find shelter there.

The countries bordering those most affected by the stampede mobilized their forces, concentrating them at the borders to support the defense against the monster onslaught. Knights and adventurers from all over Ischea were streaming into the fortress at the border of the Liebel margravate, as it was the stronghold closest to the city in which the stampede started. There, they awaited updates from other towns, preparing themselves to deploy at a moment's notice based on the latest information about the stampede's trajectory.

"Madam, the knights have taken their positions. I would advise getting some rest," one of my servants informed me.

"You're right, thank you. I'm exhausted."

We had arranged provisions and sleeping quarters inside the fortress for the adventurers and knights to rest whenever they couldn't fight anymore. Meanwhile, my husband had taken the lead of a group of knights to prepare everything for the incoming refugees who would be at our door sooner than later.

I had retreated to a room in the fortress to rest and collect myself when Lyle, one of my family's knights, came to find me with a report.

"Madam, we received a reply to the message we sent to the royal family. His Majesty the King acknowledges the urgency and assures us that reinforcements and supplies will be dispatched promptly."

"Just as you'd expect from him," I said with a smile. "I'm very grateful for his help."

"In addition to that, adventurers have been pouring in from all around the nation to lend us their help. In particular, two members of an A-rank party specialized in stampedes have just arrived from Apanemis: Mr. Arsus and Miss Raphilia from the Swords of Daybreak."

It felt like a weight had been taken off my shoulders. The Swords of Daybreak had once reached the lowest level of Apanemis's dungeon and had contributed greatly to clearing and destroying other dungeons all over the continent, not to mention all of the stampedes they had participated in. I had heard that the other members had retired from the adventuring life, either after getting married or due to old age, but Arsus and Raphilia were still active.

"What a relief to have two A-rank adventurers joining our ranks," I said before adding, "But..."

I had seen Raphilia before when mom had taken the A-rank exam; she was an elf, so it didn't surprise me that she was still in fighting shape. Arsus, on the other hand, was a human, and quite advanced in age at that. I couldn't help but feel a little worried about him.

Or maybe he's like me and his mana pool is large enough to have slowed his aging, I reasoned with myself.

"Bring them here, please. It wouldn't do if I didn't greet them, considering they came all the way here to help us face this crisis."

Lyle nodded and went to fetch the two members of the Swords of Daybreak, who were accompanied by a young swordsman.

"Pleased to meet you, madam; I'm Arsus," the leader greeted me.

He had a few wrinkles here and there, but as I had suspected, his mana pool was quite large, so his body was still like that of a much younger man.

"And I'm Raphilia, nice to meet you."

She had changed a bit since the last time I saw her; she seemed a lot more dependable than before.

"This lad right here is Tony," Arsus said, pointing at the young swordsman with them. "He's a B-rank and my future successor. Both of us will be relying on you today."



I nodded. "My apologies," I said, "but we don't have a lot of time, so I'm going to dive right in; you will be in charge of killing any monster that gets too close to the border. In addition to that, whenever possible, I'd like for you to rescue the refugees bound for the fortress."

"Noted," Arsus said. "We'll make sure to follow the knights' instructions when we're out there. Just so you know, though, I'm not as spry as I used to be, so I can't fight for as long as I used to in the past."

"I understand. We're counting on you three."

The three of them exuded heroic auras that I hoped would boost their compatriots' morale.

I was about to go work on fortifying the fortress's defenses when another knight ran into my room.

"Madam, it's an emergency! A dragon has appeared from the eastern mountains!"

"The eastern mountains... The ones bordering the wasteland?!" I exclaimed in shock.

CHAPTER 22

WHAT EVERYBODY WAS UP TO THESE PAST TWO WEEKS—SECOND PART

The Great Elder's Side

Leaving the wasteland, I quickly closed the distance with Lady Witch and Lady Guardian.

“Phew, finally caught up with you two,” I remarked to grab their attention.

“Great Elder? What are you doing here?”

“Did something happen?”

I drifted until my flight path ran parallel with Lady Witch’s. “I owe a lot to the goddesses, you see,” I explained, “so I’ve decided to lend a claw and assist you to repay them for their kindness. Besides, it’ll make it easier for you too, won’t it?” I chuckled.

Lady Witch blinked in surprise, seemingly taken aback, but she quickly pulled herself together, a small smile curling on her lips.

“I’m counting on you, then.”

“Mister Great Elder is about as strong as a hundred adventurers!” Lady Guardian added.

“I’ll do my best to help.”

The three of us flew over the mountains and kept due west, soon passing Ischea’s innermost border fortress.

“We should set out transfer gates in front of the fortress,” I muttered to myself.

“Great Elder, can you set up ours too?” Lady Witch asked me.

"Just plonk them down!" Lady Guardian replied.

Lady Witch took a pair of transfer gates out of her magic bag and threw them to me. I quickly caught them midair. After that, they broke farther west to survey the scale of the stampede, and I landed close to the fortress—but not *too* close, as the place was already crowded with refugees from other nations.

"I suppose I should set these up and regroup with Lady Witch, hm?" I muttered to myself as I got to work, setting the four transfer gates in a line.

Right as I was done, a group of what I could only assume were knights on horseback rushed towards me.

"Hm. I really don't want to deal with humans right now... I'm just going to go find Lady Witch," I said, spreading my wings to take off, when all of a sudden, I felt something whoosh past my ear.

"Don't go! We're not your enemies!" a female voice stopped me.

I paused my movements and turned my face to look at the group of humans, only to realize the person who had spoken was a young elf girl. There hadn't been a trace of hesitation in her voice. The knights with her were trembling in fear. They must've mistaken me for a monster—hence the arrow.

Well, I thought, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to spare a few minutes to explain how the transfer gates work.

"I am the Ancient Verdigris Dragon," I said, making myself sound as imposing as possible. "I was there to see this world draw its first breaths, and I will watch over its last dying cinders."

"I-It talked!"

"I just heard a voice in my head!"

Most of the humans started panicking when they heard my voice, except for one of them and the elf girl from earlier.

"I'm Raphilia, an adventurer!" she said, her tone unwavering.

"Esteemed elven adventurer, I have rushed here to assist a good friend of mine and repay my debt to the goddesses. I shall help you rid this place of those monsters!"

"How about working with us, then?" the elf asked.

Working with *humans*? Except for Lady Witch and her guardian, I was most certain no human could keep up with me.

"Very well," I said. "I will find the refugees and guide them here. In the meantime, take care of anyone who comes through the transfer gates," I said, pointing a claw at the row of transfer gates I had just arranged.

I saw a look of comprehension flashing across some of the knights' faces once they saw the gates. These men most likely had accompanied Lady Witch's adopted daughter when she had come to visit the wasteland and had seen the gates in action.

I spread my wings, preparing myself to depart, when, once again, someone stopped me.

This time, it was the old swordsman next to the elf girl. "Wait! What do you mean you're going to lead the refugees here? You'll only make them panic and drive them off!"

I couldn't help but let out a groan at his words. I had been the "Great Elder" for so long that I had forgotten most humans would instinctively flee for their lives at the mere sight of me.

"If a few knights and I came with you, you'd have a much easier time convincing them," the man insisted.

"So you're asking me to take you with me, yes?"

"Yep!"

That swordsman was a *gutsy* one. He didn't look scared of me in the slightest. The knights, on the other hand, turned white as a sheet when they heard him volunteer to tag along.

"Very well. I shall allow five of you to ride on my back."

"Thanks!" the man—who introduced himself as Arsus—said, a large grin on his face.

He ushered a terrified-looking young boy—his disciple, I assumed—and three of the knights onto my back, and I took off. This time, no one stopped me; I headed west, my gaze fixed on the land below in search of travelers in need of aid.

"These villages had no fighting chance," I remarked. "Some scant few still live here and there, it seems. They hide well, for mortals."

"May I know how you can tell, O Great Ancient Verdigris Dragon?" one of the knights asked me.

"Eh, just a bit of Mana Perception. The better part of the population must have moved on to bigger towns before the gates came down. Let's rescue the ones who got left behind."

I dropped into a low, spiraling flight path; whenever I spotted someone hiding—be it in one of the destroyed villages, in the forest, or in caves—I set up the transfer gate and had them teleport to the fortress. Thankfully, most of them were too stunned by my appearance to resist, and they obediently followed my orders.

Along the way, I helped cull monsters whenever we came across cities that seemed to be struggling to hold the fort.

"Hm, the stampede's gotten this close already?" I muttered, looking down at a town that seemed to be in a particularly tough spot.

"Let us down! We'll convince them to let you help!" Arsus said.

"All right. I'm going to start thinning out the horde."

I let the humans down onto the town walls and landed on a plain a ways off from the outer limits. Arsus and the others would explain the situation to the townspeople, so I got straight to work.

"Don't take it personally" I told the monsters through telepathy before concentrating mana in my wings and stirring up a gale that ripped them from the earth.

By the time they fell to the ground, all of them were dead.

I obviously couldn't use that strategy everywhere, as I didn't want to destroy entire forests just to kill a few monsters, but it was rather efficient on flat terrain. Besides, the tornado had left my scent in its wake, which would act as a monster repellent for some time.

Arsus had successfully convinced the townspeople that I was no threat, and the humans seemed much calmer than before. With the monsters dead, they could finally take a well-deserved breather.

"I imagine you must be running out of provisions, humans," I said to the townspeople. "Consider using these monster carcasses to satiate your hunger. Arsus, we're leaving."

"Sure thing, Great Ancient Verdigris Dragon," Arsus replied. He and the other humans climbed back in place on my back and we headed farther west, looking for the next place we were needed.

We continued this routine for around a week when I realized something strange.

"Arsus, why are so many of the people left behind demons?" I asked the swordsman.

"Discrimination against demons is rampant in these parts," he explained in a slightly embarrassed tone.

"Why?"

"A long time ago, someone summoned a great devil. It destroyed a nation in the west before it was slain, but that wasn't the only casualty."

According to Arsus, the great devil—who called itself the "Demon King"—had conjured other devils and proceeded to claim every human in the region as a slave. It took a very long time for the humans to tear the Demon King and its henchmen from their thrones, and during that time, a great many demons were born from bitter unions between demon and human parents.

"Long story short, there's old, bad blood there," Arsus concluded. "The demons we've been rescuing most likely were denied passage to the bigger towns and either tried leaving for Ischea or waiting out the stampede in the ruins of their own homes."

"The world has become no less harsh in my absence," I whispered.

Arsus's explanation made sense; demons lived in mana-dense places, and monsters were attracted to mana. It was highly likely that the demons had lost their homes first and were left to wander the roads looking for a place to take refuge.

As we got closer to the source of the stampede, the survivors and intact towns dwindled. This region was completely dominated by monsters now.

"Damn, that's gruesome," Arsus commented, looking upon the desolate landscape covered in monster bodies.

"Without humans to prey upon, such creatures sharpen their claws on each other," I said.

Some of them had even evolved already. While this meant that there would be fewer monsters by the time they reached the fortress, they would all be battle-proven and gruesomely overleveled. That fact alone more than made up for their loss in numbers.

"Well, it's unlikely we'll find any survivors here. Let us return to the fortress," I declared, preparing to turn around when Arsus stopped me.

"Hold on a minute, Great Ancient Verdigris Dragon. I'd like to survey the area a little longer."

I muttered something about the foolishness of humans, but I didn't argue; we pressed on to the stampede's epicenter. But moments before we arrived at the dungeon, we noticed that something was off.

"The hell's that?" Arsus asked.

"Such dense miasma..." I muttered.

A great number of pitch-black undead—black skeletons—were on the march.

"Hm. This is quite the sticky situation," I commented.

"'Sticky' is a hell of a word for it," Arsus replied. "Those undead are urging the monsters forward!"

In the case of a regular stampede, the monsters would eventually break from their murderous trance and migrate to less hazardous territory; they might engage in the

occasional turf war with other monsters, but that would be about it. Undead, on the other hand, had no such natural nesting impulse—their resentment would drive them on until they were forced back into the grave. With tens of thousands of them at their heels, the monsters had no choice but to keep pressing forward in fear. However, undead couldn't live without mana; in time they would fade away on their own if they were deprived for too long... unless they found a mana-dense zone to settle in. If I was right, these undead were most likely headed for the Wasteland of Nothingness. I couldn't begin to imagine how many casualties they would cause on the way there just from the miasma they shed.

"I cannot guarantee your safety if we get any closer. What do you want to do?" I asked Arsus.

"Let's head back and report to Madam Seleneriel for now. We gotta tell them that the monsters are only the first wave."

I nodded. "Good point. Hopefully, a few of them will have died by the time they reach the fortress, but..."

Whenever an undead ran out of mana and fell from exhaustion, its miasma would be released into the air, making other undead even stronger. We watched one of the evolved monsters below turn to fight the undead horde, only for the seething tide of their bodies to crush it underfoot. We were left speechless.

The undead marched undeterred towards Ischea, trailing miasma in their wake. Odds were there were other groups bound for other nations. We rushed back to the fortress to relay our intel, only stopping on the way to occasionally thin out the monster horde.

I took a moment to glance at the mob of undead behind us and prayed for Lady Witch and her guardian's safety.

Shael's Side

After we delivered the emergency supplies to the fortress in Ischea, we stayed there on the witch's orders to help consolidate their defenses. A little after we arrived, I heard people talking about a dragon who had come to set up transfer gates before taking off again with humans on its back. That must've been the Great Elder.

Soon people started appearing from the transfer gates. Meanwhile, I took care of exterminating anything that got too close to the fortress.

"They never stop coming, do they?" I grumbled between gritted teeth as I shot another monster from the sky with Wind Magic.

An elf girl game to fly next to me, having used her magic to create transparent wings that looked a bit like a cat-sith's. "Well, what else would you expect?" she scoffed. "There has never been such a large-scale stampede in history before. Don't let your guard down."

"Hmph! Don't underestimate me, elf."

"Hey, I have a name, you know? It's Raphilia."

I humped again for good measure. "I don't care. Just focus on the job in front of us."

"Piece of cake."

She conjured a spread of wind arrows and loosed them into the horde, cutting a swathe through them with a paltry bit of mana. *What had she called it again?* I thought. *Spirit Magic, or something like that?* This girl was using the power of the spirits to amplify her magic—unlike the witch, who used a staff for that purpose. I couldn't help but be a bit impressed by her prowess. She seemed strong. After about an hour of monster slaying, adventurers came from the fortress to retrieve the monsters' bodies, and I decided to go rest for a bit.

"What do you think? I'm pretty strong, aren't I?" the elf girl asked me, preening.

"You're not half bad, I guess... Anyway, my shift's over, so I'm going back to the fortress. I can't fight for too long here."

I knew that she was stronger than me, but I didn't want to admit it. I figured she wouldn't be able to pick up on my frustration with the fortress between us, but the elf girl followed me, her little wings letting her keep up with me. I headed to the tent where Yahad and the others were staying. But to do that, I had to fly above the refugee camp.

"Oh, an angel! The angels haven't given up on us!"

"The goddesses must've sent her to help us!"

"Thank you so much, thank you so much!"

My lips curled in discontent. This must be why my ancestors—Lady Luriel's angel and his wife—lived in seclusion. Who would put up with being treated like an envoy of the goddesses day in and day out?

The refugee camp was full of people who hadn't made it into the bigger towns; there were about fifty thousand people here. It was surrounded by the knights' and adventurers' tents, so they could protect them at all times. Our tent, on the other hand, had been set a little farther away from the camp.

"Heeey, Yahad, are you in here?" I asked, entering the tent.

"I am. Are you done with the monsters?" he asked me before turning to the elf girl who had followed me without permission. "And welcome, Miss Raphilia. We might not have much to offer in the way of hospitality, but make yourself at home."

"Thanks!" she chirped before taking a seat.

What the hell's her deal? I thought to myself, glaring at her before snapping out of it when I still hadn't replied to Yahad's question.

"We killed a bunch of them, but there's no thinning them out. Every day their numbers accumulate."

"We've been here a week. The goddess said that hundreds of thousands of monsters have escaped the dungeon, so it's not too surprising that we're seeing more of them as time passes. But we can hold the fortress for a long while yet," Yahad said.

We held the fortress walls in shifts; even the refugees who could still hold their own had volunteered to help the knights and adventurers. The Great Elder was thinning out the monster horde behind their lines, and I knew he would be back soon.

"I wonder what Lady Witch is doing," Yahad mused out loud.

He must've felt worried without her around to fall back on.

"I've heard she and her guardian went to kill monsters and rescue victims, just like the

Great Elder," I said. "Good grief, those two are nuts. I can't believe they dived headfirst into the thick of it just like that."

"I have to agree with you on that one. We should be protecting them, but they won't let us, huh?"

What we didn't know at that time was that all of the refugees the witch and her guardian had saved were singing her praises, calling her a "saintess" and the "goddesses' prophet."

There was a sudden commotion outside of the tent, and one of the other godkin rushed in to tell us that the Great Elder was back. We headed out and watched him lower the humans who had accompanied him this past week to the ground before putting away the transfer gates he had set up and flying back to the wasteland.

"This dragon is the one who brought us here!"

"If he hadn't been there, I would be dead by now."

"He saved us when the others left us behind!"

Just like they had done with me and the other godkin earlier, they started raving about the Great Elder. This time, however, I felt my chest swell up with pride, even though it wasn't me that they were talking about.

"Arsus must be back too. Let's go ask him what happened," the elf girl said.

"Already on it. Come, Yahad!"

He nodded. "It'd be wise for us to ask so we know what to expect from our enemies."

We went to find Arsus and the knights, trailing a whole pile of other hangers-on, and they told us everything they had seen in the west.

One week later, the undead he had mentioned were finally at the fortress's gates.

"Goh!"

None of us knew as of yet that a group of bear golems from the wasteland had reached the fortress, biding their time for the decisive battle.

CHAPTER 23

THE COLLAPSED DUNGEON AND THE UNDEAD HORDE

Teto and I headed west to investigate the stampede's epicenter and lend a hand where it was needed. It had been several days since we left on our journey, occasionally rescuing people who had been left behind and culling monsters whenever we could. However, at some point, we had stopped running into survivors altogether.

"We should be reaching the dungeon city soon," I said.

"Let's kill lots of monsters!"

There were two categories of people we rescued along the way: the ones who had escaped their villages and were desperately trying to find a bigger town to take refuge in, even if they had to cross national borders to get there, and the ones who couldn't run away and had been left behind. Most bigger towns had received news of Lerie's divine message; they knew what was coming and were ready to hole up until the monsters had left the region. The demon settlements, on the other hand, had no idea they were in the middle of a stampede. The Kingdom of Krista was viciously prejudiced against demons, so they mostly lived away from humans and kept interaction to a minimum.

Luckily, we spotted a demon settlement in the forest; we went to warn them of what was coming, and when Teto revealed to them she was a demon as well, most of them agreed to evacuate their village. A few proved more resistant, but Teto effortlessly subdued them, knocking them out cold and chucking them through the transfer gate. Witnessing the futility of their comrades' resistance, the remaining recalcitrants begrudgingly yielded and passed through the transfer gates. Every demon settlement in this neck of the woods stayed in touch with all the others; the demons passed along the other villages' locations before we parted ways. And so as we headed for the dungeon, we hit up every last demon village, rescuing people and killing monsters on the way.

We reached the dungeon city a day after the Great Elder and Arsus had spotted the

undead.

“So this is the place... Just as I thought, there are no survivors.”

“Lady Witch, the air tastes really gross here!”

Wave after wave of black skeletons poured out of the dungeon entrance in all directions, trailing miasma in their wake.

“That miasma is really thick... Just looking at it is making me nauseous.”

I stopped right above the city walls. Teto and I hopped down from my staff and peered at the fresh ruin of the dungeon city to see what exactly was going on. There was a huge crater at the dungeon’s entrance, split down the middle by a long fissure. Wave after wave of undead churned up out of the heart of the dungeon while miasma gushed into the air, coagulating into clouds, where new fear geists germinated in droves within them. Just as Liriel had told me in the dream oracle, the souls that had gotten lost in space-time after the calamity that felled the precursors had joined forces with the rite’s victims, materializing in this world as black skeletons and ghosts.

“Those undead must’ve already spread out pretty far, huh?” I noted.

Teto nodded. “Even if we go after them now, we probably won’t be able to stop them all.”

The undead, driven by resentment, moved forward, leaving nothing but destruction in their path.

“First things first, I should probably try to purify the dungeon’s entrance,” I said. I leveled my staff at it and chanted, “*Purification!*”

Much to my dismay, the miasma proved too dense for my spell to dispel completely, and I couldn’t reach the fissure. To make matters worse, it drew the attention—and, naturally, *hostility*—of the undead.

“Leeeve uuus!” the fear geists roared, shooting pitch-black magic bullets at us.

“Lady Witch, I’ll take care of it!” Teto assured me, deflecting their volley right back at them with her sword.

The bullets exploded when they came in contact with the monsters, but it seemed to have no effect whatsoever. They retaliated by laying down even more fire.

“We won’t be able to evade all of that. Teto! Let’s retreat for now!”

“Roger!”

I threw up a few barriers, climbed back on Flying Jade, and took off. When I figured we were far enough from danger, I attempted to purify the fear geists at a distance.

“Rest in peace! *Purification!*” I chanted.

Purifying the fear geist in the wasteland many years ago had cost me 50,000 MP; I had decided to use the same amount this time around. It seemed to be quite efficient, as the fear geists let out shrill cries, and a couple disappeared completely. However, there were still a lot of them to deal with, and that was without mentioning the undead monsters below.

“As expected, I couldn’t purify them all at once. This is going to be a pain... It might even be more annoying than cleaning up after the Mother,” I said, thinking back on the miasma sludge I had to purify at the bottom of the mines when I went to fix the mana seepage point in Lariel’s domain.

Not only would it take me ages to defeat all of these fear geists, but I couldn’t even focus solely on purifying them, as the undead monsters on the ground had started attacking us.

“If I run out of mana, Teto and I will be in danger...” I muttered. “We should leave for now.”

I turned my staff around and left the dungeon city. Hovering in the sky, I observed the undead horde as it spread like a drop of ink on fresh parchment. As I pondered a plan to defeat them, a sudden booming sound echoed from the dungeon.

“Huh? Did the dungeon just collapse? No... A bigger monster is coming out!”

Turning around, I watched as a giant arm made of thousands of human bones burst from the fissure, breaking through the dungeon entrance.

“Lady Witch, look at all of those bones!” Teto gasped.

I nodded. "There's no way just the two of us can defeat *that thing*."

A colossal bone titan emerged from the fissure, causing the dungeon to cave in under its sheer weight. The skeletons in the destroyed city clattered with glee, and the ghosts let out triumphant cries.

This seemed to be the last of the time-lost souls.

"Home... Home... We're going... home."

"Family... I want to... see my... family."

"Why... did this... happen... to me?"

The last of the undead left the dungeon city. With the collapse of the dungeon, they had lost their energy source; now they would wander the continent in search of replenishment. One group in particular was headed towards the Duchy of Droog. I couldn't be sure of it, but I surmised these undead were the people who had been sacrificed during the ritual and were looking for vengeance. The rest, led by the bone titan, trudged east, likely aiming for the wasteland. I couldn't tell if it was the mana that attracted them or their longing for the place they used to call home. Either way, if they reached the wasteland, it would be a catastrophe; the miasma would leave every town and village on the way uninhabitable.

"Lady Witch, what should we do?" Teto asked me, a worried look on her face.

"I don't know... I can't deal with all of them by myself."

Even my 750,000 MP wouldn't be enough to dissipate such thick miasma and purify all of the monsters. But then, as I studied the undead from the sky, I noticed *something*.

"The miasma is... scattering?" I muttered.

"It looks like it's the wind's doing!"

Right! Nature can self-purify up to a certain point!

The light of the sun, the wind, and the gravitational pull of the planet seemed to be slowly but surely dispersing the mana surrounding the monsters.

"This, unfortunately, will turn the former dungeon city into a Demon Den... But on the other hand, without miasma to give them a boost, the undead are getting weaker and weaker as we speak."

Teto and I exchanged grins.

"This means all we have to do is wait and strike when they're at their weakest!" Teto chirped.

"Exactly. It's going to be close, but if I play my cards right, I'll be able to purify them all at once right before they reach Ischea."

Well, I would need to change my equipment first; Flying Jade didn't have any affinity with purifying magic, so it wouldn't stand a chance against that bone titan.

"Teto, let's head back to the wasteland for now," I said.

"Roger!"

"Ready? *Teleport!*"

I used my magic to transport Teto and me back to our mansion, where I could create new equipment to bring my plan to fruition.

CHAPTER 24

HOLY STAFF—THE KAKKHARA OF REINCARNATION

When we returned to the mansion, Beretta came to greet us.

“Welcome back, Master, Lady Teto,” she said, lowering her head.

“Hey, Beretta. We just swung by to go get something real quick.”

“Hi, Beretta!” Teto chirped next to me.

“I see. May I suggest you take a rest before leaving again?”

For the past week, we had exclusively slept in abandoned buildings I’d put up barriers around. While my body was technically rested, I was mentally exhausted.

“I think we’ll do that, yeah,” I replied. “It’ll be nice to top up before heading out again.”

“We’re gonna have some yummy food, take a bath, and then Teto gets to sleep with Lady Witch!” Teto chirped. “And after that, we’ll go kick that bone titan’s butt!”

As we chatted with Beretta, I followed the Great Elder’s mana signature and found him sprawled out in the plaza behind the mansion with a few maids scrubbing his body with deck brushes.

“Oh, Lady Witch, Lady Guardian!” he said when he saw us. “You made it back in one piece.”

He stood up with a little “heave-ho” and turned to face us.

“Welcome back, Great Elder,” I said. “Sorry to cut the greetings short, but can you tell us what you saw in the west?”

“Did you get to help all the refugees?” Teto asked.

"Well, when I arrived at the fortress, I stumbled across a gutsy adventurer who insisted on tagging along and helping me," the Great Elder told us. "We did what we could for each village we found, I culled the horde along the way, and we turned back once we caught sight of the undead army."

He added that it looked like the undead were urging the other monsters forward. They could've stayed to survey the terrain a little longer, but ultimately they'd decided that relaying the information they had gathered was more important and left about a day before Teto and I reached the dungeon.

I nodded and told him and Beretta what Teto and I saw at ground zero: the torrent of undead, the bone titan, and the apparent destinations of the distinct contingents that had formed—Ischea among them.

"Anyway, I'm going to need a staff that can amplify purification spells if I want to deal with those undead, so that's why we came back here," I concluded.

The Great Elder hummed. "Undead gradually grow weaker once they're weaned off their original energy source, especially if they're active during the day. They'll return to dust in due time."

Undead couldn't restore their energy by eating or sleeping, so they usually borrowed their strength from something else. For instance, a lot of ghosts were bound to the location they had died in; they usually replenished their strength by drawing upon the restorative energy of the land, which allowed them to continuously curse people. But the bone titan had destroyed this particular population's native power source on its way into the world.

"It's highly likely that they will look for a new land to haunt. And the most likely candidate..."

"...is the Wasteland of Nothingness," the Great Elder concluded for me. "The mana here would allow them to survive for much longer."

Thus, it was almost certain that they would try to cross through Ischea. Everything was going exactly as Leriel had predicted, but I finally understood what was pushing the undead forward.

"Undead scatter miasma behind them. If they reach Ischea, the fields will die and the water will be tainted," the Great Elder said.

I nodded. "We have to kill them before that happens."

Just as we had thought, the whole conflict would be decided at the fortress at Ischea's innermost border.

"I need to start working on this new staff. Beretta, let's head to the leyline control room."

"Yes, Master."

"Teto is coming too!"

We let the Great Elder enjoy his break and headed to the shed where we stored the leyline managing device—a sizable magic-powered machine responsible for regulating the leylines' flow. It absorbed any excess mana and redistributed it to wherever needed, essentially serving as the cornerstone of the land's regeneration. On top of that, it could also store mana, just like a giant mana crystal.

"Beretta, how much mana do we have saved up right now?" I asked.

"Around 2,000,000 MP, Master."

"All righty, that should be more than enough. *Creation!*"

I used the mana surplus to make my new staff. Unlike Flying Jade, this one would be specialized in purification spells, which would work wonders against the undead. I watched as the mana drained from the leyline managing device, the magic stone acting as its core turning from green to purple. The mana particles all gathered together, and in the next instant, my new staff appeared.

"Let me introduce you to my newest creation: the Kakkhara of Reincarnation."

"Whoa, it's so pretty!" Teto squealed.

Countless gold rings hung from the head of the staff, jingling whenever I swung it. Taking a look at the leyline managing device, it seemed that I had spent around 1,500,000 MP. It might have seemed like a lot, but it was much more cost-efficient than the last time I'd magicked up a weapon from thin air—the Sword of Dawn I had made for Arsus.

My new staff amplified Light and Holy Magic fifteenfold and had an advantage against all undead enemies. But on the flip side, it couldn't be used to cast any other type of spell. It might have seemed like a very niche tool, especially compared to my trusty Flying Jade, but I could always use both staves at the same time if the occasion called for it.

I was, however, still a bit worried.

"What if it's not enough to kill all of the undead?" I muttered.

The miasma surrounding the undead was much thicker than the miasma sludge I had to purify in the mine after defeating the Mother. While I did have more mana than before, and the undead would be getting progressively weaker, I still wasn't sure I could clear up all that miasma *and* defeat that bone titan all at once.

"It's okay, Lady Witch! Teto will keep on hitting at the monsters until you can finish them off!" Teto offered.

"I mean, with you and the others' help, we might be able to do *something*, but..."

I still had my doubts it'd be enough.

"For now, I believe you should get some rest, Master," Beretta said. "I would also suggest storing all of your mana into mana crystals until the final battle."

"You're right; with several days' worth of mana, I might just be able to pull it off."

The mana crystals on the necklace I had given to Yuicia could store about 100,000 MP each. All I had to do was create a few dozen similar mana crystals and charge them. I had defeated the ogre and the water hydra several decades ago the same way, back when I still had very little mana at my disposal.

With our strategy for the decisive battle locked in, we returned to the mansion. The Great Elder was still where we left him, basking in the sun.

"Back already, Lady Witch?" he asked.

"Yeah. I just whipped this baby up custom," I said, showing off my new Kakkhara of Reincarnation to him.

"Oh, what an impressive staff! A work worthy to stand among the divine artifacts," the Great Elder commented, impressed.

I proceeded to tell him about the staff's properties and my plans for the final battle.

"I see." He nodded. "Your attendant is right; you should save your mana for the final battle. I shall let you ride on my back when the time comes to head to battle."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I offered, didn't I?" he said with a chuckle. "Besides, I don't often see my children fight. I relish the chance to witness their combat prowess." A smile appeared on his face as he thought of Shael, Yahad, and the others doing their best to repel the monsters at the fortress.

Beretta forced us to take the next day off to regain our strength. After that, I started creating and filling mana crystals en masse as we waited for the undead to reach the fortress.

CHAPTER 25

MEANWHILE, UNBEKNOWNST TO THE WITCH, A MYSTERIOUS CONNECTION FORMED

A month had passed since the beginning of the stampede. The first wave of monsters rampaged across countries, leaving a trail of destruction in every village and town they encountered. As time wore on, however, the horde weakened. Their numbers thinned as they covered more ground, many of them intercepted and killed by the soldiers and adventurers stationed at national borders.

At the same time, the second wave began, with undead pouring out of the now-fallen dungeon and spreading out in every direction, scattering noxious miasma as they went and terrifying the monsters from the first wave. Some of them opted to hide in the Demon Dens and wait out the undead army, while others didn't have that luxury and had no choice but to continuously run away. They ran through mountains and ravines, challenging risky terrain that the undead didn't dare traverse, and even managed to pierce through certain countries' defensive lines.

As one can imagine, these monsters were absolutely ravenous after such a wild chase—for food *and* mana. Spurred on by their survival instinct, they set upon village after village in the region. As it turned out, Gash—also known as the Town of Soap—a small town in a corner of Ischea, was about to face one of those monster attacks.

“Monsters incoming! Everyone, hurry and take refuge inside the inner walls!”

“There are too many of them! Fall back!”

After being warned by a group of hunters of the incoming monster threat, the town's vigilante corps rang the alarm and urged everyone to hide. The vigilante corps and hunters planned on fighting the horde from the outer walls, but the monsters forced their way in, pushing the group back to the keep, fighting tooth and nail to protect the town despite the limited space they had to work with.

“Great-grandma, are you all right?” a young boy asked an elderly woman.

The civilians had all been made to take refuge inside the town's sturdiest granary.

"I'm fine, little one. And you shouldn't worry either: these walls were built by a very powerful mage; no monster since has toppled them. They won't fall so easily."

The old woman had moved to the village back when it was still in the process of being reclaimed; she had complete faith in these walls. They hadn't developed a single crack even after sixty years.

Meanwhile, the monsters had reached the inner walls, ready to tear them down as handily as the first set.

"We'll protect the others!" one of the vigilante corps said. "We won't let these monsters do as they please!"

"Shoot them from above! Be careful not to fall!"

The walls weren't budging, so the vigilante corps and soldiers had time to prepare their counterattack, attacking the monsters from above with their polearms. Slowly but surely, they managed to thin the enemy's numbers. But after half a day of fighting, they were wearing out and their weapons were starting to break. Not only that, but it was only a matter of time before the fallen monsters heaped against the wall would make for a suitable ramp.

The vigilante corps and hunters were starting to lose hope when, all of a sudden, the monsters' right flank began to crumble.

"Everyone! Wipe them out and protect the village!"

"Yes!"

The vigilante corps and the hunters could only watch in shock and amazement as a group of adventurers arrived from outside the village and started laying waste to the monsters. They were particularly surprised to see a young girl fighting among them. She was clad in lightweight armor and brandishing a hand axe, which glimmered with a bluish-white radiance every time she swung it.



"Aaah, there are too many of them!" she exclaimed after cleaving through a few monsters' heads. "O mighty Earth, I bestow my mana upon thee; use it to pierce through my foes. *Earth Needle!*"

Countless thorns sprouted from the ground, impaling her targets. It didn't take the adventurers long to mop up after that.

"Thank you so much, esteemed adventurers," the town mayor said as he came to greet the adventurers. "How could we ever repay you for what you did for our town?"

"You don't need to pay us anything, don't worry!" the girl assured, a grin on her face. "We've been hired to protect the villages along the border from the stampede." She showed the mayor the letter and contract she had received when they took on the mission.

"Um... If I may, are you a dwarf?" the mayor asked, his curiosity getting the best of him.

The girl nodded. "Yes! I'm Arim, a C-rank adventurer and the leader of this party!"

The mayor couldn't help but be both surprised and impressed to discover that such a small girl was a full-fledged adventurer. When he asked her what brought her all the way to Ischea, Arim explained that she and the rest of her party originated from Lawbyle, and had been visiting Gald after hearing rumors about some very strong demons who occasionally delivered goods to the town of Vil. As adventurers, they naturally wanted to test their skills against those demons. That's when news of Leriel's divine message reached them, and they volunteered to deliver emergency supplies to Ischea. There, they accepted a mission to patrol the villages near the border and make sure they were safe.

"I see. So that's how it is," the mayor said with a nod.

After their conversation was over, the adventurers were met with a barrage of questions from the villagers.

"You're so young, yet you're already C-rank? You must be hella strong!" one of them told Arim, who chuckled awkwardly.

"I might not look like it, but I'm already an adult," she confessed.

"What's that bluish-white light that comes from your axe every time you kill a

monster? Is your weapon magical?" another villager asked.

"The people from my hometown forged it for me as a farewell gift," she explained.

The villagers had invited Arim and her companions to have dinner with them and, with the alcohol loosening her tongue, the dwarf girl found herself telling them about her life. When she was small, she had been kidnapped by a group of bandits who wanted to sell her and the other children from her town as slaves. But then the two adventurers who had been staying in her town came to save them and defeated all of the bandits. Arim decided in that moment that she, too, wanted to become an adventurer. Her two heroes agreed to help her train, but only for six months before resuming their travels. Arim kept on practicing what they had taught them even after they left, and when she was old enough to live on her own, she moved to a bigger town and registered as an adventurer.

"I still visited my hometown a lot, though, bringing my friends and family all sorts of treasures from my travels," she explained.

Her main goal was to restore her hometown's former glory, so she was spending most of her time looking for interesting trinkets the other dwarves could use for their crafts.

"And when I left for good after becoming C-rank, they gave me this mythril hand axe," she concluded, gazing softly at her weapon.

Upon learning that Arim's axe was made of mythril—one of the world's rarest magic metals—the villagers let out a collective "whoa."

"Can I touch it?" one of them asked the girl.

"Ah, no, I'm sorry. This hand axe has a bit of a, uh, complex history, let's say."

She explained to the villagers that her hand axe had been crafted from a cursed sword. The blacksmith who had made the sword had been so obsessed with the idea of becoming the most powerful person in the world that he had mixed his own blood into the material.

"That cursed sword drained the mana of the person who wielded it, which temporarily made them stronger. But when they ran out of mana, the sword attacked their life energy and wouldn't stop absorbing it until all that was left of them was skin and bones," Arim explained.

This elicited a horrified cry from the villagers.

Arim delighted in the crowd's reaction to her spooky tale, a satisfied grin playing on her lips as she took a sip of her drink. "There's nothing to worry about, though. Those adventurers who saved me when I got kidnapped actually purified the sword so it wouldn't claim any more victims, which caused it to snap in half. And years later, the blacksmiths who crafted my hand axe decided to meld the sword with mythril to make my new weapon even more special."

Arim's stories were so interesting that they allowed the villagers to relax and take their minds off the monster attack their town just faced. By the end of the evening, as everyone was finishing up their food, Arim sneaked alone to examine the town's inner wall.

"Miss Arim, are you curious about that wall?" the mayor asked the dwarven girl.

"Yeah. From what the villagers told us, it's been around for a while. Is that right?" she asked, looking up at the mud wall.

The mayor nodded. "It is said to have been built by a powerful mage to protect our village from outside threats. Despite being made out of mud, it has never crumbled since."

"I also happen to be an Earth Magic user, but this feels... different. It doesn't feel like regular Earth Magic," Arim said.

"What do you mean by that?"

The dwarf girl put a hand on the wall and tried to follow its mana signature. It seemed to lead to the woods beside the town.

"I think this wall is so strong because the person who conjured it poured a large quantity of their own mana into it. But it should've run out a long time ago; the wall should've crumbled by now."

The mayor tilted his head to one side in confusion. "So do you think there are still traces of that mysterious mage's mana in the wall?"

"No. The wall's mana is being replenished by spirits," Arim replied.

"Spirits?!" the mayor gasped.

"There are earth and grass spirits in the forest," the girl continued. "It looks like they are redirecting their mana to the wall to keep it standing. It's no mark against you that you didn't notice; we dwarves have a nose for this sort of thing."

No one in town knew it, but these spirits had actually been born when Chise and Teto had grown soap plants to help out the town decades ago... although it had been a complete accident. The little spirits had slowly grown stronger after they'd been released into the forest, and they used some of their own mana to sustain the wall their "parent" had built. Of course, neither Arim nor the mayor knew all of this, but he was still moved to learn that spirits had been protecting his village all along.

"Thank you so much for telling me all of this," he said. "I'll make sure to thank the forest spirits for their protection during our next festival."

"We make offerings to the fire spirits in my hometown. I can teach you how to thank them properly!" Arim offered.

After their conversation, the two of them returned to the impromptu party, where the mayor told the other villagers about the spirits, which sparked great excitement among the crowd. Meanwhile, the earth and grass spirits were observing the villagers from the forest, delighted to see them having such a good time.

All of them knew Chise and Teto, yet none of them were aware of the others' connection to the witch and her guardian. Fate alone had conspired to bring them all together now.

When the festivities were over, Arim went to investigate the mountain the monsters had appeared from and found the path they had taken to the village. To ensure a similar situation wouldn't occur again, she installed a barrier stone she had received from the church that would drive away any monster that came near it. It was much more efficient than regular monster repellent, meaning that the village would be safe from monster attacks for a few months, goddesses willing.

With their job done, Arim and her comrades prepared to move on to the next village. Before they left, though, the villagers insisted on giving them some locally produced soap, as well as a wooden carving of the side profile of a woman called the "Goddess of the Pioneer Village"—in other words, Chise. In the sixty-odd years that had passed

since Chise helped rebuild the town, the townsfolk had started to forget what she looked like; the more they tried to reproduce her face, the further it got from her real appearance.

"This 'goddess' looks a bit like Chise, doesn't she?" Arim mused.

Despite the discrepancies, Arim had managed to see the resemblance—although she hadn't known the portrait was supposed to be of Chise in the first place. It had been many years since she had last seen her saviors, but one thing was for sure: she'd never forget what they had looked like.

CHAPTER 26

DEFENDING THE FORTRESS

The Fortress's Side

Upon learning about the undead horde from Arsus, Vaise—the now-retired margrave—used his magic communication device to inform the other nations of the imminent threat. The soldiers and adventurers held the line against the final waves of the stampede for another week, and then the attacks simply stopped. An eerie silence surrounded the fortress, but the fragile tranquility would not hold for long.

"This is the decisive battle, everyone! To retreat would bring untold suffering upon our people! Now don't get me wrong; I'm not asking you to recklessly throw your lives away. If one of us falls, it'll only make things harder for the others. Understood? Do *not* die! It's an order!" Vaise declared to rouse the troops, fully intending to participate in the battle.

Meanwhile, his wife Selene was preparing a makeshift infirmary in a deeper corner of the fortress.

The soldiers and adventurers had made the best of the past few days of respite, both thanks to the Great Elder leaving his monster-repellent scent all over the grounds, as well as to him, Chise, and Teto culling the monsters on their way to the dungeon. But while the stampede itself was technically over, the undead army was nearly upon them.

"Home... Home... We're going... home."

The undead wouldn't be stopped by the Great Elder's scent; they had one goal—to reach the Wasteland of Nothingness to replenish their mana. Nothing could bar their advance. The army was composed for the most part of black skeletons, their empty eye sockets glowing with a bright red light as they marched. A heap of bones the size of a hill brought up the rear, and fear geists flew about at the army's flanks.

Many adventurers and soldiers paled with concern at the sight of the horde, but they quickly pulled themselves together and stoked their hunger for a fray.

“Spirits!” Raphilia yelled, stirring her magic to wakefulness; her bow filled with countless arrows of wind. Her opening volley felled a detachment of undead in one shot, each arrow finding its mark dead-on in a magic stone.

Farther away, Yahad pulverized skeleton after skeleton with his great lance.

“Take this! *Downforce!*” Meanwhile, Shael loosed wind spells at the horde from the sky, slowing their movement to buy the soldiers a temporary reprieve.

“Good grief; I shouldn’t be doing this in my old age,” Arsus grumbled as he slashed through a group of undead with his sacred sword. The Sword of Dawn possessed the Light Blade Generation skill, making it especially efficient against undead; the second the sword grazed against their bodies, the skeletons lost all of their strength and crumbled to the floor in a heap.

His disciple, Tony, quickly joined him to guard his rear. “Well, you *did* say you wanted to go home quickly, didn’t you, master?”

Vaise and his knights were holding their own as well; their formation held fast, not a single skeleton breaching their defenses. Meanwhile, the mages ran their mana reserves dry hammering the skeletons’ back lines and harrying the fear geists with artillery spells.

The skeletons wouldn’t relent, though. Their hunger for a place to replenish their mana urged them forward.

All of a sudden a group of starving monsters joined the battle, charging the skeletons’ momentarily undefended flank in a desperate ploy for magic stones. In a cruel twist, they ended up being the ones sucked dry—the undead plainly outclassed them.

“Careful! They’re going to *Drain* us!” one of the knights warned the rest of the group.

“Shit! Everyone who couldn’t dodge the attack, fall back and go get a potion to heal up and top off!”

“The same goes for anyone who got wounded! You’d better not die on us!”

After fighting for so long, the demons were quickly running out of mana. Thankfully, they had come prepared.

"Phew! The mana potions the witch prepared for us are making it more bearable, but the lack of ambient mana is really starting to take a toll on me," Shael said, chugging one mana potion after another.

"We have to push through! We need to hold the fort until the Great Elder and Lady Witch arrive!" Yahad reminded her.

It was still daytime, meaning that the undead were at their weakest. They had to soldier on and kill as many of them as possible before night fell and the undead gained strength. By noon, they had already defeated over half of the initial horde. This would be cause for celebration... if it wasn't for the bone titan constantly birthing new skeletons. Every time one of the undead fell, the miasma that emanated from its body reinforced the others. Despite the adventurers and the soldiers' efforts, that nightmare was far from over.

The miasma had caused some of the black skeletons to evolve, turning into powerful skeleton knights and wizards. The soldiers and adventurers quickly adapted to the situation, though, sending their strongest members to take care of the newly evolved undead.

Meanwhile, the people who couldn't fight healed the wounded in the infirmary, while the refugees prepared food so the soldiers could take turns getting something in their stomachs before going back to battle.

At this point, the soldiers and adventurers had been fighting for most of the day, and they were on the brink of exhaustion. The undead, on the other hand, didn't know fear or fatigue; they surged forward upon the fortress at all hours. And to top it all off, the approach of dusk only made things worse.

"Uuuoooh!"

Rumbling roars echoed across the plain as the skeletons began to gain momentum, their strength restored now that the sun had set.

"Tch! Fighting them at night is going to be a huge pain!" Arsus said between gritted teeth, struggling to fend off the undead onslaught.

The horn signaling it was time to fall back sounded all across the field.

"Retreat to the fortress! Stay inside until dawn!"

The soldiers and adventurers scrambled to get back to the fortress before night fell, while Arsus and the rest of his party stayed behind to prevent the undead from gaining ground.

“We’ll be your rear guard! You guys hurry and get to safety!” he yelled.

But then the ground started shaking, and countless silhouettes sprang from the earth right between Arsus and the skeletons.

“Goooh!”

“Wh—What the hell are those things?!” Arsus asked, ready to slash at them.

“Are those—Lady Guardian’s golems?!” Yahad exclaimed. “Wait! Don’t attack them! They’re on our side!”

“Goh, goh!” The clay golems turned towards Arsus and his comrades and started pointing at the fortress.

“Are they telling us to fall back?” Arsus said and the golems nodded. “Okay, will do! Thanks!”

“I have no idea what’s going on, but let’s go!”

The clay golems formed a wall in front of the fortress. The undead tried to force their way through them, only to sink into the golems’ bodies, who used their mastery of Earth Magic to pull out the skeletons’ magic stones, reducing them to piles of bones. Others simply resolved to smash the skeletons to bits with their fists before pilfering their magic stones. Every time one of the golems retrieved a magic stone, they consumed it to increase their own strength. The bear golems had been actively but surreptitiously playing their part in the battle all through the day, hiding in the ground and manipulating the earth from below to slow the undead and eating the magic stones of the fallen skeletons to finish them for good. Their newfound strength would allow them to fight the undead for the rest of the night.

Despite their best efforts, though, a few skeletons managed to slip through the cracks and set to hammering at the fortress’s walls. This naturally proved unfruitful, as the walls were made to withstand much stronger attacks. Seeing that they weren’t making any progress, the skeletons changed their strategy and started using each other as stepping stones to climb over the ramparts.

“We gotta set them on fire! Someone, bring me oil!”

“Madam Seleneriel prepared this holy water earlier; throw it at them! Do not, under any circumstances, let them cross over!”

“Throw your spears at them! Don’t let your guard down!”

The soldiers and adventurers made spears and spells rain from the top of the fortress, doing everything they could to prevent the undead from climbing over the walls. If the horde made it through, they were doomed; the fifty thousand refugees they had saved and the people of Ischea would all lose their lives.

But when the sun had completely set, a wave of despair struck the defenders of the fortress.

The bone titan that had been sitting at the rear of the undead army the entire day stood up. It slowly started marching towards the fortress, its hollow orbits like twin windows onto hell itself, miasma rolling off its body like curtains of rain. It towered over the fortress walls, to the point where it could set its hand on the ramparts.

“Raphilia, Tony, I’m going to do *it*. You two take care of the rest.”

The elven girl seemed to hesitate for a bit before nodding. “Fine. Leave it to us.”

“Master...” Tony breathed, his voice wavering.

Arsus made his way to the top of the ramparts, raised his sword above his head, and focused all of his mana into the blade, which started glowing, illuminating the starless night sky.

“Haaa! *Resplendent Blade!*” Arsus chanted.

The mana stored in the sacred sword was instantly unleashed, creating an immense blade of light. The blade of light slashed through the bone titan, lopping off the titan’s right arm and leaving a mighty fissure in the ground behind it.

“How about that?” Arsus challenged, panting heavily.

This was Arsus’s trump card; as he fought, he would store his mana surplus into his Sword of Dawn. He could then release the mana to unleash a single attack that far

outstripped his normal strikes. In the past, this attack had allowed him to fell giant monsters in a single stroke, shoot down flying enemies, and even kill hordes of foes all at once. It was the only reason he'd stayed active as an A-rank adventurer after so many years.

The bone titan's whole body listed to the side in an attempt to keep its balance. However...

"Damn it... You've got to be kidding me."

Its magic stone was still intact. Most of the bones that had fallen to the ground clumped back together and formed a new arm. While Arsus's attack had cost the bone titan some height, its body was mostly unharmed, and it resumed its march towards the fortress.

"Mr. Arsus! Can you do the same attack one more time?" Yahad asked.

Arsus shook his head, defeated. "Nope. You don't try to follow up on a finisher like that."

While sacred swords were indestructible, Arsus had forced it beyond its limits. In turn the sword's powers had temporarily disappeared, reducing it to naught but a dull blade. The sword's blessing—reinforcing the wielder's physical abilities—had ceased as well, and a wave of exhaustion washed over Arsus.

"Dammit! I swore to myself that I wouldn't be humiliated like this again, and yet... I'm sorry, everyone!" he exclaimed, memories of the time a monster broke his sword in half during a stampede flooding back and filling him with frustration. He could only watch, powerless, as the bone titan drew nearer, the mages' spells nearly pointless against a creature of its scale.

As the fortress drew into range, the bone titan swung its arm, hurling fragments of itself into the ramparts like a volley of ballista fire. As soon as the bones reached the walls, they turned into skeletons, forcing the defenders to focus their efforts on them.

In the midst of the pandemonium, Arsus looked up, only to see a large silhouette in the night sky.

"That was so cool, I wanna try it too!" a voice said, before a much smaller figure fell from the open air, holding a sword that shone with the same yellowish gleam as

Arsus's had.

The silhouette plummeted right onto the bone titan before slashing at it with its sword, eliciting an earsplitting cry from the titan.

The reinforcements had finally arrived.

CHAPTER 27

PURIFYING THE BONE TITAN

The Witch's Side

“Looks like we made it just in time.”

I had received news of the undead army having reached the fortress earlier in the day. Unfortunately, I had just finished filling up a mana crystal, meaning that I had to wait to recharge a bit before charging into battle. Just as night was about to fall, I set out on the Great Elder’s back, hoping to reach the fortress before the monsters had regained too much strength.

Looking down, I saw a huge blade of light erupt from the ramparts and slash right through the bone titan’s body. It was too dark for me to see anything else, but I could tell that we had picked the right moment.

“Whoa, so cool! Can Teto do the same thing?” I heard Teto mutter next to me.

She pulled out her magic sword and swung it a few times as if to test something.

“Teto? What are you doing?”

“That was so cool, I wanna try it too!”

“Huh? Teto?!”

Right as we passed over the fortress, Teto jumped from the Great Elder’s back, holding her sword above her head.



"Great Elder! Teto just jumped off!" I exclaimed in a panic.

"Calm down, Lady Witch," he told me in an amused tone. "Lady Guardian won't die from this."

I watched anxiously as Teto plummeted towards the bone titan, swinging her sword with all her might. The mana concentrated in her sword took the form of another blade of light, slashing through the titan's skull and all the way down its left arm. Dust billowed as Teto landed, having dealt considerable damage to its hulking frame.

"Did she use... *Dismantling*? The Earth Magic spell?" I asked.

"Indeed. Lady Guardian is very simpleminded, yet terribly powerful."

Dismantling allowed the caster to break their target into tiny pieces. That spell usually didn't work against humans and monsters, as they could easily use mana to resist its effects; it was mostly used to break rocks, hardened ground, or organic matter. This was actually what allowed Teto to produce high-quality soil; she removed all of the impurities from the dirt inside her body until she was left with nutrient-rich dirt. But after seeing her attack just now, it seemed that as long as she used enough mana, she could completely bypass an enemy's defenses. It was impressive... and somewhat terrifying.

"Well, Lady Guardian has gotten the bone titan's attention, but what are *you* going to do?" the Great Elder asked me.

"It seems that Teto's *Dismantling* doesn't work on ethereal bodies, so I'm going to deal with the fear geists first and foremost."

I hopped from the Great Elder's back, slapped on a couple of barriers, and used a flight spell to stop my body in midair. I held on to my new Kakkhara of Reincarnation with both hands, and right as the fear geists drew closer, swung it a few times, eliciting a calming sound from the gold rings on either side of the head.

"*Purification!*" I chanted. I had decided to use 50,000 MP—again, the same amount it had cost me to purify the fear geist in the wasteland, but *this* time I had a special staff that amplified Light and Holy Magic fifteenfold; the fear geists didn't even have time to cry out before a wave of purifying magic swallowed them up. To top it all off, the aftermath of the spell reached the fortress's outer ramparts, causing all of the black skeletons that had crawled up there to crumble in a heap of bones.

"This new staff's effects go beyond even what I expected... I'm so glad I made it," I muttered.

If I had rashly plunged into battle without gathering information about the monsters, if I didn't have the support of Teto and the Great Elder, and if I hadn't crafted this new staff... things could have ended badly.

"Haaa—take this!" I heard Teto roar as she slashed at the bone titan to keep its attention. It was much bigger than her, but she managed to hold her ground, a yellowish light arcing through the night sky every time she swung her sword, effectively severing one of the creature's arms. It must've started seeing Teto as a threat, as it turned around and focused its attention on her.

"I'm not about to be outdone by you two, Lady Witch, Lady Guardian. I have a duty to my children. Come, horror! Witness the valor of a *true* immortal!" the Great Elder declared right as the bone titan began to wind up to attack Teto. He plunged towards his target, pinning its remaining arm.

The bone titan purposefully crumbled part of its body to escape the Great Elder's grip before reconstructing its arm and swinging it at the old dragon. Yet the Great Elder gracefully soared into the sky, effortlessly evading the assault.

"Not bad, Great Elder. But I'm not done yet!" I said cheekily, using my staff to purify the miasma around us. The ghosts and remaining fear geists disappeared, their souls scattering into the night sky in a kaleidoscopic shower of mana particles.

"Now we just have to finish off the titan and those skeletons," the Great Elder said, joining me in sizing up the remnants of the undead horde.

Teto's constant *Dismantling*, coupled with the Great Elder's plunging attack and the spells the fortress's mages had rained down on the bone titan, had forced it to a halt. In a last-ditch effort, it assimilated most of the remaining skeletons into its body before swatting repeatedly at Teto, who dodged its every blow. But then it spotted me preparing to cast *Purification* and hurled a clump of bones in my direction.

"I won't let you get in Lady Witch's way!" Teto exclaimed at the same time as the Great Elder said, "Don't think I will let you get past me and hurt Lady Witch!"

Teto quickly built a mud wall to gain some height before soaring high in the sky and cutting off the bone titan's remaining arm, while the Great Elder swung his tail to block

the fragments, sending them crashing into the ground.

"It's over! *Purification!*" I threw all of my mana crystals into the sky and used the 5,000,000 MP I had stored these past few days to unleash one last attack. The purifying wave pierced through the sky before turning into a pillar of light, wrapping itself around the bone titan's frame and washing over all of the remaining black skeletons.

I'd never have been capable of such a feat if I hadn't spent months training my Mana Control to teleport the floating island in the wasteland well over a decade ago. The black skeletons and the bone titan all crumbled to dust, and I saw their souls ascending to the sky through the pillar of light. I kept the spell active for a little longer until I managed to spot a ginormous magic stone among the debris.

"This was the bone titan's magic core, huh?" I mused, going to inspect it with the Great Elder.

It was so big that it could have belonged to an S-rank monster. It made me wonder if the bone titan's magic stone hadn't fused with the dungeon's core before it collapsed.

It's taller than me, I thought, amused as I shoved it into my magic bag.

"Lady Wiiitch!" Teto exclaimed, running through the piles of bones and throwing her arms around me.

"T-Teto?!" I squeaked in surprise.

"Heh heh heh, Lady Witch, what did you think of Teto's sparkly sword? Teto thought the attack the people at the fortress did was so cool she had to try it too! Ah, but Teto's really tired now."

"It was great, Teto. You looked very cool out there," I said. I put a hand on her shoulder and chanted, "*Charge!*"



Using *Dismantling* had taken a bit of a toll on her MP, but nothing a quick *Charge* couldn't fix. Now that I thought about it, she probably didn't even *need* to use magic in the first place; she could have just slashed at the bone titan with her sword as she usually did. But she looked proud of herself, and that was what mattered.

The Great Elder watched us, an amused smile playing on his snout, and before long people came running out of the fortress, lanterns in hand.

"Mom! Big sis Teto!" Selene cried out in joy, her husband in tow.

Shael was here too, a familiar-looking elven girl walking beside her.

"Good work out there, Shael. And hi, Raphilia. Long time no see," I greeted them.

Raphilia had barely changed since the last time I saw her. Somehow, that made me feel a bit reassured. Behind her, an old swordsman was leaning on a young man; I couldn't help feeling confused when he shot me a smile. Did I know him? Thankfully, the Great Elder answered that question for me.

"Arsus," he greeted the swordsman. "You look exhausted. The aftermath of that blade of light, I presume?"

"Sorry for looking so disheveled in front of you, Mighty Great Elder," Arsus said. "I'm a little bit fatigued, as you can tell." He paused and turned back towards Teto and me. "Hi, girls. It's been a while."

It'd taken me a while, but as soon as I saw his awkward smile and the sword hanging from his hip, I recognized him.

"It really has," I said. "That blade of light was your doing?"

"Sure was. I spent decades working on this technique, but Teto managed to copy it with her first attempt. *Sheesh.*" He shook his head in exasperation, but I could tell he wasn't actually offended. "Still, you two haven't changed a hair. Mine, on the other hand..." he trailed off, running a hand through his grayish-white hair.

I hadn't expected to see him and Raphilia again. I couldn't help but feel slightly nostalgic. I quickly snapped out of it, though; there were still things left for me to do.

"Well, now that the biggest threat has been taken care of, I should probably head home

before I scare off more people," the Great Elder declared.

"Thank you for your help today, Great Elder!" I said.

"Thank you!" Teto chirped.

He spread his wings and soared into the sky, though not without shooting one last look at the soldiers and adventurers who had lowered their heads to show their thanks to him. And then he was off.

A comfortable silence filled the air for a little bit before Teto broke it by asking me what I planned to do next.

"Should we head into the fortress for the time being?" Selene offered.

"Sounds good. We have a lot to talk about," I said.

Besides, Shael and the others were still here, and we couldn't leave without them.

"This isn't over yet," I muttered.

We had defeated the bone titan, but there was still a lot for us to do. I could vaguely detect the scent of miasma coming from the west of the continent, which reminded me that the entire region had been claimed by monsters; this could have terrible repercussions on the entire continent. Would nature take over and cover the former dungeon city in lush greenery? Or would the monsters prevent plants from growing, turning the region into a wide wasteland? Would nature manage to self-purify and cleanse all of the miasma, or would it bring forth even more dangerous monsters like the bone titan?

With those thoughts in mind, I followed Selene and the others into the fortress.

CHAPTER 28

THE FUTURE RETURN OF THE GODDESS OF THE UNDERWORLD AND THE GROWTH OF CHISE'S DISCIPLE

Teto and I were led to a room in the fortress, where we settled onto the bed for a much-needed night's rest.

"It's been a while since we got to take it easy, Lady Witch!" Teto chirped.

"We've been running around a lot, huh?"

First I was busy making emergency supply kits, and then we went to rescue refugees and cull monsters before going to survey the ruins of the dungeon city... To cap it all off, we had to face and purify the bone titan. It felt like I hadn't had a moment to catch my breath throughout the entire past month.

But for now, we had dealt with the biggest threat and we could relax for the night. As soon as that thought crossed my mind, I suddenly felt a wave of sleepiness wash over me.

"We're going to be busy again tomorrow," I mumbled drowsily.

"Shhh. It's okay, Lady Witch. For now, let's get some rest."

Minutes later, the two of us were asleep.

When I came to my senses, I found myself next to Teto in the familiar black space of the dream oracles, with the goddesses before us. Lariel, the lively Goddess of the Sun, was grinning cheerfully at us, while Luriel, the Goddess of the Seas, had a small, gentle smile on her lips. Beside her, a green-haired young girl I had never seen before gazed at us with starry-eyed wonder, and Liriel, the Goddess of the Earth as well as my benefactor, seemed moved almost to the point of tears.

"Nice to meet you, big sis Liri's prophet," said the young girl—who looked a little bit

older than me, but not by much. “I’m Liriel, the Goddess of the Skies. Thank you so much for helping me sort out this whole situation.”

Beside her, Liriel took a step forward and came to stand in front of me. “Thank you, Chise. Thank you so much,” her voice trembled with emotion.

“For purifying that bone titan?” I asked. “I didn’t do it alone; Teto and the Great Elder helped too, not to mention the soldiers, the adventurers, and the demons.”

“We all did our best!” Teto chirped.

But Liriel calmly shook her head. “I didn’t mean the bone titan, no. Well, not exactly; thanks to you purifying all of those undead, their souls returned to the wheel of life. And with every soul that returns to the cycle, Loriel’s powers grow stronger.”

From what Liriel told me, Loriel—the Goddess of the Underworld—drew her powers from the number of souls in the wheel of life. However, the catastrophe of two thousand years ago had cast a significant chunk of the souls in circulation outside space and time, preventing their return to the wheel. This had not only weakened Loriel, but left her with a huge logjam of deaths to process thanks to mana drought-induced mass extinction. Overwhelmed and weakened, she fell into a long slumber. Thankfully, she could still automatically guide souls through the process of reincarnation, even asleep, but the situation was less than ideal. But our purifying the undead had helped get her feet back under her.

“Lo probably won’t wake up for a very long time still, but things are moving in the right direction,” Luriel said gently. “Thank you Chise, Teto.”

“From plugging the seepage point in the leylines in big sis Lari’s domain, to helping the people of the floating island for big sis Luri, we’re so grateful for everything you’ve done for us,” Liriel told me excitedly. “Now Loriel and I will be able to guide the lost souls and help them reincarnate.”

Seeing their reactions, I felt glad I had decided to help them this time too.

“And when Loriel wakes up, we’ll finally be able to turn our followers into angels and heroic spirits again after their deaths. It’ll make it sooo much easier for us to manage our domains!” Lariel chirped.

The goddesses used to delegate some of their work to the angels and heroic spirits in

their service, but most of them disappeared after the catastrophe. I did, however, have a sneaking suspicion that Lariel would foist *all* of her duties on the new spirits while she lazed around. And judging by the glare she shot her sister, it seemed that Liriel shared my concern.

Thinking back on the stampede, I couldn't help but feel a little conflicted; I was glad I was able to save the trapped souls, but I wished innocent people wouldn't have had to lose their lives in the process.

"Chise, Teto, we're really thankful," Liriel said, pulling me out of my thoughts. "Don't forget to take some time off now and then, though."

"Don't worry, my motto in life is to do everything I can to help others as long as it's within my capabilities and not harming my health," I replied.

"Yup!" Teto chirped. "When we go home, Teto and Lady Witch will get lots of rest!"

With those words, the dream oracle came to an end and Teto and I woke up.

The Borderlands of a Cluster of Small Countries in the West

While Chise and Teto were in the middle of a dream oracle, hundreds of adventurers, knights, and mages were fending off monsters at the border of the Yudam Kingdom, a small nation in the northwest of the continent.

"Kuro, we've arrived," a young woman said, bringing her broom to a stop above the battlefield.

"Meow!"

"All righty then, time to get started. *Ice Lance!*"

The young woman—none other than Yuicia, Chise's disciple—lightly swung her wand. In the blink of an eye, icy spears rained down on the monsters beneath her, killing a good chunk of them at once. Some managed to bypass the attack by making a mad dash for the fortress, but the adventurers swiftly dispatched them.

"Ha!"

“Meow, meow!”

Among the adventurers, a woman wearing a maid uniform and a tabby cat-sith were helping to fend off the monsters.

“Whoa, Miss Ai and Tora are doing great!” Yuicia remarked excitedly before noticing something. “Ah, would you look at that? I leveled up again.”

Having been tasked by the adventurer’s guild to safeguard the Yudam Kingdom’s border, Yuicia and Ai had successfully repelled several waves of monsters, using area spells to kill dozens in one go. This, in turn, had led to them leveling exceedingly fast.

“Have I come a little closer to my Master’s level?” Yuicia whispered.

From its spot on her shoulder, Kuro let out a low meow, as if to say, “You still have a long way to go, kid.”

But unbeknownst to them, the gap in levels between Chise and Yuicia was shrinking, slowly but surely. Yuicia had traveled and battled monsters left and right for the past few months, while Chise had spent most of her time relaxing in the wasteland. Of course, Yuicia still wasn’t anywhere close to catching up with Chise in terms of mana pool—especially since Chise still ate strange fruits every day—but she had grown tremendously since she left the wasteland. It would only take a little longer for her Slow Aging skill to level up to Unaging.

“Ah! What am I doing, getting lost in my thoughts?” Yuicia said, coming back to her senses. “I still need to retrieve the monsters’ bodies for meat, loot, and magic stones! I can’t leave anything behind!”

“Meow, meow!” Kuro said, as if to show its agreement.

Yuicia lowered her broom and started chucking all of the dead monsters into her magic bag. Looking around, she noticed other adventurers loading the bodies onto trolleys and taking them to the fortress where they would get butchered to feed the knights, mages, and refugees. Grumbling that dismantling the monsters would be a lot more annoying than killing them had been, Yuicia kept on cleaning up the aftermath of the battle.

CHAPTER 29

A GLIMPSE OF THE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST DEMONS

Still mulling over the dream oracle, I slowly got dressed before leaving the room with Teto to go assess the situation in the rest of the fortress. But as I was looking for Shael and the others, I stumbled across the refugee camp; it felt like I'd had a bucket of cold water upended on me.

"All of these people are refugees..." I breathed in shock. "Things aren't anywhere near over, are they?"

"They don't look well," Teto noted. "They must be hungry!"

As I strolled through the refugee camp, I could clearly see the mix of fear and exhaustion on their faces. I had witnessed similar scenes countless times during my adventurer days, only this time, it wasn't a few hundred people, but over fifty thousand.

I let out a long sigh. "I can't stand this. Is there nothing I can do to help?"

"Teto doesn't like this gloomy atmosphere either," she pouted.

Quickly analyzing the refugees' mana signatures, I could tell that their aura of death and despair was overwhelming.

"There's just not enough supplies for everyone..." I muttered.

The provisions were distributed to the soldiers and adventurers first, as they were the ones risking their lives to protect the nation, and the refugees only got the bare minimum to survive. This made me realize that, despite my having defeated the undead army in this part of the continent, things were far from over. I resumed my walk towards Shael and Yahad's tent, trying to come up with a solution to help the refugees when I heard a child screaming.

“Stop! Give me back my grandma’s bread!”

“No way! That grandma of yours is gonna die any day now, why should we waste food on her? We’ll have the bread!”

Looking for the origin of the commotion, I spotted a group of young men arguing with a little girl.

The people around them were frowning at the scene, but none of them lifted a finger to help her. I felt mana gathering in my fingers in anger; I couldn’t believe someone dared to steal food from a child.

“Give it back! It’s my grandma’s!” the girl argued, clinging to one of the men and trying desperately to take the bread back.

“Shut up!” he snapped, shaking off the child, who lost her balance.

I quickly used *Psychokinesis* to catch her before she hit the ground, but the force of the blow flipped her hood back, revealing short black hair and a pair of crooked horns, eliciting shocked gasps from the other refugees.

“You’re a *demon*?!?” the man who had stolen the girl’s bread spat. “I can’t believe you dared to touch me with those disgusting paws of yours! What if you put a curse on me? Huh?!”

“Look at her pitch-black hair! What are you all doing? Kick her out of here! Demons don’t belong with humans!”

The little girl let out a frightened cry at the sudden shift in the atmosphere, her gray eyes filling with fear.

I couldn’t stand back and watch anymore.

“What are you doing?” I asked, infusing just a hint of mana in my voice.

It was enough to catch the attention of everyone around.

“Huh? What the hell do you want?” one of the men asked me. “Are you that demon girl’s friend?”

"No, I just really don't like people who steal from others," I replied, shooting him a glare.

"If you don't knock it off, you're gonna get yelled at by the knights!" Teto added.

The young man clucked his tongue in annoyance when Teto reminded him that the knights regularly patrolled the area. "You've got disgusting black hair just like that demon kid, yet you're acting all high and mighty," he spat, leaving with the stolen bread so as not to draw the knights' attention.

"Don't listen to him, Lady Witch, your hair is very pretty! He doesn't know what he's talking about," Teto said to reassure me.

"I couldn't care less about that man's opinion of my appearance," I shrugged before crouching beside the little girl and holding out a hand to her. "Are you okay?" I asked softly.

The girl looked at me with wide eyes before quickly readjusting her hood and standing up. "I-I'm really sorry!" she exclaimed.

The crowd was still glaring at her; she was clearly uncomfortable.

"I'm going to take you to your grandmother, all right?" I offered. "We don't want you running into those people again."

"Teto and Lady Witch are super strong, so we'll protect you!" Teto assured.

The girl seemed to hesitate for a few seconds, but ended up nodding.

"It's, uh... It's our fault the others don't like us," the little girl awkwardly said as we walked her back to her tent. "We're the descendants of the devils who ruled the west. We even have the same hair color as them..." She gestured at her covered black hair.

Not only was discrimination against demons rampant in the northwest of the continent, but having black hair was considered a bad omen, as it was heavily associated with devil heritage. This explained the reaction from the other refugees.

"Thank you for coming with me," the girl said when we arrived near her tent.

"Don't mention it. More importantly..." I trailed off and quickly muttered "*Creation!*"

under my breath. I clapped my hands together, conjuring a fluffy loaf of French bread with bits of sweet potato, dried fruits, and walnuts mixed into it. It was much higher quality than the bread the man had stolen from her.

"Take this and share it with your grandmother, all right?" I said.

"It's very yummy, so I'm sure you'll like it!" Teto chirped.

The little girl's face lit up and she shot us an awkward grin, as if she wasn't used to smiling. "Thank you!" she exclaimed before dashing to her tent.

To my surprise, Shael was standing right there.

"Ah, Miss Angel!" the little girl chirped when she noticed her.

"Oh! Naia!" Shael said by way of greeting. "That's some yummy-looking bread you've got there. Did you get it from the soldiers?"

The little devil girl—Naia, apparently—shook her head and pointed at us. "Nope! The nice girls there gave it to me when mean humans stole mine!"

Shael looked in our direction and her eyes widened slightly. "Witch? And your guardian's here too. What are you doing here?" Shael asked, closing the distance between us.

"We were looking for you and the others," I replied.

"We wanted to know how you were doing!" Teto added.

Shael told the little girl to go back to her tent and took us to hers, which looked more like a yurt than a regular tent. Beretta must've packed it for her and the others. I also noticed that there were a bunch of other tents around the demons' yurt, forming a little tent village a little farther away from the main refugee camp.

"I didn't think you were watching when I was talking to Naia," she grumbled, clearly embarrassed. "Well, it's whatever. Make yourselves at home. Yahad has taken one of the griffins out to patrol the main road. Oh, and some of the adventurers we're on good terms with are going to come have dinner with us later."

"I see. So you know that little demon girl? How did you two meet?" I asked.

Shael seemed to hesitate for a bit before letting out a resigned sigh. “Her family settled near our tent. All of the people on this side of the camp are either demons or humans you and the Great Elder saved—people who were abandoned.”

“Abandoned?” I echoed.

The conversation was getting a bit difficult for Teto to follow, so she took out some food from her magic bag and started munching on it as she listened to Shael.

“Yeah. These people were left behind; they should’ve died. But you and the Great Elder saved them. The other humans refuse to accept that fact; they don’t want anything to do with them.”

This part of the refugee camp housed people who had been rejected by society—demons, people with black hair, and petty thieves, as well as humans who had been left behind when the others fled so they wouldn’t slow them down—the elderly, the sick, slaves, and orphans.

“The others wouldn’t even *feed* them,” Shael continued, a saddened look on her face. “I couldn’t let that fly. You and the Great Elder went out of your way to save these people, only for them to starve to death? No way. So Yahad, the others, and I decided to share our provisions and medicine with them, but it’s still not enough.”

“I see...”

I thought that killing the monsters and the undead would get things back to normal, but I couldn’t have been more wrong. Unless we helped these people back onto their feet, I couldn’t claim that we had “saved” them.

“Lady Witch, I don’t want that girl to get bullied again,” Teto said.

I sighed. “I can’t say I’m happy with such transparent bigotry, but there’s not a lot I can do.”

Godkin and dragonkin looked similar enough to humans and dragonmen that their existence was largely accepted. However, the little girl and her tribe were descendants of the devils who once tyrannized the region. Eradicating the deeply ingrained prejudices against them would prove incredibly difficult, if not outright impossible. One thing was for sure: it wouldn’t happen overnight. If those prejudices were to ever disappear, it’d take dozens or even hundreds of years, at the very least.

"Hey, Witch. Can't we have them move into the wasteland?" Shael asked me, a serious look on her face.

I took a moment to consider her suggestion. Technically, we had more than enough space to accommodate all the less fortunate refugees. However...

"We *could* take them in. But do you only want us to save the demons and the humans who were abandoned?" I asked.

"Well, yeah. The other refugees are the worst; they worship us, call us 'angels' and 'envoys of the dragons.' Yet they treat Naia and the others like trash! Why should we help them?!" Shael exclaimed, her cheeks puffed out in discontent.

I nodded softly. "I understand your feelings, and I agree with you for the most part; I can't stand people who dare to steal food from children either."

"I know, right?" Shael interjected.

"*But* if we do that, we'll be the ones discriminating against the other refugees and it won't fix the issue," I explained. "What I want is for everyone to be safe and happy."

"Lady Witch can tell that all of these people are suffering and she wants to help them," Teto supplied.

It was just as she said; I didn't want to only help the demons and the people who were left behind. I wanted to help *everyone*.

Shael tried to argue, but she stumbled on her words and vigorously scratched her head in frustration.

"Why do you want to help these people? They're complete strangers to you! I swear, you're too nice for your own good," she said, although there was no bite to her words. "So? What's your plan, then?"

"For now, I'm mostly going to focus on making food for the refugees with my Creation Magic until they settle down somewhere."

"Then Teto will build fields around the fortress so that the people can grow their own food!" Teto offered.

"Good idea, Teto. That'll help alleviate the tensions between the refugees too, as the troublemakers will have less time and energy to pick fights."

Our plan was so straightforward that Shael let out a sigh of exasperation. "Well, get a move on, then. People are dying here every day. We had to build burial grounds outside of the fortress."

Be it from starvation, overwork, illness, injury, or simply old age, there were constantly people dying among the refugees. But I knew that even with my best efforts I couldn't save everyone.

"I do plan on helping as many people as I can," I said, furrowing my brow. "But there are limits to what I can do, even with my Creation Magic. There *will* be people I won't be able to save."

Even the goddesses themselves couldn't save everyone, and they were the most powerful beings on this continent. Take Leriell, for instance: she had managed to warn the people of the catastrophe, but that had been the extent of her abilities.

"But rather than trying to help everyone ourselves, we should focus on the things we can do and trust that other people will contribute their efforts where we might fall short."

My plan wouldn't fix every problem overnight; in fact, I very much wanted to avoid rushing things along, so as not to create even more tension among the refugees. I believed a gradual approach would be best in the long run.

"I agree with you, Lady Witch!" Yahad said, storming into the tent, Arsus and Raphilia in tow.

"Yahad? Were you guys listening in on us?!" I asked, my jaw hitting the floor.

Due to the sense of security I felt from being in my friends' tent, I had unconsciously dropped my Mana Perception.

"I see you two are just as good-natured as before," Arsus said with an amused smile. "We'll gladly lend you a hand."

"Why didn't you ask us earlier?" Raphilia added. "We're A-rank, you know? We'll be much more helpful than amateurs."

I was glad to see my old friends were willing to help us. However, we couldn't just start doing things of our own accord; we needed to convince Selene and the Liebel margravate to cooperate with us.

CHAPTER 30

HELPING THE REFUGEES

"Mom... You're as quick to act as always when you've made up your mind about something, hm?" Selene said, an exasperated smile playing on her lips.

We were in a meeting room with Vaise—her husband and the head of the Liebel family—and I had just told them about our plan.

"Isn't that a good thing, though? Your adoptive mother is one of the most reliable people I know; it's heartening to know that she has a plan," Vaise said. "And besides, she's willing to deal with the most troublesome refugees of the bunch."

Thankfully, Selene and her husband quickly agreed to help us ensure that the refugees would get back on their feet.

"I'd like to start moving things along as soon as possible," Vaise continued. "The king has been discussing the situation with his counselors, and they concluded that Ischea could gradually welcome up to twenty thousand people."

From the daily reports of the nations in the northwest of the continent, it seemed that the dungeon city-state wasn't the only nation that got destroyed due to the stampede; the Kingdom of Krista and the Duchy of Droog had also met a similar fate. The Kingdom of Londell—the third nation that bordered the dungeon city—had lost half of its territory and its autonomy. The Mubad Empire had sent troops to assist in repelling the monsters, and I was convinced it was only a matter of time before they absorbed what remained of the kingdom. There were a few towns and villages that were left unscathed, even in the destroyed nations but their future seemed bleak: they would either become abandoned or be absorbed by a neighboring country.

This meant that the refugees didn't have anywhere to come back home to; they would need to be moved to new lands. However, each nation could only take in so many people. While we could ask the other countries for their help, it was highly likely that they, too, were grappling with their own refugee crises. After all, there must've been a lot more refugees than the ones the Great Elder and I saved.

"So we'll have to find new homes for the thirty thousand remaining people, huh? I can help by using my Creation Magic to feed them in the meantime," I offered.

"And Teto will ask the golems to clear out some land and build fields to grow crops in!"

This would provide jobs for the refugees and hopefully minimize conflicts.

"Then the demons from Chise's place and I can hunt monsters to provide meat for the refugees," Raphilia suggested.

While Teto, Raphilia, and I offered ways to feed the refugees, Arsus had an idea of his own. "I have connections at the adventurer's guild, and one of my former comrades is a priest. I'll try coordinating with them to see if we can distribute the refugees efficiently, perhaps sending some adults to work at the guild and check if any orphanages have room to take in some of the children."

One of Arsus's former party members had taken over Father Paulo's orphanage in Apanemis and expanded it. At first, the only lessons the children could take there were the ones I had introduced—potion mixing and papermaking—but nowadays, they could be trained in all manners of things, from woodworking to smithing or architecture.

Selene nodded. "Good idea. Then I'll ask the cardinal of the Church for advice as well."

Having both Selene—a saintess—and the head of the church in Apanemis write to the cardinal would definitely help things move along. However, there were still a lot of issues that needed to be addressed.

"We can't just randomly choose who to send where, though," I said. "We need to check their qualifications, if they have family, what kind of environment they are used to... It's going to be a whole ordeal."

We'd most likely need to divide them into groups, which would take even longer.

"Then I'll send for some civil officials to come join us as soon as possible," Vaise said. "We also need to find a way to treat the ill and the injured."

"Now that the stampede is mostly over, I can probably take care of that," Selene offered.

After that, they promptly started working on getting the refugees sorted into groups.

Meanwhile, I began using my magic to make more food.

“*Creation: wheat!*” I chanted, holding a hand over an empty jute bag.

Given the inefficient conversion ratio of Creation Magic, producing finished products would consume too much MP. Rather than creating bread, it was much more cost-efficient for me to create wheat flour or wheat and work on turning it into bread later.

“It’s a miracle... Is she a saintess?”

“Thank you so much for blessing us, saintess!”

“Black Saintess... She’s the Black Saintess!”

Apparently, there was a legend about a saintess who, like me, once miraculously created wheat to alleviate hunger. Seeing me do the same thing prompted them to dub me a “saintess.”

“Black Saintess,’ huh? That’s a nostalgic one,” I chuckled.

At first, the refugees hadn’t wanted anything to do with me due to my hair and eye color. But as soon as they saw me use my magic to create wheat, they showed me a lot more respect.

“Well, at the very least this should alleviate prejudices against black-haired people,” I muttered. I didn’t like being the center of attention, but if it was for the greater good, then so be it.

The refugees took the wheat to the fortress, where they used the magical millstone to grind it into flour that the women then turned into bread. I used my remaining mana to make more wheat and went to help them out.

As a side note, the refugees hadn’t seen me kill the bone titan; all they’d seen was a huge pillar of light appearing from the sky, purifying all of the undead at once. Therefore, they believed it was a miracle of the goddesses.

As a side, *side* note, I wasn’t the only one getting the “saintess” treatment; thanks to her healing the refugees, Selene had earned a similar moniker as well and came to be known as the “healing saintess” or the “green saintess”—although, in her case, she was the real deal. And because it was confusing having two saintesses around, the

refugees took to calling me “Lady Witch,” just like Teto did. At first, they called me the “Wheat Witch,” then the “Witch of Blessings,” until they settled on the “Witch of Creation.”

“Teto will do her best too and work as hard as Lady Witch!”

“Goooh!”

While I was busying myself making wheat, Teto headed to the nearest destroyed nation and reclaimed the land to build some fields. She put her hands to the ground and the earth started rumbling, swallowing all of the undergrowth and creating furrows to divide the fields. The clay golems took out the seeds inside their bodies and planted them so that the refugees wouldn’t need to find seeds themselves. All they had to do was water and tend to the crops on a regular basis, which, thanks to Teto’s mana traces in the fields, were growing much faster than normal. Some of the fastest-growing vegetables only took one month to be ready for harvest. This ensured that the refugees had a modest yet steady supply of fresh produce.

Just as promised, Raphilia, Shael, and Yahad regularly patrolled around the camp, killing monsters both as a security measure and as a quick and dirty source of protein for the refugees.

As time passed, we began receiving updates from other countries.

“I’ve just been told that our neighbors have successfully contained the monsters as well. It’s unfortunate that part of the region has turned into a Demon Den, but it’s reassuring to hear not *everything* has become uninhabitable,” Selene said.

I was glad to hear the monster threat was pretty much entirely gone by now. As the weeks went by, more positive news continued to arrive.

“Mom! Lord Gyunton told us that Gald could welcome up to ten thousand demi-human refugees,” Selene exclaimed with excitement.

“Chise.” Raphilia sought me out next. “Arsus is back. He found a few orphanages that can take in some of the children.”

Just as I had anticipated, the refugee crisis wasn’t contained to just Ischea. However, through collaborative efforts between the neighboring nations and the different organizations, we managed to slowly but surely provide them with new homes.

With the monster threat dealt with for good, refugees with financial resources could leave the camps, using their funds to embark on a fresh start, while those with family in other nations left to reunite with their relatives. Skilled individuals—former adventurers, knights, mages, craftsmen, and the like—departed as well, intending to take on quests at the guild to support their new lives. With each passing week, more people left, and the refugee camp grew smaller and smaller. The adventurers who had been stationed at the fortress returned to their lives too, leaving the task of protecting the refugee camp to the Liebel margravate's knights.

A few of the refugees had decided to settle near the fields Teto had built, and the Liebel margravate bought the land from Teto, officially making it part of Ischea.

"There are fewer and fewer refugees every day, huh? That's good." I noted.

"It is," Teto confirmed before adding, a tinge of sadness in their voice, "But we didn't manage to save everyone..."

Despite our best efforts, winter had claimed the lives of many refugees, and we had to build a cemetery on the outskirts of the camp. Faced with unbearable living conditions, some individuals resorted to selling themselves into slavery, aspiring to gather funds for a better life for their families. In the same vein, several refugees were sentenced to a life of criminal slavery in the mines after getting kicked out of the refugee camp for bad behavior.

"But many children were born too."

Some of the refugees had been pregnant when they arrived, and while they were nervous at first, we helped them safely give birth. Witnessing the arrival of these innocent infants motivated us to redouble our efforts, striving to guarantee them a good life. Things weren't easy, and we even had to take in *more* refugees on a few occasions—people who were working abroad and had no home to come back to, families who had been scattered across different refugee camps, or demons who left their homes due to discrimination.

Still, we didn't let those incidents deter us; we kept doing everything in our power to find a suitable home for everyone. Eventually, our efforts paid off; after about a year, there were only three thousand people left in the refugee camp.

"Ah, Miss Wheat Witch, good morning!"

"Lady Witch, thank you so much for the medicine you gave me the other day."

"Almighty Witch of Creation, what should we do? Where will we live from now on?"

Unfortunately, all three thousand of these people faced rejection in other towns and nations, leaving them with no place to go. This pained me, as they had started opening their hearts to us; I couldn't just leave them behind. And so I started going around the refugee camp, asking them if they would like to move to the Wasteland of Nothingness with us. The refugees left behind fell into a few categories: demons, who were shunned by most societies; those who were enslaved, ailing, or elderly; orphans from the slums; half-demons, who were accepted by neither demons nor humans; and people who admired Shael, Yahad, and the other demons so much they wanted to learn from them.

In terms of demographics, around four hundred were humans, three hundred were beastfolk, a hundred each were elves and dwarves, and fifty were dragonfolk. There were also individuals of mixed heritage such as half-elves, half-dwarves, or half-dragonfolk, born from unions between humans and other races. If two nonhuman races had a child together, the child would end up only taking after one of their parents, meaning there couldn't be, say, half-elf, half-dragonfolk children. But when a human had a child with another race, the child would inherit traits from both parents. This had caused severe discrimination in the past, as a lot of people refused to welcome mixed individuals into their community, notably due to the difference in life span and inherent abilities of each race. Gald had taken in a lot of mixed refugees, but unfortunately, there was a limit to the number of people they could accommodate.

Apart from those mentioned, all of the remaining refugees were demons. This group encompassed humanoid demons, like the devilkin, the oni-kin, or the multi-eyed demons (most of which had three eyes); half-beast demons, including werewolves, centaurs, lamias, or minotaurs; size-shifting insect-type demons; and plant-type demons like dryads, who could turn part of their bodies into plant and grow flowers out of thin air, or alraunes, creatures that were half-mandrake and half-humanoid. There were also other demons who didn't belong in any of the aforementioned categories.

Lamias, insect-type demons, and plant-type demons had always maintained matriarchal tribes, and they all had a history of kidnapping human or demon men for reproductive purposes. This had won them a particularly bad reputation among other races. Minotaurs, on the other hand, were quite similar to dragonkin, as the men had bull heads, but the women looked almost exactly like cowwomen, which made it easier

for them to mingle among beastfolk.

Most of the refugees accepted my invitation, and I quickly headed to the wasteland to ask Beretta, Shael, Yahad, and the others—who had gone back home a little while ago through the transfer gate—to build new houses for the refugees. Since I didn't have to use all my mana to make food anymore, I gave them a hand too, using my Creation Magic to make furniture and amenities. Some of the demons—especially the ones who weren't used to living among other races—asked if they could move to the wasteland first and build their settlement themselves, which I agreed to.

And at last...

"As of today, we've officially closed down the refugee camp!" Vaise announced. "Your resilience has been remarkable, everyone."

"Yaaaaah!"

Cheers echoed throughout the crowd. Usually, the closing down of a refugee camp wasn't something to be celebrated; it meant that the town couldn't afford to look after the refugees anymore and most of them would end up left to their own devices with very little to their name. But we had successfully found a home for every single person in the camp, and the remaining refugees rejoiced to finally be able to move into the wasteland and start their new lives.

"This way, everyone!" I announced, leading them all to the transfer gates I had installed beforehand.

There were five of them, and each led to a different settlement. While tensions between demons and humans had subsided considerably these past few months, we still thought it would be best for them to live in separate villages for the time being. I was pretty sure they would still mingle with each other, though.

Teto and I walked through the transfer gate and were greeted by the children from the refugee camp, all wearing little maid and butler outfits.

"Welcome home, Master, Lady Teto!" they all said in unison.

"We're back. How are you all doing?"

"We're hooome!"

It had been Beretta's idea to hire the children to work at the mansion. "With a third of us managing the new settlements, we do not have enough manpower to properly serve you and Lady Teto," she had told me. "I suggest training the refugee children as servants so they can help us take care of the mansion."

About fifty of the maids were currently working at the mansion, while thirty were in charge of looking after the new refugee settlements. Now, you might be wondering what happened to the remaining twenty maids. Well...

"A few months ago, one of the maids married a godkin man. This has led to other maids getting involved with the demons and... they are currently all pregnant," Beretta explained.

I was so taken aback by that piece of news that the only response I could muster was a strangled, "*What?*"

"Oooh! The maids are gonna have babies! Congratulations to them!" Teto chirruped.

The maids were all demons, meaning that they did technically possess a reproductive system. However, I must admit, I hadn't expected it. Once the initial shock subsided, though, a wave of happiness washed over me. "So the maids I made with my Creation Magic are going to become mothers, huh? I'm happy for them."

"In a way, you are their mother," Beretta said, teasingly. "Will that make you a grandmother, then?"

"Lady Witch is going to be a *grandma*!?" Teto exclaimed in shock.

I couldn't help but chuckle at her reaction. "I'm already one; Selene has kids too, remember? I'm even a great-grandmother, technically."

The three of us shared a small laugh at that before Beretta brought the conversation back on track. "We will train the children of the maids to become your servants in the future as well, but until the pregnant maids can come back to work, I believe we could train the refugee children to work in the mansion in their stead."

"Beretta, not *all* of the mechanoids have to become our servants, you know?" I said. "If the children want to do something else, we should let them."

What mattered the most was for the maid's children to be happy and healthy, and to

find their own calling in life—and the same went for the refugee kids.

After our discussion was over, I asked the refugee kids if any of them wanted to help Beretta and the other maids take care of the mansion and most of them volunteered as a way to repay us for what we did. With so many people moving into the wasteland all at once, we decided to finally establish a currency system, along with some other minor things.

As I took in the now much busier Wasteland of Nothingness, I felt relieved to know I had done everything I could to help the refugees.

CHAPTER 31

WELCOME TO THE WITCH OF CREATION'S FOREST

As it turned out, the refugees weren't the only people who'd moved into the wasteland.

"Chise, I'm done patrolling the forest. I put stamps on the trees that we could use for lumber."

"Thanks, Raphilia. Wanna take some jam home?" I offered.

"We just made a bunch of it!" Teto chirped.

"Thanks, I'm sure Shael will appreciate it," Raphilia replied.

Arsus had headed back to Apanemis with his apprentice Tony to help the former-refugees-turned-adventurers get the hand of their new jobs, and Raphilia had decided to move into the wasteland—and by that, I meant that she was freeloading at Shael's house.

"Hey, Raphilia? Are you sure about this?" I asked as I handed her the jam.

"What do you mean?"

"Lady Witch is asking if you're sure you want to stay in the wasteland!" Teto supplied.
"You could still have worked as an adventurer for a long time."

A smile curled on Raphilia's lips. "I just thought it was a good time to finally settle down. I've been mostly flying solo these past few years anyway; I hadn't done a mission with Arsus in years before the stampede."

"Is that so?"

"Yep. I've been thinking of taking a break for a while and after meeting Shael and Yahad, I figured why not move here?"

Demons and elves were long-lived species, so she must've been happy to finally have made friends whom she could spend a long time with.

"Besides, Shael reminds me of me when I was younger, so I want to take her under my wing," she added.

"You did mellow out a lot since our first meeting," I conceded.

"Yeah! You're all soft now!" Teto chimed in.

"You're making it sound like I've gotten fat." She sighed. "Oh well."

When Raphilia left, we headed outside and stumbled across a burly man with demon horns and Yahad engaging in a mock battle.

"Haaaaaa!"

"Uoooaaah!"

Amid the clouds of dust kicked up by their intense duel, the two of them finally saw us.

"Oh, Lady Witch, Lady Guardian!" Yahad said, a smile splitting across his face. "I didn't notice you there."

"Were you watching? What do you think of my bulging muscles?" the other man—Gasta, an oni-kin—asked, flexing his arm muscles.

The oni-kin had started joining the godkin and dragonkin's daily mock battles. Due to the discrimination against demons in the northwest of the continent, a lot of oni-kin men had to move to other nations to find work, usually as adventurers or mercenaries thanks to their superhuman strength. When the oni-kin's settlement got destroyed during the stampede, the Great Elder and I helped the women get to safety by teleporting them to the refugee camp through the transfer gates. After that, they had sworn allegiance to us and moved into the wasteland, along with the oni-kin men who had returned.

"We, the oni-kin, swear absolute allegiance to you, Lady Witch!" Gasta said.

"Thank you... Don't push yourselves too hard, though, all right?"

We let them return to their training and went to visit the other refugee settlements. I was glad to see that they were all living together, each contributing in their own way. We had to pass through the forest to get to the next settlement, where we ran into a strange little group.

"Ah, Lady Witch and Lady Teto!" a girl with tanned skin who looked strangely like Teto greeted us.

A translucent, smaller girl was floating next to her. "Lady Wiitch! Lady Tetooo!" she exclaimed when she saw us.

"Goh!" their third companion—a bear golem—said.

All three of them were clay golems Teto had made. After eating the magic stones from the black skeletons, three different types of mutations occurred among the bear golems. Some of them turned into earthnoids—just like Teto—while others shed their physical forms and became spirits, and the rest retained their bear golem appearances but became significantly stronger.

Later that day, I was talking to Selene using my magic communication device when I asked her, "Hey, Selene, did you know that the refugees have started referring to the wasteland as the 'Witch of Creation's Forest'?"

"I did. Although I can't say I'm too surprised; back at the refugee camp, you were using your Creation Magic in front of everyone, after all. Everyone started calling you the Witch of Creation, so it seems only natural that they would name your home after you," Selene said, looking amused. "If you told anyone that it used to be a wasteland, they wouldn't believe you."

"So people outside the forest have started calling it by that name too, huh?" I grumbled, my shoulders slumping.

It seemed I was the only one displeased by this turn of events, though; Beretta and the other mechanoids in particular were very pleased to hear that my name was included in the wasteland's new moniker. Even the Great Elder seemed to think it was a good thing.

"That's great news, isn't it?" he had said when I vented to him. "It's good that this place has evolved from being the Wasteland of Nothingness. And the Witch of Creation's Forest has a nice ring to it."

Well, it seemed everyone agreed to the name change.

"Why can't we call it the Ancient Dragon's Forest, or the Verdigris Forest instead?" I suggested in a last-ditch attempt.

"But Teto likes the Witch's Forest better!"

I still didn't like the fact that the new name had my nickname in it, but Teto seemed so happy, I reluctantly accepted it, albeit with some reservations.

"Mom, big sis Teto, thank you so much for your hard work this past year," Selene told us.

"And thanks to you too for helping so many refugees find a new home."

"I didn't participate a lot; it was mostly my father, my brother, and my son's doing."

Our call came to an end, and I sipped on the tea Beretta had brewed for us while listening to the laughter of the children who worked at the mansion as they played in the garden. I remembered how happy the people had seemed when we went to visit them earlier, and a soft smile curled on my lips.

"Things are certainly changing fast, aren't they?" I muttered.

"It's all good changes, though!" Teto chimed in. "It's good to see so much happiness!"

The Wasteland of Nothingness—no, the Witch of Creation's Forest—became quite the lively place.

I planned on living each day to the fullest while embracing all of the changes life had to offer, big and small.



EXTRA STORY

THE WITCH LEARNS ABOUT HER DISCIPLE'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

"The nations most affected by the 'Month of Chaos,' were the Mubad Empire in the north, the city-state of Palma in the southeast, several smaller countries in the southwest, and the Kingdom of Ischea in the west. Adventurers from all around the continent gathered to face the threat, successfully containing the monsters," Professor James Tollman said, picking up a piece of chalk to put up more details about the damage caused by the monsters during the stampede, as well as the strategies used by the adventurers to repel them. "Out of the three nations surrounding the dungeon city where the stampede originated from, the Kingdom of Krista and the Duchy of Droog were destroyed, while the Londell Kingdom in the North lost over half of its territory and its autonomy. It was later absorbed by the Mubad Empire."

He then explained that, while some regions successfully fended off the threat, others lost some of their territory to the monsters.

"The two main contributors to the eradication of the monsters were Lady Chise, the master of the Witch of Creation's Forest, and the Ancient Verdigris Dragon, although it is worth mentioning that other adventurers, both known and unknown, played crucial roles in other regions as well."

"Lady Witch! He said your name!" Teto gasped, raising her head and suddenly seeming very interested in Professor Tollman's lecture.

A wry smile curled on my lips. "You don't have to point it out, Teto..."

"The Witch of Creation's Forest was known as the Wasteland of Nothingness during the Middle Ages, as the entire region had become desolate following a massive catastrophe. Nowadays, there are a few buildings we can access from the outside, including a school and several research facilities, but that is only a small part of the territory. The lush forest at its center houses mythical beasts, as well as mysterious trees and plants. It is currently a source of great interest for historians, as no one knows exactly what kind of history and culture the forest's inhabitants have built."

I felt a bit awkward hearing Professor Tollman talk about our home from an academic viewpoint. Thankfully, a quick look at the clock told me the lecture was almost over.

"The stampede war has inspired many creative works, and it had a large influence on popular culture as well," Professor Tollman continued. "To unravel the intricacies of this event, simply studying the history of the continent isn't enough; it is necessary to take a look at folklore studies, theological studies—as the goddesses are the ones who warned humanity of the stampede—as well as dungeon studies to understand what caused the stampede in the first place."

He then moved on to the conclusion of today's lecture. "During the Month of Chaos, people worked together to repel the monster threat. It was nevertheless a tragic event; we estimate that the population of the affected areas was around two and a half million, but over a million lost their lives during the stampede. Around a million managed to survive by holing up inside while waiting for the monster threat to pass, and the remaining five hundred thousand lost their homes and had to seek refuge in the neighboring regions. While the Kingdom of Krista was destroyed, most of its population managed to evacuate before the monsters' arrival. Meanwhile, the Duchy of Droog, which caused the stampede in the first place, suffered terrible damage; very few there survived. Additionally, the survival rate in the cities that resisted the onslaught was also quite low due to continued monster attacks and various issues such as shortages of food and supplies. These towns ended up getting abandoned or destroyed, causing over half a million people to lose their lives in the process."

Professor Tollman added that we and future generations should never forget about the consequences of the Duchy of Droog's actions.

"As a side note, the principal of our school, Miss Yuicia, participated in the stampede as well," he added in passing. "It is said that she has used her mastery of area ice spells to repel monsters in the Yudam Kingdom, a small nation south of the Duchy of Droog."

I hadn't known Yuicia had played a role in the Month of Chaos, and I couldn't help but chuckle about how it had taken me so long to learn about it.

"Remember, everyone: history is a constant cycle of discovery and revision," Professor Tollman said, looking at all of his students one by one. "Always bear in mind that the current consensus might be overturned by new findings tomorrow. Thank you very much for your attention and I hope to see you all for another lecture."

As soon as the lecture was over, Teto stood up and stretched her back. “I’m so happy he talked about you and Yuicia!” she chirped.

“Me too,” I replied, getting onto my feet and following the other students to the cafeteria for lunch.

As we were eating, I suddenly heard Yuicia’s voice in my head. “Master! Miss Teto! I’m so sorry for keeping you waiting. Where are you now?”

“Ah, Yuicia’s looking for us,” I said to Teto before telling Yuicia that we were in the cafeteria.

“We’re eating some curry!” Teto chirped. “It’s very yummy!”

“Please come back when you’re done with your meal,” Yuicia said, sounding slightly exasperated.

I replied that we would, finished off our meal, and headed back to Yuicia’s house on campus.

“Master, Miss Teto, *why* are you wearing my school’s uniform?” she asked, exasperated.

“Oh, you know, I just wanted to experience student life for a bit, so I made uniforms for Teto and me with my magic,” I replied with a mischievous chuckle.

“It was so much fun hanging out at your school with Lady Witch!” Teto chirped.

Yuicia let out a long, deep sigh at our antics. We were supposed to meet with her that morning but something urgent came up on her side and we had to move our plans to the afternoon. It actually wasn’t the first time that happened, and Teto and I had dressed up as students and went to attend lectures on numerous occasions already. Besides, it wasn’t even against the rules; anyone could take trial lessons at Yuicia’s school.

“Well, as long as you don’t disturb the classes, I suppose it’s fine,” Yuicia said before asking us if we caught any interesting lectures.

“We went to an early modern history class. It was pretty interesting,” I said as I undid my transformation spell. “The topic of the lecture was the Month of Chaos and, I have to say, it was quite refreshing to hear an outsider’s perspective on the whole thing.

Plus, I got to hear about everything *you* did," I added teasingly.

"Yeah, he talked about both you and Lady Witch!" Teto piped up.

An embarrassed smile curled on Yuicia's lips when she heard her name was mentioned during the lecture. "Ah, Professor Tollman, right? He's a pretty good teacher but..." She hesitated before continuing, "He's very... *passionate* about his research. Always probing me for details on specific historical events."

"Oh right. We've experienced them firsthand, after all."

Yuicia and I both let out long, deep sighs. We had been pestered for information about the past more times than we could count throughout our long lives, and we were getting a bit tired of it. Teto had no idea what we were sighing about, though, and blinked at us in puzzlement.

A wistful smile curled on Yuicia's lips. "I like studying history, though. I get to learn about the kind of lives the people I knew back then lived."

I nodded. "Yeah, I get that. I've looked up some of my old friends in the past and was surprised to see all of the shenanigans they got up to. Some even became close to other friends of mine, and I had no idea."

I had also met a lot of people who had no idea I used to know their ancestors. Fate sure worked in mysterious ways, but it only made these encounters more intriguing and charming.

As immortal beings, we would continue to embrace the present, all while looking back fondly at the connections we formed over the years.

AFTERWORD

I'd like to give my biggest thanks to everyone who picked this book up, my editor I-san, Tetubuta-sama for the lovely illustrations he drew for the series, and everyone online who looked at my work before it was published as a book.

A manga adaptation of this series by Shin Haruhara-sama is currently streaming in *Gangan ONLINE*, and the first volume will be published in the same month as this book. Chise and Teto's interactions are absolutely adorable, so I highly suggest you go give it a try.

For this volume, I ended up removing some things from the web novel for the sake of consistency. Instead, I decided to focus on characters who had appeared in the previous volumes and had them all gather together to face a huge threat. I have been wanting to do something like this for so long, I've pretty much been writing this series specifically for this moment—and I mean it.

Speaking of the characters, most of you have probably noticed that a lot of Chise's old friends have aged quite a bit since the last time you saw them. They have matured a lot; some of them have children or even grandchildren and are pretty much old people now. Who knows? Perhaps in later volumes, Chise will end up crossing paths with their descendants or the people who carry their legacy. Or maybe the people she'll meet down the line will have nothing to do with any of them.

I still have so many ideas for this series, so I hope you're all looking forward to the continuation of Chise and her friends' journeys.

Please keep treating me—Aloha Zachou—well from now on too.

Lastly, I'd like to thank every reader who picked this book up once more.

BONUS SHORT STORY

TABLETOP RPG

Two small cubical objects tumbled on the table, bumping into each other with a *clink*. The collision caused one of the cubes to fall from the table and roll onto the floor.

Teto picked it up and tilted her head in confusion. “Lady Witch, what are you doing with pens, paper, and dice?” she asked.

“Just prepping some TTRPG supplies,” I replied.

“Tee-tee-arr-pee-gee? What’s that?”

“Uh... How to put it? It’s a game where you pretend to go on an adventure using pens, paper, and dice,” I explained, trying to make it as simple as possible for Teto.

Yet my explanation fell short. She stared at me with wide, uncomprehending eyes, as if I was speaking another language.

“How about you give it a go? Here, take this,” I said, handing her a character sheet I had made using cardboard. “You’ll be playing as this character.”

Teto inspected the sheet. “That’s... a villager!”

I nodded. “You can read his status on the other side of the paper. You have his attack, defense, accuracy, mana, initiative, and HP. There’s a number beside all of those words, right?”

“There is!”

“That’s his stats. Let’s say a slime has appeared in front of him.”

I pulled out a slime monster card and placed it in front of Teto’s character sheet.

“During a fight, the character with the highest initiative gets to make the first move. In

this case, your villager has more initiative than the slime, so you start.”

“I see! So Teto just has to attack the slime, right?”

“Yep. First, let’s see if you can actually land a hit. To do that, you’re going to roll two dice; if the sum is higher than your character’s accuracy, your attack will hit.”

“Okaaay! Teto’s gonna do her best!”

She grabbed the dice, clasped her hands, and cast them onto the table. The sum of her roll was seven.

“Yay! It worked!” she cheered.

“Now we need to calculate how much damage you’ve dealt. The villager’s attack is three, and the slime’s defense is one, meaning...”

“We subtract the slime’s defense from Teto’s attack, right? That’s two!”

I nodded and put two little colored marbles on the slime card.

“Okay, now the slime tries to strike back... and it missed. Too bad.”

“So it’s Teto’s turn again!”

“Exactly. But before you roll the dice, let’s equip your villager with this,” I said, handing Teto an iron knife equipment card.

She set it down beside her villager and rolled the dice again.

“It worked again!”

“And this time your villager had a weapon so...”

“He dealt more damage! So when you give weapons to your characters, they get stronger,” she remarked.

I smiled and nodded, placing a couple more marbles on the slime card. Since it had taken more damage than it had HP, it was now dead.

"Congrats, Teto, you've defeated the slime," I said. "Anyway that's pretty much the gist of your basic TTRPG; you use your character's abilities and roll dice to defeat monsters and clear quests."

Teto's eyes were sparkling with excitement. "It was so much fun! But why did you decide to start making tee-tee-arr-pee-gee supplies all of a sudden?" she asked.

A somewhat strained smile appeared on my lips. "The demons have asked if I could come up with a fun way for them to learn about the outside world."

Some of them might want to leave the wasteland one day. I decided that a TTRPG would be a great way for them to learn all they'd need to know, especially if they wanted to become adventurers. It'd teach them what exactly the job entailed, the importance of assigning each other roles and cooperating during fights, how to quickly evaluate the pros and cons of certain actions on the battlefield, how crucial good equipment was, and last but not least, a grasp of the monetary system. I had also decided to make the combat system pretty lethal to really hammer in how important it was to always be cautious when fighting.

"I see. Teto hopes the others will like it!" Teto chirped and I nodded.

After that, I had Beretta and a few of the maids try out the system I created, made a few adjustments, and when I deemed it was good enough, released it so that anyone in the wasteland could try it out.

Many years later, the demons brought the TTRPG to the outside world, where it became a huge hit, garnering a community of hardcore fans.



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Making Magic: The Sweet Life of a Witch Who Knows an Infinite MP Loophole Volume
6

by Aloha Zachou

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