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Making Magic

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

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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]



**“You have to keep warm during the winter, Master.
I will knit you some wool underwear.”**

By early winter, Beretta's newly formed arms were fully functional, and I used my Creation Magic to make her a wheelchair so she could wander around the house as she pleased. I gave her a knitting book and some yarn to occupy herself, and she made it her mission to learn how to knit.



**“Uh, that’s a bit embarrassing but...
thanks. I appreciate it.”**



CHAPTER 0

THE WITCH AND HER WAITING MAID

REMINISCE ABOUT THE PAST

Today had been a lot busier than usual, and when I finally sat down to take a breather, I noticed it was already well past 11 p.m...

“Phew, I’m spent!” I sighed, plonking down on the sofa.

I leaned against Teto, who had taken a seat next to me, the both of us feeling absolutely brain-drained.

“Today’s work was really tough,” she nodded.

“Thank you for your efforts, Mistress, Lady Teto.” My manor’s head maid, Beretta, appeared, carrying a tray of tea as if to reward us for our trouble.

I used to do a lot of hands-on work and helped people from all around the world solve their issues. But those days were over, and now the children I had raised with the help of Teto, Beretta, and the others had taken on that role. But a few times a year, they would run into more difficult problems that only I, with the knowledge and experience I had accumulated over the years, could solve, and I would have to chip in.

“I prepared some hot milk tea for you, Mistress, and here is some hot wine for Lady Teto.”

“Thank you, Beretta.”

“Thanks! I love hot wine!”

I brought the cup to my lips and released a deep sigh of pleasure when the warm, slightly sweet liquid hit my tongue. Next to me, Teto chugged her hot wine in one go and immediately asked Beretta for seconds.

“Mistress, might I know what kind of work you did today?” Beretta asked.

"I went to investigate some old precursor ruins. Some of the things we found there really brought me back."

Teto chimed in. "Lady Witch feels more tired from all the questions the archeologists asked her than from the digging though!"

Teto was right; the archeologists who had accompanied us to the ruins had bombarded me with questions the entire time I was there. They hadn't been unpleasant or anything, but they were clearly a bunch of ruin fanatics, and their overzealousness had been hard to cope with.

Anyway, we excavated a bunch of old magic tools from the ruins, as well as some damaged humanoid magical weapons and attendant dolls. The whole haul brought back so many memories.

"One of the dolls woke up, but she's in a pretty bad state. I actually brought her home so we can fix her up."

She would need to be handled very carefully to make sure she didn't get damaged any further, and I knew that those researchers would poke and prod at her to satisfy their curiosity, so I made the executive decision to disregard their complaints and lay claim to her.

"Is that so? I shall make the necessary preparations to train her when the time arises then," Beretta said.

I'd turned up a fair few attendant dolls in my time ruin-delving. Every time, I'd start by checking for signs of life in one, and on confirmation, I'd haul her home, just as I had done with Beretta a few hundred years ago. Once I was done fixing her body, she would join the other attendant dolls and work in the Witch of Creation's Forest, all while helping me with my research on the precursors.

"I feel a bit nostalgic now. It reminds me of when you joined us, Beretta," I said.

"Is that so?" she smiled. "I am very much looking forward to seeing what type of personality that doll develops."

Beretta, Teto, and I started reminiscing about the past. After a short while, I let out a sigh.

"Talking like this—you know, just the three of us—it always brings me back to those leisure trips we went on together."

"I wanna go on another trip with you, Lady Witch!"

Teleportation magic allowed me to instantly travel wherever I wanted as long as I had set that place as a potential destination—which I had done for every region of this world. There were places that I hadn't visited in literal centuries though. I was sure they must've changed a lot since the last time I'd been there. How nice would it be to embark on a charming little trip down memory lane—quite literally—and go check out what had become of them? It would be so relaxing! I was really feeling the wanderlust set in.

"We should definitely do that when I'm done with this job," I said before putting down my now-empty cup on the table and stretching my arms over my head.

"I can't wait!" Teto chirped.

"If at all possible, I would love to accompany you on that trip. It has been a long time since we last traveled together, after all."

"Oh! You're coming too, Beretta? That's great! It really has been a while."

Teto and I always traveled together, and it was pretty rare for Beretta to tag along. Usually she would stay at home and take care of the house while she waited for us to come back. Of course, it wasn't as if she never came with us. Thinking back on those trips we took together somehow made me feel really warm inside.

"All righty, time for bed," I declared. "Tomorrow's also going to be a busy day."

"Yees, Lady Witch!"

"I wish you a good night, Mistress, Lady Teto," Beretta said with a bow.

Teto and I left the room and slipped into the same bed.

That night, I dreamed of the trip Teto, Beretta, and I would take once I was done with my current job.

This is the story of a doll who, after her rescue from ruins, enkindled a soul of her own

as she saw the world roll past her. It is also the story of a waiting maid who resolved herself to always protect the home of her mistress.

CHAPTER 1

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE WASTELAND OF NOTHINGNESS

After entrusting Selene to the royal family of Ischea, Teto and I went back to the Wasteland of Nothingness and resumed our life there, a profound gloom hanging over us.

"Now that Selene's in Ischea, we don't need to live so close to the town anymore. Let's move back to the center of the wasteland," I declared.

"Yeah!" Teto nodded vigorously. "We need to keep an eye on the devil from last time. If it comes out of the stone, we have to seal it right back in there!"

That's right: the Archdevil the devil cult had summoned during Selene's debut party was currently trapped in the middle of the Wasteland of Nothingness. To be precise, it was attached to a mana conversion device and slowly getting sucked dry of mana as we spoke. But in the event that the Archdevil managed to break out of the jewel, or if the mana conversion device started malfunctioning, Teto and I needed to be able to act fast.

"Are we moving back to our former house then, Lady Witch?"

"That's the plan. Let's go check it out."

We came out of the teleportation gate and started making our way toward the center of the wasteland.

A wave of nostalgia washed over me as I reacquainted myself with the house where Teto and I used to live while Selene was still a baby. But when I stepped outside and took a good look at the exterior, I realized that things might not go to plan.

"Yeah, I'm not *quite* sure we're gonna be able to live here..." I muttered.

I built this house using Earth Magic several years ago. Back then, I hadn't been that

good of a witch, and the size of my mana pool put pretty hard limits on what I could do. On top of that, time hadn't been kind to that house; here and there it'd turned pretty decrepit. I was holding out hope at first that I could convert a corner of the place into a brewing room for my potions, but it was clearly way too small.

"I should probably build another house."

"But you can't build a super big house here, Lady Witch," Teto pointed out.

I took another look at our surroundings and noticed that the World Trees I had planted back when Selene was a toddler had grown tremendously, which didn't leave us a lot of space to build our new house. I thought of moving them somewhere else, but the World Trees' roots ran *deep*, and that was way more of a hassle than I wanted to put up with. But I also couldn't bring myself to cut down trees I had spent so much energy growing.

"I'm just gonna make a temporary house for now, and we'll build a bigger one later down the line," I decided.

"Roger!" Teto nodded enthusiastically.

The two of us headed back inside the house, and Teto helped me put all of our valuables in my magic bag. I then had her use Earth Magic to take down the house and level the ground where I would build our new home.

I extended a hand toward the now perfectly even ground and used my Creation Magic.

"All righty, let's make ourselves a nice little house. Creation!"

The house I built with Creation Magic had a gently peaked roof; it ended up looking like a certain famous delivery witch's childhood home.

"Oooh, it's so cute! What a nice little house!" Teto chirped.

I thought of knocking it down and rebuilding it again, but Teto's enthusiasm convinced me that it would be good enough for now. I took the transfer gate that connected to our house at the border of the wasteland out of my magic bag and installed it in our new home.

"In the future, I think we should turn this place into some sort of hub, with a bunch of

transfer gates leading to all the different regions we've visited," I said.

"Lady Witch, what's a 'hub'?" Teto asked, puzzled.

"Hm, you see the middle part of a wheel? It's kinda similar," I explained, drawing a wheel in the ground to illustrate my point.

Teto immediately understood.

"A hub, huh? Teto became a bit smarter today!"

"Hee hee, you did. Anyway, as I told you before, this is temporary. We should probably start thinking of where we're going to build our real house, huh?"

"Oh, you're right! Let's go then!"

And so, Teto and I trekked through the grove to scope out the ideal spot for our future house.

"The trees sure have grown a lot," I noted.

This place had been barren when I arrived, but now, after only a couple dozen years, this place had basically turned into a small forest. We were in the middle of winter, so most of the trees were bare—with the exception of the World Trees, which not only stood about a head taller than the others, but were also lush and green, circulating oxygen back into the wasteland.

"The mana around the World Trees is really dense and the air is so fresh!"

"It feels so good!"

Teto and I breathed in deeply, enjoying the literal atmosphere around the World Trees. In a few decades, the little groves we had planted all around the Wasteland of Nothingness would spread until they formed one single, giant forest, which would make the perfect habitat for small animals. By that point, the barrier the goddess Liriel had placed over the land would also start to weaken, animals would slowly start coming into the wasteland, and even later down the line, what was left of the barrier would probably disappear.

"Oh, look, there's water coming out of the ground," I told Teto.

"You're right! It *is* coming out!

As we strolled through the forest, I noticed that water seemed to be springing out of a spot at the base of one of the World Trees. The ground that the World Trees were standing on must've contained a lot of water, but the dirt was so tightly packed it couldn't come out. The trees' roots must've pierced through those layers and released the water, which was now springing out of the ground due to the shift in pore water pressure. Upon further inspection, it seemed that there were several other springs. Thanks to this, the surface wasn't as dry anymore, and seeds that had been carried to the wasteland by the wind had started sprouting, creating some patches of greenery here and there.



"Lady Witch... Water coming out of the ground is really good, but if there's too much of it, the area around the house might get flooded!" Teto said, concerned.

"You're right," I nodded. "But we can always make a little river to redirect the water somewhere else, or lower the ground to turn the area into a wetland. Anyway, let's keep looking for a spot for our future home—ideally, one that doesn't risk getting flooded."

"Roger!"

Teto and I pressed on, sometimes crossing paths with the clay golems Teto had created to help us take care of the farmwork in the wasteland, and they would wave at us. All of the golems had twin balls of mud sticking out of the top of their heads, which made them look a little bit like bears. We had thus affectionately nicknamed them "bear golems."

As we got closer to them, I noticed that there were plants sprouting from their heads and back, and that got me a bit worried.

"Uh, are you guys okay? You got *stuff* coming out of your head," I said.

"Goh!"

"They're fine, Lady Witch!" Teto told me.

Apparently, the clay golems' way of spreading greenery to the barren areas of the wasteland was to merge with the ground in the middle of the grove, embed some saplings and such into their body, and transplant them to the treeless spots.

"This is really starting to become a nice place to live."

"Teto agrees!"

Thanks to the bear golems, the forest was going to grow bigger and bigger. That thought made me feel really happy.

Teto and I resumed our stroll until we finally found a suitable spot to build our future home.

"This looks like a pretty nice spot for a house," I mused.

We had walked east from the center of the wasteland and were currently standing at the edge of the grove, right outside the barrier I had set up around the forest to stop the mana from flowing out into the rest of the wasteland. The water from the springs in the forest had helped the ground here regain some of its moisture, and plants had sprouted all over the area, forming a pretty decently-sized meadow. Granted, it was still winter, so most of the greenery was at low ebb.

“It’s going to require a bit of work, but I think this place will make for a nice base of operations.”

Since it was located right outside the forest’s edge, we wouldn’t need to transplant any trees, and it gave us more than enough space to expand in the future if we wished.

“Well, for now, let’s use some stakes and string to mark the area,” I said.

“Teto will take care of the stakes!”

She put both hands on the ground. All of a sudden, the lot started shaking, and stone stakes shot out of the ground all around it. In the meantime, I used my Creation Magic to make some string and, when Teto was done, tied it around the stakes to mark the outline of our future house.

“All right, let’s call it a day and head home. Now that we have a spot picked out, we have to decide what kind of rooms we want.”

“Oooh, that’s exciting!” Teto chirped.

And so Teto and I spent the rest of the winter discussing ideas for our new home base: the types of rooms we wanted, how the house should look from the outside... But while we both had lots of suggestions, we couldn’t settle on anything. I had the idea to put our disputes aside and go look for an architect to draw up a blueprint, which I would then build myself with Creation Magic. From that day onwards, I started storing all my mana in mana crystals in preparation for the day when we would finally build our new home base.

CHAPTER 2

PRINCE GYUNTON'S REQUEST

Spring sprung, and Teto and I were on our way to Vil, a town in the Gald Beastman Nation.

"This is so exciting!" Teto beamed.

"It is. I really hope we'll manage to find a good architect."

We had two reasons to visit Vil today: the first was to pop by the adventurer's guild, and the second was to look for our architect.

When we arrived in town, we headed straight to the guild.

"Chise! Teto! Long time no see!" The catwoman receptionist, a long-time acquaintance of ours, called out to us the moment we stepped into the building.

"Hey, it's been a while," I said, greeting her back. "How have things been while we were away?"

"Did you run into any issues?" Teto asked in turn.

"A lot of people were feeling really sad to learn that Selene left," the receptionist answered with a smile. "May I ask how she's doing?"

"She's started studying at the church," I lied.

"She's having lots of fun!" Teto added.

"I see. That's good to hear!" the receptionist said, looking relieved.

I couldn't help feeling a bit guilty for lying to her. But we had decided to keep the fact that Selene was the princess of Ischea a secret from everyone in Gald. The only people who knew about her true identity were the guards, adventurers, and staff members of the guild who had been present during our conversation with the task force sent to

search for her, and they had all signed a magical contract that forbade them from revealing Selene's identity. We planned on telling everyone else that Selene, who had come to be known as the "little saintess" due to her healing abilities, had gone to study at the Church of the Five Goddesses in Ischea to learn advanced healing magic. Prince Gyunton was actually the one who helped us concoct the cover story.

"Anyway, just like always, we've got some potions and herbs to turn in. Can we do it now?" I asked.

"Of course! May I have your guild cards, please?" the receptionist asked; Teto and I obliged.

She glanced at them and her eyes shot wide open.

"You're A-rank adventurers now?! Congratulations!"

Until last summer, Teto and I did a lot of coming and going between Ischea and Gald via teleportation gates, and we would occasionally stop by the guild. But then we went to the capital of Ischea to pass the A-rank promotion exam and ended up staying there to act as Selene's secret guard. We'd gone straight to the wasteland once we had to part with Selene, so it'd been a good ten months since we had last come here.

"We passed the examination when we went to pay Selene a visit in Ischea last year," I told the receptionist.

"Lady Witch and I are both A-rank now!"

"So you can just go to another country's capital whenever you want? That flying carpet of yours truly is amazing!"

I gave her a forced smile. Thankfully, she hadn't seemed to find it odd that Teto and I managed to travel from Gald to the capital of Ischea in time for the A-rank promotion exam, even though the exam had been set in the fall and we had still been in Vil during the summer. She simply assumed that we had used our magic carpet, which allowed us to travel faster than a carriage would.

We turned in our potions and herbs, and right when we were done, another staff member of the guild called out to us.

"Chise, Teto, the guildmaster's looking for you."

“The guildmaster?” I asked.

“I wonder what he wants,” Teto mused.

The two of us exchanged confused looks. We had no idea why the guildmaster would want to see us, but we followed the guild employee, who ushered us to the reception office on the second floor.

“Good, you’re here.” The guildmaster, who had been waiting for us in the room, raised his hand in a greeting.

“Why did you call for us?” I asked.

“I’ve heard that you two have become A-rank adventurers. First of all, allow me to congratulate you.”

“Thanks.”

“Thank you!”

With Teto being an earthnoid and me having stopped growing after twelve due to the Slow Aging skill I had gained, the two of us looked as youthful as ever, while the guildmaster was quite visibly aging. Despite the fact that we could’ve easily passed for his granddaughters, he addressed us very politely. It made sense; as a former adventurer, he grasped just how impressive our track record was.

“I know you two went through a lot recently...” he said, sounding a little awkward.

He was one of the only people who knew about Selene’s true identity. Seeing a big guy like him try to show us compassion while almost stumbling over his words was a rather comical sight, and I couldn’t help the small smile that played on my lips.

“Thank you for your concern. We’re fine; don’t worry about us. More importantly, would you tell us why we’re here?” I asked.

“Teto’s gotta know too! Is it another job?”

Sometimes the guildmaster offered us special assignments that capitalized on our greater mobility thanks to our flying carpet. Typically those assignments came to us through the guild receptionist, though.

“I’m the one who has a job for you today.”

“Long time no see, Lady Chise, Lady Teto.”

The door behind the guildmaster opened, and Gyunton, the third prince of Gald, came into the room, followed by his private secretary, Rollwacca. I hadn’t seen them since we first left Gald for Ischea.

“Long time no see, Prince Gyunton.”

“Heya, it’s been a while!”

“I see you two haven’t changed a bit since the last time we saw each other,” Prince Gyunton said. “As I said, I have a request for you.”

The guildmaster left the room to give us some privacy. Teto and I listened carefully, eager to know what kind of business Prince Gyunton, one of Gald’s diplomats, had with two mere adventurers.

“We’d like your help getting rid of a certain underground organization that’s been causing us some trouble,” he told us.

“Is that so? I don’t suppose delivering them a stern talking-to is going to cut it,” I said.

“So Teto and Lady Witch just have to beat up the bad guys?” Teto asked.

“In the past few years, citizens of our neighbor kingdom of Lawbyle have started sneaking into our country to kidnap our citizens, and sell them in the slave markets of their own neighbor states,” Prince Gyunton added by way of explanation.

“If I remember correctly, Gald allows slavery, but only as punishment for a crime, right?” I asked.

This was also the case in the Kingdom of Ischea. In both countries, the trade of slaves was only allowed in certain circumstances, and it was illegal for anyone to own and sell slaves without explicit license from the government.

Prince Gyunton nodded. “Yes. But in recent years, a black market’s clearly surfaced, stocked with abducted children, live-in domestics uprooted from their homes by poverty or violence, and victims of predatory lenders.”

"And you can't do anything about that?" I asked.

Seeing as Prince Gyunton had started looking a little weary, Rollwacca took over the explanation.

"We have started organizing more patrols in villages and along the main roads, and in turn have apprehended many abductors, reinforced our borders, and rescued several people who had been illegally enslaved, but to our dismay, we simply lack the manpower to solve the matter decisively."

"Members of these types of crime networks usually have a background in combat, and the higher-ups are as strong as most A-rank adventurers," Prince Gyunton added.

"So that's why you're asking for our help, now that we're A-rank."

"Exactly. Besides, it seems that one of this organization's leaders is actually a Lawbylean mage. Our nation's magical technology is definitely not up to par with Lawbyle's, and I fear one misstep would only exacerbate our casualties," Prince Gyunton said.

Gald was doing a decent job policing its black market for slave labor, but they had no way of getting rid of the organization as a whole. That's why Prince Gyunton turned to us: as we were both A-rank adventurers and I was a mage, we might be able to put down their heavy hitters.

"So many of my people suffer in bondage to keep these rogues' purses full. Could you two please help us break them?"

Prince Gyunton didn't bow, but I could see in his eyes that he was desperate.

I couldn't just stand by and let such a pack of monsters harm innocent women and children.

"Okay. We'll help."

"Teto also wants to help the children!"

"Thank you. You have my gratitude."

Prince Gyunton and Rollwacca nodded at us.

"Save the thanks for once we've mopped up with them. Oh, and I'm hoping for a handsome reward for this job," I said.

"Of course. If it's in my power, I'll give you anything you ask, on top of the base remuneration," Prince Gyunton assured me, full of confidence.

Naturally, I told him my request. "Can you recommend us a good architect? We want to build a new house, so we'd like to ask someone to help us plan it."

"An... architect?" Prince Gyunton repeated, a bewildered look on his face. "I can introduce you to one that is popular among nobles, but are you sure that's all you want?"

Teto chimed in. "It's very important for Lady Witch and Teto!"

Prince Gyunton would have smelled it if we'd been lying, but he still didn't seem convinced.

CHAPTER 3

SEIZING THE SLAVERS' HEADQUARTERS—

PART ONE

Having received Prince Gyunton's request, Teto and I rendezvoused with a detachment of the Galdian army in the city at the heart of the slaver network's operations.

"Thank you for guarding me on the way here," Prince Gyunton said. "Colonel Carter will be the one in charge of the operation," he added, pointing to a birdman.

Prince Gyunton was a diplomat and wasn't in the habit of commanding troops, usually entrusting that job to the soldiers themselves. He had only accompanied us here to coordinate with the local lord; he would leave right after.

Teto and I went to introduce ourselves to Colonel Carter.

"Hello, nice to meet you. I'm Chise the Witch, an A-rank adventurer"

"And Teto is a swordswoman and also A-rank!"

"I have heard a lot about the both of you. I'm Colonel Carter. Having two dungeon-breakers of your caliber assisting us in this mission is greatly appreciated."

We shook hands and asked him to brief us.

"They established their base here under the pretense of setting up a branch office for a company in Lawble, but we have since confirmed there is no such company. We have also witnessed many suspicious people coming in and out of the building on a daily basis."

"I see. What else?"

"From the information we have gathered so far, we know that there is only one leader. His strength seems on par with an A-rank adventurer. He has four bodyguards; each

of them seems to be approximately B-rank. He's also allied with the head of a band of thieves, many of whom have been confirmed to be former mercenaries or washout adventurers. They help with the grunt work—the actual abductions," Colonel Carter explained.

He proceeded to tell us that all of the kidnappers the authorities had caught until now had been petty thieves, and that there were also eyewitness reports of members of the organization disguising themselves as peddlers and traveling between villages to buy people to enslave. All in all, the organization seemed to consist of several hundred people.

"Wouldn't Gald's army be more than enough to deal with an organization of this size?" I asked.

They already had a lot of intel. With a sound strategy, they could isolate the strongest members and defeat them one by one, which would, in turn, drastically weaken the organization as a whole. As a matter of fact, Colonel Carter himself could easily overpower one of those B-rank members.

"We *could* pick them off one at a time, but if we act carelessly, we might put the townsfolk in jeopardy," Carter said.

The organization's base was located right in the middle of the commoners' residential area, and most of the buildings there were built out of wood. Carter told us that the first time the army had attempted to invade their base, the organization set fire to the residential area, and the soldiers had no choice but to give up on their initial mission to fight the fire instead. The organization escaped in the midst of the chaos, using the people they had enslaved as shields.

"So this is all one big hostage situation waiting to happen, huh?" I mused.

"That's dirty!" Teto commented.

"It is. But these guys don't care about that. They're slavers—the ethics of their actions are completely secondary to ensuring they get what they want. That's why we need to be careful. We absolutely can *not* act recklessly!" Carter said, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists so tight I could see his talons digging into his palms.

"You're going to draw blood if you keep that up," I pointed out.

“Y-You’re right. I apologize.”

“Well, I have a better idea of the situation now, but I can’t really be sure without seeing the enemy’s base of operations. Can you take us there?”

“Of course!”

We obviously couldn’t get too close to the actual building, lest we arouse the organization’s suspicion, so Carter took us to a lookout post a little further away. There were a lot of other birdmen there maintaining surveillance. Birdmen had better eyesight than any other tribe, which made them excellent stakeout companions.

“It’s that building right there,” Carter informed us, pointing it out. “They have a couple of similar bases in other cities as well.”

“I see... Teto, can you tell me what the building looks like from the inside?”

“Gimme a second, Lady Witch! Hmm...”

She put her hands on the ground and started groaning.

“Um... Might I ask what you’re doing, Miss Teto?” Carter asked, puzzled.

I was the one who answered him. “I asked her to use her *Earth Sonar* spell to investigate the building’s internal structure.”

“I’m done, Lady Witch!” Teto said. She then used her magic to manipulate the dirt floor in front of us, creating a maquette of the building’s basement levels.

“Th-That’s...” Carter trailed off.

“What’s going on underneath that building!” Teto concluded for him.

Carter and the others were flabbergasted upon seeing Teto’s perfect replica of the building’s underground structure. Apparently, this had not been the first unsanctioned slaver operation to set up shop here; the previous owners had been shut down by the authorities, and the building had lain dormant until this new operation bought up the property and magically expanded the tunnel networks beneath it.

“I’ve always wondered how they managed to smuggle the slaves in and out of the city

without being stopped at the gates. I thought they maybe had a mole among the guards, but to think that they've just been walking right under our feet all along... Where does this tunnel lead?!" Carter asked Teto, seemingly excited at the idea of having made progress on the case.

Teto extended the range of her *Earth Sonar* to try to find the exit.

"Hmm..." she groaned. "Somewhere outside the city... I'm going to take a look!"

She shot up from her spot on the ground, left the building, and started following the tunnel from aboveground. Carter, the members of his regiment, and I tagged along behind her. The tunnel passed right under the city walls, then extended all the way to a small hunting cabin about two kilometers into the forest. Carter and the others were absolutely flabbergasted by the sheer length of the tunnel.

"So this is where it leads..." Carter breathed out in shock.

"There's another exit in a dried-up well in a deserted village a little further away, and another in a cavern on a cliff!" Teto said.

We quickly went to confirm their locations and found footprints as well as wagon tracks near all of them, which confirmed these three exits had been used recently. Then we promptly withdrew. We couldn't let the enemy know we had found the exits of their tunnel, lest they escape before we had time to make our move. And so, we thoroughly wiped out any traces we might've left and returned to the city for the time being.

"Miss Chise, Miss Teto, you've only been helping us for a single day, and we've already made so much progress on this case. We're almost ready to strike now!" Carter said excitedly.

I, on the other hand, didn't think we were anywhere near that stage. "I wouldn't say that," I said.

"Why is that, Lady Witch?" Teto asked.

"Think about what Carter said earlier. The last time the army tried to take over their base, the organization set fire to the nearby houses. This means that they might have arsonists stationed all over the city."

And the second the organization realized they were under attack, they would most likely call in a second wave of fires.

"Guilds use magical communication tools for members to communicate with each other, but these are pretty expensive. I imagine the slavers use something cheaper," I said.

The members of Carter's regiment argued with me, insisting that we should make our move now, that we couldn't let the innocent people who had been captured and enslaved suffer any longer. Convincing them that moving too soon would do more harm than good was no easy feat, but I somehow managed, and they agreed to simply remain vigilant for the time being.

And on the second night...

"It started. Get ready, everyone."

I had been sleeping in a corner of the observation post, huddled with my knees to my chest, when I suddenly felt traces of mana coming from the slavers' base. Teto and the others hurriedly gathered at the table.

"I'm going to use Wind Magic to hijack their communication," I explained.
"*Interception!*"

The spell the organization was using to communicate with each other was a Wind Magic spell called *Whisper*. It allowed one to have private conversations with anyone they wanted, even if the target wasn't in their immediate vicinity.

I used my own magic to intercept their signal and projected the sound onto a metal plate.

"Zom speaking. It's time for our routine check-in."

The soldiers of Carter's regiment stiffened upon hearing the speaker's name: it was the leader of this branch of the organization.

The next few minutes were spent listening to Zom as he gave instructions to his cohorts, while the regiment's secretary dutifully noted everything that was said. I, on the other hand, was using my magic to trace the spell to its target.

"Found 'em. Get me a map of the city," I asked a member of the regiment.

"Y-Yes!"

I marked the arsonists' location on the map he gave me.

"Now we just have to plan how we're going to attack both this place and the main base at the same time," Carter said.

I nodded. "Yes. And if they don't have other Wind Magic users, we should be able to easily prevent any outside communication by simply erecting a soundproof barrier around the main base."

The members of the regiment, Carter, and I started devising the strategy we would use to bring the slavers to heel.

CHAPTER 4

SEIZING THE SLAVERS' HEADQUARTERS—

PART TWO

We decided that the operation would take place in two days.

We spent this time preparing by deploying soldiers near the tunnel exits—as well as the building the arsonists were hiding in—and stationing more guards at the city gates to prevent the other members from escaping. Then, as dawn broke, we made our way down the empty streets, marching toward the organization's base.

"It's raining. This couldn't be more perfect," I said, pushing up the brim of my witch hat and peering at the cloudy sky.

Now, even if the arsonists managed to somehow start a fire, the chances of it spreading were pretty low.

"All righty then, is everyone ready?" I asked.

"Yes. We may start the operation, Miss Chise," Carter said.

He and I then instructed the remaining members of the regiment to spread apart so that we had the building completely surrounded.

"*Multi-Barrier!*" I chanted, erecting several barriers around the slaver headquarters, effectively locking it down.

"Do not let a single one of these rats escape! Our countrymen cry out to be liberated!" Carter said to rouse up his soldiers.

"Oooh!"

Hundreds of beastmen in full armor pushed into the building all at once, taking the slavers completely by surprise. The battle entered its full swing in moments. As roars echoed throughout the entire building, a mage jumped out of the second-floor

window, hovering right above us.

"You beasts never learn, do you? Don't you remember what happened the last time you tried to attack us?" the man said mockingly.

Carter drew his bow and aimed it at the mage.

"Zom, the Black Eagle! You won't escape this time!"

"And you even have a *plan* now! Look at you, waiting for it to rain before attacking us. How many migraines did you put your wizened little brain-nubs through coming up with that one, hm? I have to say, I'm moved—I've never felt so much *pity* watching someone try to strategize!"

Goaded by Zom's mockery, Carter loosed three arrows at him in quick succession. The two of them started dueling each other, Carter shooting arrow after arrow as Zom wheeled and dipped clear with spell after spell. Meanwhile, our plan was steadily progressing.

"What's wrong? If you don't want a repeat of last time, you should step it up, beast!" Zom jabbed at Carter.

The birdman gritted his teeth and let out a growl.

It wasn't an easy fight for him. While Carter was quite adept with a bow and arrow, Zom was a nearly impossible target. The gap in strength between the two of them was evident.

Zom was clearly using this as an opportunity to buy time while his pet firebugs set to work and his underlings once again used their captives as meat shields to slow down the regiment's soldiers. Once he had successfully distracted us, he would take advantage of the chaos and flee the city by air. Meanwhile, his cohorts would be making their escapes using the tunnel underneath the city, taking the slaves along with them.

However...

"Hey, what's going on? I can't see any smoke! Hey! Answer me! What's going on?!"

Zom was starting to get impatient, seeing as the arsonists were taking an awfully long

time to do their job. Meanwhile, our army kept on pushing forward, taking control of the entire building one room at a time.

"Zom, this is bad!" someone told him, seemingly using *Whisper* from inside the building. "They already subdued the slaves! And they've destroyed the tunnel!"

"What?! Tch! *Vortex*!"

Lightning appeared all around Zom's staff; he didn't waste a single second charging toward the barrier I had put up around the building. Zom seemed to have understood how bad the situation was for him and decided to cut his losses, leaving the rest of the organization twisting in the wind.

Lightning Magic was incredibly strong and excelled at single-target attacks, each blast being both fast and powerful, which made it the perfect type of magic to use when trying to break past a barrier.

I couldn't help but be impressed by Zom's prudence. The second he realized he was at a disadvantage, he didn't hesitate before deciding to run away. I guess you need to be able to make those snap judgments if you want to survive in the underworld, huh?

However...

"What?! The barrier blocked it?! Since when are the beasts able to put up such strong barriers?" Zom exclaimed in shock.

Zom had already fought the Galdian army before. He knew what they were capable of, and that's exactly why he had assumed he could easily break their barrier and fly away. But his attack didn't even make a dent in the barrier I had put up.

"I have to say, I'm disappointed. I heard you were supposed to be *tough*."

"Wha—? You're the one who built this, aren't you?! Who the hell are you?!" Zom barked.

I had been mixed in with a crowd of huge beastmen and concealing my mana ever since we arrived; Zom hadn't noticed my presence until now.

I looked up at him with cold eyes. "I'm an adventurer. I've been asked to help with this job. Anyway, you're really starting to get on my nerves zipping around up there like

that, so I'm gonna have you come down now, okay? *Gravity!*"

All I had to do was make a little up-and-down motion with my staff, and Zom came crashing to the ground. He smashed right through the roof and the second floor of the building, hurtling down until his body slammed onto the ground of the first floor.

"Someone get a set of mana-leech cuffs!" I instructed.

The soldiers of the regiment let out a collective "Aye-aye!"

As soon as Zom hit the ground, one of the soldiers grabbed his arms, put his hands behind his back, and fastened the handcuffs on his wrists before dragging him outside.

"Damn it!" Zom spat. "But it's not over yet! You still have to deal with my colleagues: Rock Crusher Eiden, and his bodyguard, Bardley the Bloody! Those men have body counts you can't *imagine*. It's only a matter of seconds before you're all dead!"

"What?! There are two other A-rank guys?!" Carter exclaimed before dashing to the entrance.

However, he immediately stopped in his tracks at the sight of a hulking shadow in the doorway.

"Eiden, Bardley! Hurry up and kill these guys!" Zom said from his spot on the ground. He seemed to have guessed who it was simply from their shadow.

"So that's what these guys are called, huh? Heave-ho!"

But unfortunately for Zom, it was Teto who came out. She was carrying two large bodies—one of them a giant man and the other a huge beastman—which she unceremoniously dumped next to Zom.

"Impossible... Eiden has mastered Body Hardening, and Bardley can use the Beastchange skill at will! I can't believe you..."

"Lady Wiiiitch! I took everybody to safety, just like you told me to!"

I had entrusted Teto with the task of clearing out the prisoners. To do that, she built a tunnel that led straight to the room where they were confined and brought them to safety. Meanwhile, Carter's soldiers kept pushing forward, and soon enough, the

remaining members of the organization had found themselves cornered.

"I'll give you all some potions later. Use them to heal the slaves and the soldiers who got injured during the operation," I told Carter.

"Miss Chise, Miss Teto, you have defeated the organization's strongest members and saved our brethren. I will never be able to thank you enough," he said.

Zom shot us a death glare.

"Chise and Teto... You're the ones who cleared that dungeon, huh?" He muttered.

It seemed that he had heard about us destroying that dungeon in Gald's breadbasket. The soldiers then took Zom and his two sidekicks away. The three of them were for sure going to be thrown in jail and tortured until they spilled everything they knew.

Carter, Teto, and I headed back into the building to look for evidence of their criminal activities.

"Colonel Carter! We found a secret safe!" one of Carter's subordinates came to tell us. We promptly headed to the second floor to check it out.

"Is *that* the 'secret' safe?" I asked, pointing at a metal box. It was hidden behind a painting. How innovative and absolutely *not* predictable in the slightest, nope.

"Yes," Carter nodded. "This seems like a pretty high-quality steel safe. Looks like dwarven work to me."

"Teto can slice it open if you want!" She was about to draw her sword, but Carter hurriedly stopped her.

"Hold on a moment! Some types of safe have a mechanism that makes them burn everything inside if they are forced open."

I hummed. "A magical device for getting rid of the evidence, huh?"

This safe most likely contained traces of the organization's illegal activities: their secret accounts, documents related to important deals, and maybe even some contracts as well. It would make sense for the safe to possess such a mechanism. The fact that the safe was made out of steel and not some sort of magic metal might have

been a deliberate choice, meant to bait whoever found it into trying to force it open, destroying any evidence of wrongdoing within.

"For now, we need to take this safe back with us and find a way to disarm the safety. There are very few mages who are capable of such a feat in our nation, so it's going to take some time for us to open it," Carter said.

He started grumbling about how this was going to slow our investigation even more. Listening to his complaints with half an ear, I took another look at the safe.

"Hmm... *Analyze*," I chanted. "I see... So if I just pour a bunch of mana in here at once, it looks like I can burn off the magic circle," I muttered to myself. "Aaand all done. It's open."

The device was powered by a magic circle, and it seemed to only react if someone tried to break or force the safe open. I used about 30,000 MP to flood the magic circle and fry the device, which, in turn, opened the door.

"Looks like the documents are intact," I said.

"Lady Witch, you're amazing!" Teto chirped.

Carter was staring at me in disbelief, his eyes wide as saucers and his jaw on the floor.

I paid him no mind and started skimming through the papers that were in the safe. It seemed that the organization didn't just abduct beastmen: there were also records of them enslaving elves and dwarves, as well as dragonmen and other demi-human races.

"Here," I said, handing the documents to Carter.

"Once again, thank you so much for your help, Miss Chise! I shall have my men inspect these documents right away!"

"All righty then, should we head on to the next base? It's a race against time now."

"We still got lots of people to save!" Teto said.

"H-Huh?" Carter seemed to have been so surprised by my statement that all traces of life left his voice.

"Well, the rest of the organization will learn about us destroying one of their bases and capturing some of their members soon enough. They'll most likely desert their other bases and hunker down."

"So we have to go beat 'em up before they have time to run!" Teto added.

Carter gulped loudly before reeling his expression back into his usual serious look.

"Leave a few people here to deal with the aftermath of the raid and let's regroup with the soldiers in charge of observing the other bases," I instructed him.

"Y-Yes, Miss Chise!"

After that, things moved fast.

Carter gathered all of his best soldiers, and they started making their way toward the next enemy base on horseback. Teto and I followed them on our magic carpet.

We went from base to base, taking control of the buildings, looking for more intel about the organization, investigating every single person who seemed to have some sort of ties with them, etcetera, etcetera, rinse and repeat.

CHAPTER 5

A BLUEPRINT FOR OUR NEW HOME

“Phew, things have finally calmed down!”

“Good work out there, Lady Witch!”

“I hope we get to take it easy for a little while.”

It had been a year since we were tasked with the eradication of the slavers from Lawbyle. Since then, Carter, Teto, and I spent our entire time trudging about the eastern reach of Gald. We made quick work of the first three bases, but it seemed that, as soon as we were done with one, we learned about the existence of another. The organization had much deeper roots than we had initially thought, and we had to go as far as to set up a countermeasures office in the barracks in eastern Gald and collaborate closely with Carter’s regiment to mop up the stragglers one by one.

“The investigation part took forever!” I groaned.

“That was the most annoying part for sure!” Teto nodded.

Most of our time had been spent waiting for Carter’s regiment to track down the members of the organization in hiding. Carter’s soldiers scoured every little town and village for clues to help triangulate our next target until we had sufficient intel to flush them out. Teto and I would go lend them a hand if things got sticky, but we mostly stayed at the countermeasures office and helped the soldiers run practice drills.

“So this is the Beastchange skill?” Carter said, panting.

Teto and I had secretly helped him learn the Beastchange skill; by now he was about on par with most A-rank adventurers. Due to his nature as a birdman, the skill gave him the ability to fly, which meant he could now hold his own against magic users with flight spells like Zom.

“Miss Chise, Miss Teto, it was an honor working with you!”

“Thank you so much!”

The following spring, exactly a year after we accepted the job, we were contacted by Prince Gyunton, who told us there were no traces of the organization left in Gald. After some tearful goodbyes from Carter and his regiment, Teto and I headed back to the capital to make our report to Prince Gyunton, bittersweet smiles on our faces.

“Miss Chise, Miss Teto, we’ve been awaiting you. Let me take you to Prince Gyunton’s office.”

“Thank you, Rollwacca.”

“Thankies!”

While Gald’s royal palace had a rather plain appearance, it seemed very strong and sturdy. It truly fit the notion of “form over function” to a T.

“I’ve read through a few reports of the mission already, and every single one of them mentions just how impressive you two were. It truly was an exhilarating reading experience,” Rollwacca said.

“Thank you. It’s a bit embarrassing to hear you say that, though.”

“Lady Witch and Teto did our best!”

On top of destroying all of the organization’s branches in Gald, we also managed to dismantle several bandit groups, investigate and arrest the slavers’ Galdian accomplices, rescue illegal slaves by chasing down a wagon... We’d stayed *busy* this past year.

“Even in the capital, we started hearing rumors about two adventurer girls on a flying carpet taking down villains all over the country.”

“We didn’t only use our flying carpet. I also flew on my broom from time to time,” I pointed out.

My broom was much faster than the flying carpet, but since we had to move in tandem with Carter’s regiment, we mostly used the latter. That must have been why it left such an impression on the Galdians.

We kept on chitchatting with Rollwacca until we reached Prince Gyunton's office. Rollwacca knocked on the door and announced us.

"Prince Gyunton, Lady Chise and Lady Teto are here."

"Come in," the prince answered.

We did as we were told. Prince Gyunton was sitting at his desk, doing some paperwork.

"I'm almost done," he said. "Hold on a moment."

Teto and I nodded and went to take a seat on the sofa. A couple of minutes later, a maid brought us some tea. For a while, the sound of a pen scratching across paper was the only noise in the room.

"Sorry for the wait," Prince Gyunton said when he was done. "And also for having you locked into that mission for an entire year. We're swamped with all the bureaucratic cleanup still to do. Rollwacca, can you get me something to drink?"

"Of course, Your Highness."

We proceeded to chat about the organization while sipping on some tea. Well, Teto and I had already written everything we did in our report, so we just provided some additional details as the need arose.

Prince Gyunton, on the other hand, was still dealing with the fallout. He was currently trying to convince the neighboring kingdom of Lawbyle to release the Galdians who had been illegally sold there.

"For now, they have agreed to let us repatriate the people with a definite paper trail, but we suspect there are still others we don't know about yet; chasing leads on that front has been our main preoccupation of late."

"I see. That's a good start."

These people had suffered heavy physical and mental wounds and would probably never be able to live normally again. Well, that was what I thought at first, but Prince Gyunton followed up by explaining that they'd been sold into *debt* slavery, not punitive slavery. Gald only allowed slavery as punishment for a crime, which meant there weren't that many slaves in circulation in the first place, and almost no women or

children. So the organization had to pretend they were debt slaves from Lawbyle instead to avoid arousing suspicion from the buyers, and unlike criminal slaves, debt slaves were at least guaranteed food, shelter, and clothing. This may have been the only silver lining to a very dark cloud for these people.

"We've also learned that certain Lawbylean nobles have bought illegal slaves. After we confronted them with that fact, the ruling body assured us they were doing everything in their power to eradicate the organization in their country as well."

Well, no surprise there. It would be a huge diplomatic issue for Lawbyle if other countries thought their nobility supported the illegal trade of slaves. From certain points of view you could say that it would be tantamount to an act of war. The government of Lawbyle most likely was doing everything it could to eradicate the organization with the aim to exonerate itself. Once they got rid of their main branch, the whole operation would drastically weaken, and if there were any remaining branches in Gald, they would collapse before long. While this definitely wouldn't put an end to all criminal activities in Gald, it should at least lead to a decrease in the number of abductions for the foreseeable future.

"I've already transferred your reward for the mission to your guild cards, and I've booked you an appointment with the best architect in the country. Just in case, I also wrote you a letter of recommendation signed with my name. Take it with you."

"Thanks. Well then, we should get going."

"The tea was super yummy!"

We received the letter of recommendation from Prince Gyunton and departed from the royal castle. We then decided to pay a visit to the architect Gyunton recommended to us. When we arrived there, a glasses-wearing apeman greeted us.

"Prince Gyunton told me everything about you two!" he said excitedly. "You'd like me to build your new residence, is that right? Might I ask if you already have an idea of what you want?"

"Um... We wrote our requests on this paper!"

"Teto wants to live in a biiig house!"

We had been wandering the country for the past year, so we had more than enough

time to exchange ideas about the new house. We'd managed to get it down to about a page worth of must-haves, which I handed to the architect. He quickly skimmed through it, nodding occasionally.

"I see. And these are nonnegotiable, hm? Are there any limitations regarding the terrain you plan on building the house on? Oh, and if you're building it in the capital, I can introduce you to a carpenter friend of mine."

"Ah, that won't be necessary. We live near Vil, right next to the frontier. Just the blueprint will be fine. And no, terrain's not a concern."

"Understood. In this case, it'll take about six months for me to design the house. However, if you want to have any input in the process, it'll take a little longer."

I hesitated a little before answering.

Normally, when one hires an architect to build a house, they do a lot of back-and-forth with them to make sure the blueprint is one hundred percent to their liking. But I could use Creation Magic. As long as I had a blueprint, I could make all the changes I wanted myself.

"We want to go back to Vil as fast as possible, so we're leaving it all in your competent hands. I'm sure you're this country's number one architect for a reason," I said.

"I'm so excited to see what our new house's gonna look like!" Teto piped up.

"Understood. Well then, once I'm done with the blueprint, I shall send someone from the merchant guild to deliver it to Vil's adventurer's guild."

Prince Gyunton had actually paid part of our bill in advance as part of our reward.

Now all we needed to do was wait for the blueprint to be done.

"Lady Witch, I'm so excited!"

"Me too, Teto. I'm looking forward to seeing what kind of house he's going to come up with."

Teto and I hopped on our flying carpet and slowly made our way to the Wasteland of Nothingness. We spent the next few months doing commissions for the guild and, in

the fall, we finally got the blueprint of the house.

But...

"This, um... This isn't exactly what I was expecting."

"Wow, what a beautiful mansion!"

The blueprint was drawn on a large sheet of paper that had been folded on itself several times. We spread it out and were met with the blueprint of a giant, two-story mansion with tons of bedrooms, large balconies, a dining room that looked like it could fit several dozen people, a massive kitchen, and a bathroom with a large bath. The plans even included a large backyard and a basement. On another smaller sheet of paper were the plans for a separate building for the servants. It was so over the top that it looked just like one of those fancy noble mansions. Needless to say, it was miles away from the moderate-sized, functional home I had been anticipating.

I was staring in despair at the ceiling, wondering why in the world the architect thought *this* would be a good fit for us. Teto, on the other hand, loved it.

"Lady Witch! We're really gonna live in such a big house? Teto is so excited!"

"No way. Did you see the size of that thing? Imagine cleaning in there! It'd take *days*."

I took another look at the house, which was way too big to house two people, and finally realized why it was so ginormous.

"Oooh, I get it now. Since Prince Gyunton was the one who referred that architect to us, he must've thought the prince was going to give us a noble title."

He probably assumed that the prince had decided to ennable us after seeing how promising our careers were, and that we were looking to have our future residence built already. And since I told him we didn't have any limitations regarding the size of our land, he most likely thought it meant we were going to have servants as well, which explained why he included a separate building for them. While most of the nobles in Gald were demi-humans such as beastmen and dragonmen, there were still some humans among them, especially in remote towns like Vil. That must be why the architect hadn't thought much of two human girls looking to build a mansion.

"*Creation*. A maquette of the house."

I used my Creation Magic to create a scale model based on the blueprints, just to see how it would look. The residence, while big, looked pretty unassuming and seemed, all in all, pretty functional. A house fit for a pair of newly ennobled adventurers, really. But the best part was definitely the mixing room—which was located in a detached building—as well as the giant library with bookshelves covering all of the walls for us to store the myriad of books we had accumulated until this point. I couldn't help the sigh of *want* that escaped my mouth when I imagined myself living in this house.

"We can't," I chastised myself. "This is way too big for two people. I'm going to put it away for now, and we'll decide what we do with this later on."

"Aw, what a shame!"

I could technically build it—I had enough mana stored up in my Mana Crystals. But taking care of such a massive house would be damn near impossible. And so, I reluctantly put the blueprint away.

Our current house would do just fine for the time being.

CHAPTER 6

A GHOST FROM THE PAST

With our new house plans on the back burner, Teto and I headed back to the Wasteland of Nothingness for the winter.

"We've let the place sit for a whole year thanks to the mission. Let's do a thorough check of everything we've got going on here," I told Teto as we flew over the wasteland on my broom.

"Roger!"

We made sure the Archdevil we had sealed in the middle of the wasteland hadn't escaped, inspected the World Trees and the rest of the mana hot spot, checked the barrier devices... But then I suddenly noticed a strange, small shift in the mana.

"Lady Witch? What's wrong?"

"It feels like... somewhere in the wasteland, there's a hole, and the mana's draining through it, a little at a time."

The wasteland's mana production was already pretty low to begin with... Scratch that, it was nonexistent. For the past ten-odd years, we'd been hard at work planting trees and releasing my own mana in the hope of upping its mana density, but we were still nowhere near done. So if something *was* sucking up what little mana we'd cultivated, we'd never manage to rehabilitate the wasteland.

"Teto, let's go find out what's causing this."

"Roger!"

Gathering mana into my eyes to use Mana Perception, I turned my broom in the other direction and followed the flow. But when we arrived there, everything looked normal.

"Seems like it's right under here. *Psychokinesis!*"

My spell cleared the snow from our surroundings, revealing a slight fissure in the ground. The ambient mana here was drawn inside in rhythmic pulses, almost as if the ground was breathing.

“Teto, can you check what’s under us?”

“Leave it to me!” Teto said, using her Earth Magic to inspect the ground below us. “Lady Witch, there’s a building under the ground.”

“Oooh! These must be ruins from our precursors.”

Around two thousand years ago, an ancient magical civilization had gone on a rampage here, reducing their land to a barren moonscape. Everything aboveground had been destroyed in the process, but it seemed that a few underground structures survived the catastrophe. I had actually stumbled across some ruins elsewhere in the wasteland a few years ago, where I’d found documents about the control devices our precursors used for their magic tools. I’d used them to create a similar magical apparatus that I was, to this day, using to manage the barrier devices around the wasteland. I’d been wondering what exactly was left of the ancients for a while now, but I hadn’t gotten the chance to do any further spelunking. One thing was for sure though: I never thought whatever was down there would randomly start working again, just like that.

“Let’s try digging up whatever’s draining all of the mana. We should put up a barrier to try and limit the effects too.”

“Teto’s good at digging things!”

I quickly set up a barrier device to prevent more mana from being sucked up and started moving the earth with my magic, Teto doing the same next to me.

“It doesn’t seem to be sucking up live beings’ mana, and it’s not preventing us from using magic either.”

From what I could tell, it seemed that whatever was hiding down there was only sucking up the mana surplus that plants and animals released into the air—or from us. It also wasn’t absorbing whatever mana we used casting spells.

“Maybe some sort of mana-sucking device has booted up on its own?”

This could make sense: before, there had been no mana in the air for the device to absorb, but our restoration efforts might've reactivated it.

"Lady Witch? Is something wrong?"

"This looks like... concrete?"

After moving the earth around for a while, we stumbled across something that looked like it could be a building. It had been fixed in place with magic, so Teto and I carefully removed all of the earth and stones that surrounded it so as not to break anything, until the whole building was visible. It seemed about the size of a small hotel.

"Lady Witch, what is this?"

"I don't know. Let's go inside and inspect it."

I looked for the door and tried pushing it open. It didn't budge, probably because it had been buried underground for more than two thousand years.

"Looks like we don't have much choice. *Laser!*" I chanted.

Instantly, a beam of light shot out of my staff, burning off the door.

"Aren't you being a bit too rough, Lady Witch? Ancient ruins are rare and irreplaceable," Teto said.

"I didn't really have a choice. Don't you wanna know what's in there?"

The documents detailing the experiment that led to the destruction of the ancients might still be in one of these structures. If they were, I needed to seize and destroy them to make sure a calamity like the one that struck this world two thousand years ago wouldn't happen again.

And so, Teto and I stepped into the building.

"It's pitch-dark in here. *Light!*"

I cast a spell to allow us to see the room and couldn't help letting out a little 'Oh my.' We were standing in some sort of great hall. Skeletal remains and mummified bodies were strewn across the room. Some of the skeletons bore signs of brutal head

trauma—these people had not passed quietly.

“It looks like not all the ancients died during the rampage. Some of them had time to take shelter in these buildings. And then they all...” I trailed off, deeming it unnecessary to finish my sentence.

“It’s really sad.”

These bodies haven’t seen the sun for two thousand years. We should take them out and give them a proper burial, I thought, taking a step toward the nearest skeleton.

But right as I did, all of the bodies on the ground started rattling, and ominous-looking fumes started filling the musty room.

“Lady Witch! An enemy’s coming!”

“Looks like it’s some sort of geist!”

The fumes drew together into a colossal, vaporous creature.

“It hurts,” it lamented. “Everything hurts. We’re so cramped in here. I’m hungry. Someone save me. Take me out of here. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die like this.”

“This monster embodies the collective grudges of the people who were stuck here. Two thousand years worth of lamentation and fear of death gave birth to it... It’s a Fear Geist.”

I grabbed Teto’s hand and used a flight spell to get us out of the hole we had dug, but the Fear Geist immediately came after us. Well, it tried to. It seemed that the monster couldn’t follow us past a certain point beyond the shelter.

“It seems to be bound to the building.” I concentrated my mana into my eyes and looked at the creature, confirming my suspicions. It would figure that a monster born from that place’s conditions couldn’t stray too far from it. “Two thousand years of grudges, huh? Well, it’s been stuck in that shelter with no mana for equally as long, so it shouldn’t be too hard to beat,” I mused.

“Lady Witch, I feel so sad for these poor people... Please help them!” Teto implored me, looking on the verge of tears.

Teto became an earthnoid after consuming a magic stone in which a spirit was trapped. While she was now her own person, there might still be remnants of that spirit inside her. Hearing about the poor people being trapped in that shelter, just as the spirit itself had been in that stone, seemed to have struck a chord with her.

“Don’t worry, I will. *Purification!*” I chanted, floating high above.

A surge of cleansing mana washed over the building.

“A-Aaaaah!” the Fear Geist shrieked in agony when the wave passed through its ghostly body.

Its cry diminished as the creature all but melted into thin air, the negative energies sustaining it vanishing before us.

“Lady Witch, are you done?”

“Yeah. There probably isn’t a single evil spirit left in the shelter.”

I had used 50,000 MP—about half of my mana pool—to cast that spell. No evil spirit should have been able to withstand such a powerful purification spell.

After that, I used Wind Magic to send some fresh air into the building and, with Teto’s help, cleared out all of the bodies and rubbish.

“Lady Wiitch! Do we cremate everyone?”

“Yes. We’ll deal with that later.”

“Okay!”

When we stepped into the shelter for the second time, we noticed that there were lots of small rooms everywhere, probably to make sure all of the people who had taken refuge there could have their own space. Teto and I went from room to room, gathering all of the remains and mummified bodies and taking them out. After we made sure we had gotten all of them, we cremated them with a fire spell and scattered the ashes in the wind.

“May you be reborn and embark on a new journey,” I quietly prayed.

Just as I'd been reincarnated in this world, I hoped that these people got a chance to live another life.

All of a sudden, I felt like I heard a voice in my ear.

"Thank you. We're free now," it said.

"Teto, let's investigate the rest of the shelter."

"Roger!"

Now that we had dealt with the geist, we could go back to exploring the building. Most of the rubbish we found there was old, broken emergency supplies. I was pretty impressed by how modern all of these devices looked. Some of them even sported tags stating that they would last for up to a thousand years. On these, I could detect faint traces of residual preservation magic. Well, whether or not they were bound to truth in advertising, they clearly weren't rated for *two* thousand years of neglect; they were all broken now. I was in the process of transporting a broken defensive golem (rendered so during an internal struggle, I presumed) when I spotted *it*.

"Is that a person? I thought we had taken all of the bodies out already. Did we miss some?"

"This isn't a human, Lady Witch," Teto said.

"It's not? Is it some sort of doll, then?"

Its skin was peeling away—most likely due to how long it had been sitting inside this shelter—and its metallic limbs weren't even attached to its body anymore. I wondered if it got damaged during the riot I suspected had happened here. The human-shaped doll was drawing on our mana in that same pulsing rhythm that led us here to begin with.

"I wonder if it can still move."

"Lady Witch, be careful! It's dangerous."

"Don't worry, I got this. *Charge!*" I put my hand on the doll and poured some of my mana into her, just as I did whenever I recharged Teto.

The doll glowed slightly, and her eyes blinked open.

"Hello. I am Attendant Doll N°B20984. I am currently out of order. Please send me back to the manufacturer to have me fixed," it rasped.

Its voice was cracking, and it was a little difficult to understand. Maybe the passing of time also degraded the mechanism that allowed it to speak.

"An attendant doll? Do you know the current situation?" I asked.

"The current situation... I was posted in this shelter to attend to the refugees. On the sixty-seventh day after the calamity, the humans started fighting each other... and they dismantled my body. After that, I entered sleep mode for an extended period to conserve mana. Are you two... here to help us?"

"Nope, we're just exploring the ruins. All of the humans who lived in this shelter are long dead. We actually just got done cremating their remains. It's been two thousand years since the events you just mentioned."

"I... see. Might I ask you... to tell me... what happened?"

"Of course. We'll take you to our house, and I'll tell you everything there. Teto?"

"Yes, Lady Witch!"

Teto gently picked up the attendant doll while I looked for its limbs and the other parts of her body that might've gotten broken during the riot, and we headed back home.

CHAPTER 7

THE ATTENDANT DOLL

When we reached our house, we softly set the doll down on a chair. I started examining her body while she told us more about herself.

“Type B attendant dolls are made by combining metal with organic matter. We are humanoid magic tools whose main duty is to provide assistance to humans in their daily life.”

“A bit like a homunculus then?” I asked.

“I believe most people would consider us more akin to humanoid golems.”

“Oooh, so you’re just like Teto!” Teto chirped up, beaming.

“You said you’re a Type B attendant doll, right? There are other types, then?” I asked next.

“Yes. Type As are made for fighting purposes, Type Bs for assisting humans in their daily lives, and Type Cs for sexual relief.”

As I inspected her body, I couldn’t help but think that its mechanical and thaumaturgical components, including the fake skin covering it, looked much more advanced than I imagined anything from that time period to have been. She was an honest to goodness out-of-place artifact.

“Lady Witch, do you think you can fix her?”

I hummed. “It’s gonna be a bit difficult...”

“An attendant doll’s warranty period is only three hundred years. The manufacturer does not provide warranty support for this product anymore. I would recommend purchasing a new attendant doll,” it said, a wry smile on its face.

“That manufacturer died about two thousand years ago. We have no choice but to fix

you yourselves."

I had my Creation Magic, after all. I could easily make the doll's missing parts with my magic and fix it, little by little.

"I'm gonna need a blueprint for Type B attendant dolls... *Creation! Blueprint.*"

I naively thought that I could get the plan for an attendant doll with my magic, but when I cast the spell, nothing happened.

"Well, I guess my mana pool is still a little too small to create something from two thousand years ago, huh? Sorry, I'm going to need some time before I can actually fix you," I told the doll.

If I wanted to have access to this super-technology, I'd need to expand my mana pool some more.

"Why are you apologizing? We attendant dolls do not require thanks or apologies."

"I've heard before that all objects gain a soul on their hundredth birthday."

In Japanese folklore, we referred to these objects as "tsukumogami." And since that doll had survived for two thousand years, I absolutely intended to treat her as if she was a regular human being.

"This phenomenon has already been studied by magic scientists before under the name of 'ghost theory.' However, attendant dolls all undergo an antimagic treatment, which makes us resistant to the effects of magic. Only 0.01% of attendant dolls can actually develop a soul."

"But that antimagic treatment gets weaker and weaker as time goes by, doesn't it? Which means it's entirely possible for a doll to develop a soul after some time," I pointed out.

"That would make the attendant doll a defective product. I advise you to find a replacement as soon as possible."

It was a very mechanical response, but to me, that doll was still no different from a regular human.

Still, the ancients sure had some pretty awesome technology. They seemed to have been almost as advanced as modern civilizations. It was definitely much too advanced for Teto, who was standing there with her head tilted to the side in confusion. The sight was rather comical.

“Well, I’m the one who found you, so I’m gonna fix you and keep you around.”

“Understood,” the attendant doll said after a short pause. “My original owner has left, so you are now my new master. I look forward to serving you, Master.”

“The pleasure’s mine. I’m Chise, by the way.”

“And I’m Teto!”

“You don’t have a name, huh? That’s not very practical. Let’s see... What do you think of the name ‘Beretta’?”

“I’m now... Beretta. Understood,” the doll said, nodding slightly—the outer limit of her motor function.

From tomorrow onwards, I would focus on fixing this broken attendant doll while looking for other precursor ruins in the wasteland.

The Attendant Doll Beretta’s Side

“Why did I wake up? Why am I not broken anymore?” I whispered to myself after my masters went to bed, lying down in a bed like an ill patient.

It was a bizarre feeling to be taken care of like a human. I was created solely to serve, yet I couldn’t do my duty. I turned my head to the side—the joint of my neck creaking as I did—and caught a glimpse of myself in the window glass with my night vision.

(I look awful.)

My artificial skin and muscles had peeled away, revealing the metal skeleton underneath, and most of my hair had fallen out as well. It wasn’t a pretty sight. My magic vocal cords were damaged, and my voice was raspy, yet my thoughts sounded very clear.

(Why am I the only one who survived? I know the answer to that question: my body. I got left behind because of this metal body of mine.)

I closed my eyes and was wrenched back to a moment two thousand years past, according to Master.

Master had told me all about the collapse. From what I remembered, when the calamity struck, about a thousand people had taken refuge in that shelter. Somewhere on the surface, something exploded, and with it, the world's mana burned away. Most people died in the blast, but those who hadn't wouldn't have been able to live long after that. My contemporaries—Master's "precursors"—drew long life and prosperity from the vast seas of mana they had cultivated, and in turn, they could not survive without them. I still recalled when the subject was a matter of debate in the prevailing science literature. I had to assume that most people probably died shortly after the explosion, and that the survivors had given up on longevity—and with it, mana dependence—many generations ago.

"What about my masters though? What are they? Is Lady Teto even a human?"

Master's mana pool was almost as large as the ancients', but she had no need of mana to survive. Her body had also stopped aging. My creators had aspired to the eternal youth of the first humans, but none had come quite this far. And, well, Lady Teto looked and acted just like a human, but she wasn't one. She was a demon, a race that hadn't existed two thousand years ago.

"There's no point in overthinking this," I said. "Master is Master. It's all that matters."

My thoughts wandered back to the calamity. It truly was a miracle that the shelter had survived the explosion. However, the force of the blast had completely blocked off the shelter door, and with no mana anywhere, the humans couldn't use their magic to escape either. In the absence of a better way to encapsulate what came next, I can only resort to a crude human notion. It was hell.

At first, the humans had been optimistic: they would cheer each other up, falling back on an eternal refrain that soon enough, someone would find the shelter and help them. And so the other attendant dolls and I simply did our jobs, assisting the humans with daily tasks. However, as time went by, the necessities of life dwindled, and the confinement and close quarters had started to take a toll on the humans' mental health.

Unfortunately, as Type B dolls, all the other attendant dolls and I could do was take care of chores. If there had been Type A dolls among us, they could've stopped the fights and riots from happening and kept peace in the shelter, however uneasy. Type C dolls would've been able to comfort the humans and help them relieve their stress. But all we Type B dolls could do was keep the shelter clean and organized. However, after a while, we became an irritant to our masters. They tore our arms and legs apart and left us in a corner of the shelter to be forgotten. I painstakingly turned my head to the side, only to see the other attendant dolls and the sentinel golems in pieces on the floor, broken beyond repair after the humans took out their nerves on them. Several days passed, and there was not a single bit of food left in the shelter. The last thing I remembered was watching powerlessly as the humans fought each other until my body completely ran out of mana and I entered sleep mode. This happened on the sixty-seventh day after the catastrophe.

My new masters said that they had cremated all of the human remains left in the shelter. However, from what they had told me, they had found too few bodies to explain the sheer number of souls in the Fear Geist's gestalt. One possible explanation would be that most of the remains had worn away from erosion. Another would be that the last people in the shelter had eaten the other humans' remains, bones and all, in a last-ditch attempt to survive.

Why am I the only one who made it out? Why not the humans?

"I can't even move... Why did my body suddenly boot up all on its own?"

That thought repeated itself in my head ad nauseam. I couldn't move, couldn't fulfill my duty, yet I still existed. My new masters had even given me a name.

Why did that thought bring me such joy?

Was my body even salvageable after two thousand years in that shelter?

Would my master really manage to fix my body?

Would I be able to properly serve her and Lady Teto one day?

These thoughts ran without interruption through my head the entire night.

CHAPTER 8

THE HUMANOID MAGICAL WEAPON

From the next day onwards, Teto and I started exploring the wasteland's every nook and cranny to find out if there were more ruins from the ancients. We both used *Earth Sonar* to check the underground for ruins, going as deep as a hundred meters. The wasteland was huge, almost the size of a small country, so we spent the entire winter doing basically just that.

We ended up finding thirty-seven more ruins underground. A few of them were shelters like the one we found Beretta in, and we ended up having to purify vengeful spirits in every single one. Naturally, we cremated all of the human remains, just as we had the first time.

We also stumbled across a bunch of different magic devices in the ruins. We found other attendant dolls, but unlike Beretta, they were *truly* broken and wouldn't boot up even after I poured mana in them. There were also pretty advanced-looking magic items everywhere in the ruins. I used the appraisal magic I'd learned from the church's grimoire on them and quickly realized that the precursors' magic items were way more advanced than anything we had in this world.

Even the way they were made was different. One of the buildings we had found underground seemed to have been some sort of magic item factory, full of really high-grade-looking magic machinery and devices. And when I took a look at the broken attendant dolls and the golems, I noticed that they all had identical characteristics, which made me think that they might've been mass-produced as well.

"From what I can tell, it looks like the ancients would first make magic parts, then send them to a big factory to get assembled, and that's how complex tools like attendant dolls were made."

Of course, individually, all of the broken magic parts we had found were worthless garbage, but put together, they must've been pretty efficient tools.

"There are magical parts in the doll's joints. This must've been so that they could function without needing too much mana."

I was currently in the process of dismantling a broken attendant doll to see exactly what I had to do to fix Beretta, and noticed that it was equipped with features like posture control and even a mechanism that allowed it to regulate the weight of any object it carried. All of these features might've seemed like nothing at first, but put together they made it possible for the dolls to move a lot more like humans than golems, all while consuming very little mana.

Compared to how advanced the attendant dolls were, the other small magic trinkets that I assumed belonged to the refugees in the shelter all seemed very similar to things we had nowadays.

"These look so normal... If I made copies of them and handed them to random people in the streets, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't suspect anything," I mused. "Still, we really didn't find that much stuff, considering we turned the whole wasteland upside down, huh?"

All of the ruins we found were either made of really sturdy materials or located near the wasteland's edge. This, again, proved just how powerful the explosion that had happened here had been: it had wiped out almost everything, even underground.

"Lady Wiiitch, this is the last one!"

"Thanks, Teto."

It was almost springtime, and we were finally on our way to explore the last underground structure we had found. It might've taken us the entire winter, but we could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"Haaah! Yaaah!"

With practiced moves, Teto started digging up the earth with her magic. This time, though, we didn't find ruins, but a giant golem buried in the ground.

"Huh? What the hell? This looks more like a robot than a golem," I said.

The giant "golem" we dug up was actually a humanoid magical weapon made entirely out of metal. It was about four meters tall and had a turret on its left shoulder. It somehow reminded me of a tank.

"It looks like it's sucking up the wasteland's mana too. If we leave it like that, it's gonna

end up booting up on its own in the near future," I noted.

"What should we do, Lady Witch? Should we break it?"

I hummed. "We probably shouldn't touch it for now. What if we end up waking it up and it starts attacking us?"

I quickly put a defensive barrier around the golem and used a teleportation spell to send Teto and me back to our home base.

"Beretta, we're back. How are you doing?"

"Hi again, Beretta!"

"Welcome back, Master, Lady Teto. I apologize for not being able to come and greet you properly," she said, sitting on a rocking chair on the front deck of the house.

I had used the *Refine* spell—an Earth Magic technique—to polish and smooth out Beretta's broken limbs before carefully wrapping them in a cloth and putting them in a corner of the house. I had also exchanged Beretta's old and tattered dress for a new, classical maid outfit, and covered her lower body with a lap blanket.

"I'm the one who should say sorry. I really want to fix your arms and legs, but I still don't know how."

"Please do not worry, Master. My body wasn't intended to last for two thousand years, after all."

"Thanks, Beretta. I actually have something to ask you. We just found a giant golem buried in the ground, and I was wondering if you might know what it is."

I quickly described the golem to her. She nodded as if she knew exactly what I was talking about.

"It is probably an artillery-type magical weapon. They were created to fend off monsters that attacked human cities and towns. You talk about the 'precursors' like they were miracle workers and demigods, but the magic humans used back then wasn't necessarily all that much more powerful than the kind humans use now."

"Is that so?"

According to Beretta, while the precursors might've been a lot more advanced than our current civilization, it wasn't as if they could wield stronger magic than we did nowadays. Back then, most people possessed large quantities of mana due to their long life span. However, almost none of them actually used their magic to fend off monsters, as they tended to rely on defensive magical weapons. The magic incorporated into these weapons was tuned to penetrate their default target's potent Body Strengthening.

Most people back then didn't even know how to use magic anymore and created magical tools for even the simplest tasks, pumping up mana from the leylines to power it all.

"Why do humans always end up going down the path of industrialization?" I muttered, thinking back on my previous life.

Teto tilted her head to the side in confusion at my words.

Beretta then told us that skills weren't a thing back in the Ancient Magical Civilization Era. It seemed that these had been added, along with status, by the gods of this world in the hopes of rendering a world deprived of mana a little bit more survivable.

"Magic back then truly wasn't as impressive as one might think," Beretta concluded.

"I see," I nodded, thinking back on the catastrophe that struck the ancients and how it was probably related to all the technology they had acquired. "Having the power to make tornadoes and tsunamis is all fun and games until one has to deal with the aftermath, huh?"

Most people were probably curious about what experiment the ancients did that caused such a huge explosion, but researching the topic was a huge taboo.

Humans can't help but want to put whatever they learn into practice, after all.

"Going back to the golem, it won't be able to move properly, so I believe leaving it where it is is the best course of action. You could also dismantle it," Beretta suggested.

"I see. Even if I kept it around, I have no idea how to operate it. Can you, Beretta?"

"Attendant dolls and magic weapons like golems do not possess such compatibility. I am unable to help you, Master—much to my dismay."

"Hm, then I guess I'll just break it down for parts."

"Lady Witch, Lady Witch, this golem is so big it must have a huge magic core! Can Teto have it?" Teto asked, hungrily.

I shot her a strained smile and glanced at Beretta. That golem was a humanoid magical item just like her, after all. I had to wonder if Teto's request didn't come off as sort of ghoulish from her perspective. But Beretta seemed completely unbothered.

After we got done talking, I took Beretta in my arms and teleported back to the artillery golem.

CHAPTER 9

PHYSICAL MAGIC 2.0

When Teto, Beretta, and I arrived, the golem had a nasty surprise in store.

"Hey, Teto. Is it just me or is it moving? I *did* put a barrier around it, right?" I asked.

She nodded. "You did. Teto also thinks it's moving. And the tube thingy on its shoulder too."

Its external armor was peeling off, probably due to being buried for so long. Its right arm had probably fallen out at some point—as that'd been missing when we dug it up—and one of its legs was damaged, dragging on the ground. Despite that, the golem was still moving, walking around as if it was surveying the area.

"Master. This type of magical weapon most likely has a magic absorber built into its body. I believe it must have nullified your barrier and used that mana to boot back up."

"What?! Wait, isn't that dangerous?" I asked.

"It might be. It has been buried in the ground for so long, it wouldn't be abnormal for it to start malfunctioning. And if it went on a rampage..."

The golem spotted us as we stood there, listening to Beretta's explanation, and the turret on its shoulder slowly turned toward us.

"Hold on, it is aiming at—? Run!"

I used Body Hardening to ward off the attack right as the turret shot a laser beam at us, making a huge hole in the ground.

"This laser has magic-canceling properties. It can easily pierce through weak barriers," Beretta supplied.

I used a flight spell to soar high into the sky and avoid the golem's attacks, Beretta still in my arms. Teto, on the other hand, attempted to confront the golem head-on.

“I’m going... Oh!”

The golem pointed its turret at Teto and fired another beam at her, but she easily deflected it back with a swing of her Body Hardening-reinforced sword.



"Oh my... Lady Teto is rather reckless, isn't she?" Beretta commented. "Unfortunately, the golem is probably expecting her to fight back."

Beretta was right: the golem used whatever remained of its armor to withstand the shock of the attack. It seemed that its outer armor could somehow absorb magic attacks, as the laser beam didn't even leave a scratch on its metallic body.

As soon as the beam disappeared, the golem sucked up more of the ambient mana and readied its turret for another attack. This time, it wasn't one single, large beam, but a barrage of smaller shots at Teto. She skillfully used her sword to parry most of the lasers and dodged the remainder.

"There isn't a lot of mana here, so the golem's attacks take a while to charge, but they're pretty strong. It even knows how to read the situation and changes its attacks depending on its opponent," I remarked.

"Master, shouldn't we help Lady Teto? I believe she's in danger."

"Don't worry about her, she's fine," I said. "But you're right, I should probably try something."

Maybe a physical attack would work?

"Let's do this. *Hard Shot!*"

These mana crystals contained about ten times the load of the previous ones. I used some of my mana to harden them, making them sturdy enough to pierce the golem's armor—especially since I'd fired them at supersonic speed.

"Whoa, that was pretty loud."

"Unfortunately, the golem withstood the attack."

The mana crystals had crashed into the golem with a deafening sound. But due to the golem's magic-absorbing properties, the hardening effect on the crystals got canceled as soon as they made contact with its body. However, the golem wasn't able to offset kinetic energy. The speed at which I had thrown the crystals had been more than enough to make a big dent in its outer armor as they shattered against it.

"Hm... Guess I need something sturdier. *Creation! Tungsten cannonball!*" I yelled.

Instantly, just what I requested appeared in my hand. It had cost me about the same as the massive guillotine I had created to fight the hydra back in the day.

“Here’s a cannonball about ten times harder than the mana crystals! Take this!” I yelled as I cast a spell with my free hand to negate gravity’s effect on the cannonball, still cradling Beretta against my chest with my right arm. I added some spin to the cannonball and launched it, using Gravity Magic and Wind Magic to adjust its trajectory. There was no point in trying to harden it—the golem would absorb the mana anyway—so I decided that making it go faster would be a better investment.

The cannonball punched straight through the golem’s midsection, effectively severing its upper body from its lower limbs.

“Aaand, done. Let’s go check what’s salvageable then, shall we?” I said, landing softly on the ground.

“That was an impressive attack, Master. It was almost like an anti-army artillery—Huh?! It’s still moving!”

Despite being cut in half, the golem aimed at Beretta and me with its turret. But right before it could launch its attack...

“Lady Witch! Beretta! Teto will protect you!”

Teto, who had been busy dodging the golem’s laser beams for the past couple of minutes, dashed toward the golem and swiftly sliced off its left arm and head. The mana it had gathered in its turret dispersed right before it could shoot at us, and the golem fell utterly still.

“Phew, now it’s really over. Let’s go dismantle it.”

“Roger!”

Teto and I went to do just that.

“Its magic core is still intact,” Beretta said. “It’s what was used to control it. I would advise either selling it, as it is quite valuable, or using it in the mana management device you plan on constructing to regulate this land’s mana, Master.”

That golem had been as strong as an A-rank monster, and the deep red magic stone

that formed its core was huge. I shot Teto a glance.

"*Analyze*. Okay. I know how to make it now, so you can have the stone, Teto. I'll be able to recreate it easily as long as I have another magic stone and enough mana saved up."

"Yaaay!" Teto cheered.

She broke the magic stone into bite-sized pieces and started eating them. My *Analyze* spell told me everything I needed to know about the golem and its magic stone. Now, all I needed to do was either find another A-rank magic stone or make one myself, and I could use it to make a much more powerful mana-controlling device than the one I was currently using. It might even be able to properly maintain the leylines.

"Let's head home then, shall we? This was the last ruin from the ancients in the entire wasteland. From now on, I can finally focus on fixing your body, Beretta."

"Thank you very much, Master."

And so I teleported the three of us back home, Beretta still in my arms.

CHAPTER 10

THE GREAT GODDESS LARIEL

Fixing up Beretta turned out to be a much more challenging endeavor than I initially thought.

I had dismantled the other attendant dolls we had found in the ruins and was using them as a reference to see what I would need to do to fix Beretta. However, the magic parts our precursors used had incredibly complex structures. I ended up spending hours analyzing every single part that made up the dolls' bodies and taking notes about their composition. I then used my Creation Magic to make the parts one by one. But when I tried to install them in Beretta's body...

"This is no good. I'm missing a part, and I have no idea how to make it. And even if I did, I wouldn't know how to connect it to the others."

"Is there truly no way, Lady Witch?"

"There isn't," Beretta answered. "The attendant dolls' manufacturer had something of a 'black box.' Some of the parts have been enchanted so no one would be able to learn their composition and recreate them."

Of course they had. It made sense that they wouldn't want anyone to be able to reproduce their work, but it meant I had no way of fixing Beretta, to my dismay.

I sighed. "There's nothing I can do here. I just don't have access to technology that advanced."

I had been able to craft most of the parts by myself, but the core components were totally out of my range, and I couldn't even use my magic to learn how to make them.

"You really are an out-of-place artifact. I have no idea how to fix you."

"So Beretta will stay broken forever?" Teto asked, disappointment audible in her voice.

"It's all right," Beretta said, calmly. "There simply is no solution. I regret not having

been able to service you, Master. If you allow me one last request, I would like for you to break my body down for scrap so that I can be of use to you at least once.”

“Don’t be silly. I can’t fix you *now*, but it doesn’t mean I have given up on the idea completely.”

My first idea didn’t work out, but it was fine. I just had to come up with another approach.

I tucked Beretta in her bed, and Teto and I called it an early night. And in my dreams...

“Oooh, so you’re that promising reincarnator Liriel’s been talking about!”

“Um... Who are you?”

Usually, whenever I had a dream oracle, Liriel would be the one visiting me. However, the woman standing in front of me right now had red hair and seemed a lot livelier than Liriel.

Earlier, I had used the *Dream Oracle* spell to ask Liriel for advice on how to fix Beretta, but I clearly must’ve made a mistake when casting it.

“I’m Lariel, the oldest of the Five Great Goddesses! Nice to meet you!” she introduced herself, a sassy grin on her face.

Her outfit was similar to Liriel’s, down to the halo above her head, and wings were sprouting from her back. She seemed full of energy, which stood in stark contrast with Liriel’s calm personality, but it didn’t make her any less charming.



"Okay... I'm Chise the Witch," I said with much less enthusiasm. "You seem awfully carefree for a goddess."

"I don't have to be all stiff and stuck-up just 'cause I'm a deity. Besides, I'm the Goddess of the Sun! I gotta have a sunny disposition, right?" She beamed at me.

She sure did seem bright and warm. All in all, I thought she gave off gentle big sister vibes.

"Liriel picked out a pretty cooperative reincarnator this time, didn't she? I can't believe how far you've gone in the regeneration of the Wasteland of Nothingness in a mere dozen years!"

She flashed me another smile before scanning me from head to toe with her bright eyes. It made me feel a little uncomfortable, so I took a couple of steps back.

"Liriel always boasts about you whenever we see each other! I'm so jealous! So it got me thinking... Chise, could you help me with my domain too?"

I blinked in confusion at her unexpected demand. I thought about it for a few seconds and, right as I opened my mouth to give her my answer, a voice came from above us.

"Lariel! What are you doing?"

"Aw, Liriel's come to ruin my fun!"

Liriel flew down and landed right between Lariel and me.

"It's so unfair, Liriel! Why would you get to keep her all for yourself, huh? You can lend her to me for a bit!"

"No. She's not done rehabilitating the Wasteland of Nothingness yet. And besides, dealing with whatever is going on in your domain is going to take her ages!"

"Um, I don't mind helping," I chimed in, interrupting their quarrel.

"What?!" Liriel cried out in shock, right as her sister broke into a huge grin.

"For real?!" she asked.

"Yeah, it's fine. Can it wait for a bit, though? I'd like to fix Beretta first."

"Of course! I've waited for two thousand years, what's a few more, am I right?"

"Be careful, Chise. If you accept Lariel's request, my other sisters won't hesitate to ask for your help too," Liriel warned me.

Hmm, that *did* sound like a pain...

"Well, I'm basically immortal. I'm sure I'll get bored at some point," I said.

And when that happened, I could take on the other goddesses' requests.

"You're too much of a soft touch," Liriel lamented with a deep sigh.

I forced a smile on my face, inwardly apologizing to her.

"Anyway, I have a question for you two. Do you know how I can fix Beretta, the broken attendant doll I found? I'm at a bit of a loss here."

Both of them shook their heads, apologetic looks on their faces.

"While I do feel flattered that you're asking for my assistance, I'm sorry to say I can't help you."

"Unfortunately, we goddesses aren't omnipotent."

"But you're the goddesses of this continent! Surely you can give me a hint. Isn't there, I don't know, a tribe that still has access to that technology somewhere?" I pressed.

But they shook their heads again.

"Sorry, but we really can't help you, Chise. That technology you're talking about is long gone. And since the world is a lot different now than what it used to be, I'm afraid it's gone for good."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Liriel and Lariel gave me a quick rundown of everything that happened between the genesis of this world and now.

The Creator first birthed the continents and the gods, who then created life: people, monsters, plants... The gods watched over the people of their continents and used their magic to lead them through this age of chaos. The miraculous natural phenomena caused by the gods in that era apparently became the basis for Origin Magic, which was born later down the line.

The chaos subsided and the world entered an age of civilization. The people started studying the world, divine weapons, and magic the gods had bestowed upon them, which allowed them to grow at a tremendous rate. And after a great span, they finally reached the pinnacle of civilization.

"Then, two thousand years ago, the catastrophe struck, civilization collapsed, and the whole world ran short of mana. And so, to ensure the scant few left behind would survive, we decided to change the world's rules by introducing the status system you're so familiar with."

Status access allowed the survivors to alter their bodies, and skills gave them an edge independent of mana.

"You already know what happened after that: we started reincarnating people from other worlds here in the hopes of battling the mana drought. At first, everything was going fine; civilization seemed set for a swift recovery. But then, things started stagnating."

In about three hundred years, the local population had reached a level of industrial development equivalent to early medieval Europe. But after that, while there was still the occasional genius that gave a little push with their inventions, things weren't really moving forward.

"The threat of monsters is omnipresent and people keep fighting each other; steady progress is impossible in the midst of such chaos. But there is one thing in particular that's completely throwing things off, something we hadn't anticipated at all..."

"What is it?" I asked.

"See, everything in this world has a status, not just people. And by everything, I mean even things like tools and, naturally, monsters. This is what caused the things you guys call 'demons' to appear. We tend to refer to them as the 'second humanity'."

It seemed that the gods considered humans and all of the races that appeared in their

immediate wake—elves, dwarves, beastmen, dragonmen, etc—to be the “first humanity”; demons, as the one great upset to this arrangement, were their successors.

“It’s been over two thousand years, yet people still haven’t discovered the technology to cross oceans,” Lariel said. “For all we know, the other continents might be ruled by demons instead of humans.”

“Fortunately for us, while the fall ravaged our continent, relatively few individuals have become demons. But who knows what happened in the rest of the world?”

“I see. Because you’ve changed the rules of the world, new races have appeared.”

All I did was ask a single question, yet I somehow got roped into listening to the goddesses’ problems. I understood their dilemma, though: humans might’ve been born first, but Liriel and her sisters probably felt that it was their duty to protect the demons as well.

This little conversation gave me an idea.

“Thank you for telling me all of this. You gave me a precious hint about how to fix Beretta,” I said.

“What? No way. What do you mean?”

“Well...”

I told Liriel and Lariel about my off-the-cuff idea.

Lariel instantly burst into laughter. “Are you serious? Well, that’s definitely not something that would’ve been possible two thousand years ago!”

“But it doesn’t sound impossible...” Liriel muttered, a pensive look on her face.

And just like that, the two goddesses disappeared and I woke up from my dream.

CHAPTER 11

THE DOLL CAN FINALLY SERVE ITS MASTER

Now that I had an idea of how to fix Beretta, I wasted no time and got to work.

And on a beautiful spring day...

“Beretta, I’m going to repair your body today.”

“Didn’t you previously say it was impossible, Master?” Beretta asked me.

I told her about the method I came up with.

“Well, like I told you earlier, I can’t fix you using the same technology that they used back then,” I started.

It was slight, but I could feel Beretta’s disappointment at my words.

“But then, I started thinking: what *can* I use? Is there something that would allow me to fix you, an inorganic being? And *she* gave me the answer,” I said, pointing at Teto.

“Huh? Teto did?”

Teto used to be an earth golem, but for reasons too involved to retread here, she became an earthnoid, a demonic race. Or, well, I guess a “second humanity” race. After she ate that dungeon core, the spirit that was trapped inside it fused with her clay body, changing her status to “earthnoid.”

Another critical point: certain magic swords, provided they’d been forged a certain way, could mend themselves with sufficient time and mana.

“Beretta, I’m going to give you the Self-Regeneration skill, and with enough time, your body will repair itself. It might change your status to ‘demon,’ but that’s the plan.”

“I see. Might I know how you plan on bestowing me that skill?”

“With this bad boy.” I took out a Self-Regeneration skill orb I had made with my Creation Magic. It was a much rarer skill than, say, a random fire spell, so I had to use a good chunk of my mana crystals to make it.

“If I give you this orb, you’ll be able to use the Self-Regeneration skill. But I want *you* to decide whether or not you want to proceed with this method.”

“Me? Might I ask why?”

“Sure. I told you my plan, but I’ve never tried anything like this before. I have no idea if it’s going to work or what’s going to happen to you. So I want you to tell me: do you want to take that risk, or would you rather we wait until civilization reaches a point where we have access to comparable technologies to the ones your manufacturer used to make you?”

No matter her decision, I would never, ever give up on her.

“I am a soulless attendant doll. No matter what, I will never become an equal to humans. However...” Beretta marked a pause and fixed her eyes on me. “You have taken me into your home despite my body not working. To repay you for that kindness, I will accept your offer. There is no point in me staying like this, unable to move, let alone properly serve you. I am willing to take this chance, no matter the outcome.”

“Okay. And for the record, neither Teto nor I think that you don’t have a soul.”

“Lady Witch’s right! Teto used to be an earth golem, you know? So don’t say sad things like that ever again, okay?”

I pressed the skill orb into Beretta’s chest, right above her attendant doll core, granting her Self-Regeneration.

“Did it succeed, Master?”

“I don’t know yet. We just gotta wait and see for now.”

She had just gotten the skill, so it was still really low-level, and we wouldn’t be able to see any drastic changes for a while.

“Master, the mana levels in my body are rapidly decreasing. At this rate, I will enter sleep mode in a matter of minutes.”

"It looks like your body has started using that mana to regenerate itself. Let me replenish it for you. *Charge!*"

"Mm... mmm!" A strangely sensual sound slipped out of Beretta's mouth when the spell hit her.

"Beretta?" I asked, a little worried.

"Pardon me. I am fine."

It must've been a side effect of the orb, I thought as I tucked her in.

About as I expected, there was a stretch where we couldn't see any progress, as the Self-Regeneration skill prioritized repairing the destroyed parts inside her body. But then the artificial muscles and skin that had mostly peeled off her endoskeleton grew back, and, after a few months, indigo-blue hair started sprouting from her scalp. By summertime, all she was missing were her limbs. Her arms started regenerating first. Unfortunately, they could only grow about one centimeter a day, so it took several months for both of her arms to grow back. By early winter, her newly formed arms were fully functional, and I used my Creation Magic to make her a wheelchair so she could wander around the house as she pleased. I gave her a knitting book and some yarn to occupy herself, and she made it her mission to learn how to knit.

"You have to keep warm during the winter, Master. I will knit you some wool underwear."

"Uh, that's a bit embarrassing but... thanks. I appreciate it."

I did feel a bit awkward receiving underwear from her, especially as a first gift, but they were soft and kept me warm.

Her legs started regrowing, and finally, in spring, a little over a year after we found her...

"How does it feel to be standing for the first time in two thousand years?"

"Ooh, Beretta, you're taller than Teto! And your posture is so elegant!"

Beretta was standing gracefully in front of us wearing the classical below-the-knee maid uniform I had created for her, her indigo hair neatly tied up in a high ponytail.

"Thank you so much, Master, Lady Teto. From today onwards, I, Beretta the attendant doll, will serve you to the best of my ability."

"Congratulations, Beretta. I'm looking forward to it."

Ever since we started the regeneration process, I'd been checking Beretta's status every day to see if there were any changes. Contrary to what I had thought, she hadn't turned into a demon; her status still read "attendant doll," and the only thing that changed was the addition of the Self-Regeneration skill to her skills list. I also noticed that she spoke and moved slightly less mechanically than before. All in all, she seemed a little more human now.

There was a beautiful smile on her face; the joy rolled off her in waves. She was deeply moved to finally be able to stand on her own two legs after all of these years. Nothing about her said "soulless doll."

Still, I didn't know why, but I had a strong feeling something would happen in the future that would turn Beretta into a demon.



CHAPTER 12

RESUMING OUR ACTIVITIES AS A-RANK ADVENTURERS

We successfully managed to fix Beretta's body, but unfortunately, another issue remained. See, attendant dolls drew on ambient mana to move for extended periods of time. This obviously hadn't been an issue two thousand years ago, since there was mana aplenty in the air, but nowadays, the mana concentration was much, much lower.

"I am disappointed in myself for not being able to fully serve you, Master."

Beretta could only move properly when she was near the World Trees, and even then, she had to enter sleep mode for about six hours a day to replenish her mana, or she wouldn't be able to move.

"It's all right, Beretta. You're already a huge help to us," I comforted her.

"Yeah! And you shouldn't be overworking yourself in the first place anyway!"

I hadn't been lying: now that we had Beretta with us, we could leave the management of the Wasteland of Nothingness entirely to her, which meant that Teto and I were finally able to resume our activities as adventurers. And so, after over a year spent confined in the wasteland, Teto and I made our way to Vil. We headed straight to the adventurer's guild, where we learned that the old guildmaster had retired and a younger staff member was now assuming that role.

And finally, after a year-long break, we were able to resume our activities as A-rank adventurers. Although unfortunately, we quickly discovered that there were actually very few A-rank quests.

"Miss Chise, Miss Teto, can you please take care of this job?"

"Sure, let me see... Okay. Got it."

"Let's go, Lady Witch!"

Once or twice a year, we were dispatched to other towns to go on urgent missions. Most of the time, we were asked to go support Gald's army in areas where they ran short on manpower, as our flying carpet let us cover ground quickly. We went from town to town and, after a few years, I was able to add all seventeen of Gald's major cities to my list of teleport destinations.

"This is actually quite fun. We got to add so many new spots to our list."

"I'm always having fun when I'm with Lady Witch!"

When we weren't being dispatched to other towns, we would spend our days helping the newer adventurers train, delivering potions and medicinal herbs to the guild, and taking care of the boring routine quests no one ever wanted to do. By the time I turned forty, we had gotten a few A-rank quests under our belts. In no particular order, we had:

Defeated the Thunderbird Dragon, an A-rank monster.

Subjugated a monster that was causing trouble for B-rank adventurers.

Performed regenerative magic on Gald's greatest warrior, at the request of Prince Gyunton.

Traveled to the capital to oversee the adventurers' A-rank promotion exam.

Dealt with the aftermath of a landslide caused by heavy rainfall in a southern region of the country.

Apprehended a wanted criminal.

Tracked down and subjugated a man-eating werewolf.

Worked as security at the international adventurer's guild conference held in Gald.

We also took on loads of B-rank quests to keep racking up achievements.

At first, people were a little weirded out by our flying carpet. There were already very few humans in Gald to begin with, and there we were, traveling around the country on a *rug*. But then, when they realized it let us take care of urgent missions way faster than any other adventurer, they became much more accepting of us. Troubadours

started singing about us and, before we knew it, the flying carpet had sort of become our trademark. In the absence of a proper party name, folks started calling us the “Carpet Riders.” There wasn’t a soul in Gald who hadn’t heard about us.

But life wasn’t all fun and games, and during our travels, we encountered many tragedies and hardships.

Take the Thunderbird Dragon quest, for instance. As soon as we learned about it, Teto and I flew straight to where the monster had last been seen.

We weren’t fast enough. By the time we arrived, it had already destroyed three villages, killing over 150 people in the process. From our vantage point on our flying carpet, Teto and I could see the villages that had been annihilated by Thunderbird Dragon’s lightning bolts. Later on, we learned from the few people who had managed to escape that some of the villagers had tried fighting the creature, but there was nothing they could do against a living, thinking, *hateful* storm.

“If only we had shown up sooner...”

“We did everything we could, Lady Witch,” Teto said to comfort me.

One hundred and fifty casualties were actually pretty good against an A-rank monster. Similar monsters on record had killed well over a thousand.

Life’s not a fairy tale. No matter how much I wished it was possible, I couldn’t possibly kill a monster on the other side of the country before it caused any harm. Besides, quests were only issued if some sort of damage had already occurred.

That applied to the other quests we took on as well.

Both the wanted criminal we apprehended and the man-eating werewolf—a member of the Hagle tribe—were threats to the citizens of Gald and had to be promptly taken care of. The Hagle werewolves actually looked quite similar to Beastchanged wolfmen, and for that reason, some regions welcomed them with open arms. However, unlike wolfmen, werewolves had evolved from monsters, not humans. They weren’t compelled by the rules of human society, which made them as big of a threat as those criminals were to the people of Gald. That particular werewolf hadn’t technically hurt anyone in Gald yet, but for the safety of the people, he had to be eliminated. And so, that’s what we did.

We also had to come to the rescue of a B-rank adventuring party after they failed to subjugate a monster. They lost half of their members during the battle, and the remaining half escaped death by a hair's breadth. After we were done with the monster, I used my magic to heal the survivors. Unfortunately, there I had no way of mending the trauma of seeing their comrades die.

That's when I realized the profound reality that every single quest carried with it the weight of someone's sorrows. The higher your adventurer rank was, the greater the tragedies.

Fortunately, there were still some rays of light amidst the darkness.

One day, I was tasked by Prince Gyunton to heal the nation's greatest warrior. He had also fought a Hagle werewolf and had emerged victorious from his battle, albeit not unscathed: he had lost his right hand and his left leg, as well as one of his ears; even his tail had been cut off. It truly was a pitiful sight.

The regeneration spell relied on the body's nutrients, so I forced him to eat a lot, and, little by little, his limbs started growing back. Unfortunately, though, his body had to eat into his muscle mass to complete the regeneration, and by the time his limbs had grown back, all of his muscles had atrophied. He was so scrawny no one would've been able to tell he was once a powerful warrior.

"Thank you, girlies. I can once again protect my comrades."

That man would have to work like crazy to get his muscle mass back to what it had been before. But despite the horrifying experience he went through, he stayed strong and didn't lose hope.

One year, we got invited to oversee the adventurers' A-rank exam at the capital. That's when I realized that the adventurers in Gald were a lot different from Ischea's. Gald was a Beastman Nation, which meant that there were a lot more human-adjacent races such as elves, dwarves, dragonmen, and of course, beastmen, than actual humans. All of them had their own distinct fighting styles and techniques that showcased their individual strengths. In particular, there was a young warrior in his late teens who had successfully ascended to A-rank in an insanely short amount of time. Despite his youth, he had already mastered both Body Hardening and Beastchange, and possessed incredible swordsmanship. He truly was a prodigy. The sword training he had received from his father, who worked as a knight, combined with the practical experience he

had gained working as an adventurer propelled his growth at an even faster pace than our own journey had taken us. It made me realize the boundless potential of humanity.

Another incident that made a big impression on me was the landslide that happened in that little town in the south of Gald. Once I had received the quest, I quickly packed my Magic Bag full of emergency supplies, and Teto and I flew there to help rebuild the town. Natural disasters were undoubtedly tragic, but seeing those people staying strong and working together to restore their town truly moved me. I could feel their optimism for the future.

We also were tasked to work as security during the international guild conference. All of the Grand Masters from every single guild in the continent were invited, and it was held in a different country every time. The main goal was for the Grand Masters to discuss things like how to adapt to changing threats from monsters, or what the best strategy to clear a dungeon was. Things weren't entirely fair though, and the Grand Masters had different degrees of influence in the decision-making depending on the importance of their affiliated nation. It was also difficult for all of the Grand Masters to find common ground sometimes, as each country had its own ideology and traditions, not to mention the conflicts of interest and racial tensions that sometimes arose. But despite these disagreements, the Grand Masters still worked together day and night to keep apace with monsters.

We would occasionally go back to the Wasteland of Nothingness to get some well-deserved rest, exhausted from all of the quests we had taken on.

"Welcome back, Master, Lady Teto."

Despite the many horrors we witnessed on a regular basis, having Beretta warmly welcome us back every single time we came home never failed to soothe my heart.

These little moments of happiness meant the world to me.

CHAPTER 13

AND JUST LIKE THAT, I TURNED FORTY

At some point during the ten years that Teto and I spent flying back and forth across Gald to fulfill quests, Selene, my adoptive daughter, had turned seventeen and had even gotten married. I used my magic to teleport Teto and me to Ischea, where we hid on top of the bell tower to secretly watch the ceremony. Beretta hadn't been with us back when we lived with Selene, so I made sure to tell her everything about my darling daughter.

Over these ten years, I had dutifully eaten my strange fruits every single day, and Teto also got to eat magic stones to her heart's content.

NAME: Chise (Reincarnator)

CLASS: Witch

TITLE: Goddess of the Pioneer Village, A-rank Adventurer, Black Saintess, Carpet Rider

LEVEL: 90

HP: 3000/3000

MP: 304,430/304,430

SKILLS: Staff Martial Arts Lv 5, Origin Magic Lv 10, Body Hardening Lv 2, Mixing Lv 6, Mana Regeneration Lv 10, Mana Control Lv 10, Mana Isolation Lv 9, various others...

UNIQUE SKILLS: Creation Magic, Unaging

NAME: Teto (Earthnoid)

CLASS: Guardian Swordswoman

TITLE: Witch's Follower, A-Rank Adventurer, Carpet Rider

GOLEM CORE MANA: 150,880/150,880

SKILLS: Magic Swordsmanship Lv 2, Earth Magic Lv 10, Body Hardening Lv 5, Monstrous Strength Lv 6, Mana Regeneration Lv 5, Subordinate Strengthening Lv 7, Regeneration Lv 6, various others...

Thanks to that, my mana pool had grown to over 300,000 MP, and Teto's golem core to over 150,000 MP. We had also defeated a large number of high-ranked monsters over the years, which resulted in all of our skills leveling up. Teto's Swordsmanship skill had even evolved to Magic Swordsmanship, a much more advanced skill. We also each learned a lot of other skills that weren't shown in our status. All in all, these past ten years had been quite fruitful.

Meanwhile, the Wasteland of Nothingness had also changed quite a bit.

"Master, Lady Teto, lunch is served."

"Thanks, Beretta! You're the best."

"Thankies!"

Beretta and the bear golems Teto had made more than a decade ago had taken care of the wasteland for us whenever we went adventuring.

Teto and I sat down to enjoy our meal, but Beretta simply stood to the side and made no move to join us.

"Beretta, eat with us."

"Yeah! Food tastes better when you share it with others!"

Teto and I tried to get her to join us at the table, but Beretta refused.

"While I do have artificial taste buds that allow me to detect flavors, I do not need to

eat," she answered matter-of-factly.

I forced a smile onto my face.

"Food can nourish your heart too. How about you sit with us, and we can chat about our day over a nice meal?"

"Is that an order?"

"It's not; it's a request."

Beretta stayed silent for a little while, seemingly deep in thought, before finally saying "Understood," and taking a seat at the table. Since then, we've been eating all of our meals together.

Some more time passed and, one day, after she was done with a big spring-cleaning of the house, Beretta came to see me.

"Master, I found this while tidying up," she said as she handed me a thick bundle of paper.

"Oooh. A long time ago, we had an architect draw up these plans for us when we were thinking of expanding."

"I took the liberty to look at it and the house in these plans is, indeed, very large. Isn't it more of a mansion than a house?"

"It is!" Teto chimed in. "Lady Witch said it was too big for the two of us, so we didn't build it!"

"I see." Beretta nodded. She took another look at the house blueprint before shifting her gaze back to me, the determination clear in her eyes. "I have a proposition, Master. If you had about twenty more attendant dolls, we should be able to easily take care of a house that size."

I was pretty surprised when Beretta told me she had a suggestion, but I was interested to see what she had to say.

"Okay. Can you elaborate?"

"Of course. The house is by no means small as is, but if you plan on installing more teleportation gates and rebuilding the land management system, I believe it would be wise to build a larger house."

She was right. I shot an amused glance at her before answering.

"Okay. I'll build that mansion and create a couple of coworkers for you."

"Ah, that's not... That's not why I suggested this."

Now that we had Beretta, Teto and I could leave the wasteland for extended periods of time without having to worry about anything. But what was Beretta doing to occupy her days when we weren't here? She wasn't necessarily *alone*—the bear golems could keep her company—but she would probably be happier with a few other doll friends.

"All righty then. *Creation!*"

And just like that, I used my magic to build the mansion as it was designed on the blueprints and created twenty more attendant dolls, all of which I bestowed with the Self-Regeneration skill.

"It's amazing, Beretta! Now you won't have to be alone when we're traveling!"

"Lady Teto... Thank you so much, Masters."

Beretta looked a little puzzled, but I could tell that she was happy.

She immediately led the other dolls inside the mansion, where she tasked some of them with cleaning the house while the others were in charge of rebuilding the wasteland management system.

"These new dolls feel a little robotic, huh?"

Unlike Beretta, who had existed for two thousand years, these dolls had just been born. This explained why they were a lot stiffer and seemed a lot less human than Beretta. I hoped that, in the future, after gaining more life experience, they would turn out to be just like Beretta—maybe more so.

Even more time passed, and before I knew it, I had turned forty. I was technically old enough to be a grandmother, but due to my Unaging skill coupled with Teto, Beretta, and the other dolls not aging either, I didn't really feel that old. And so, I kept on living my relaxed, mostly carefree life.

Then, one winter night, Lariel appeared to me in a *Dream Oracle*. It had been a while since she last came to see me alone.

"Hey, Chise? Now that you're done fixing up that attendant doll, do you think you'll be able to help me with my little issue soon?"

"Oooh, I forgot about that."

It had been over ten years since Lariel asked for my help with her domain, and between the emergency missions I got dispatched on in Gald, the refurbishing of the wasteland, and, most importantly, the fun-filled days I spent with Beretta and the other attendant dolls, it had completely slipped my mind.

"Chise... Aren't you becoming a little too blasé with life now that you've lived for so long?"

"Maybe... If things keep going like this, I feel like I'm gonna start saying 'the other day' to talk about things that happened a hundred years ago."

Since I had pretty much reached eternal youth, did I even have something akin to a "future"? That thought made me rethink my life decisions: I should probably try living a slightly more varied life.

"I guess I can probably help you now, yeah," I told Lariel.

"Thank you, Chise! Here's the spot that's been causing me trouble!"

Lariel gently touched my head and transmitted to me everything I needed to know. Turns out it was located in the eastern part of the continent, in the Kingdom of Lawbyle.

"Lawbyle's in your domain? And you want me to seal a seepage point in the leylines?"

"Exactly! And to answer your first question, I'm the Goddess of the Sun, remember? It's only natural for my domain to be where the sun rises!" she said, puffing up her

chest with pride.

I had a hard time following her logic, but I didn't bother asking more questions and simply nodded.

The next morning, I told Teto and Beretta about Lariel's mission, and that we would leave as soon as spring came.

"So you're leaving again, Master?"

"Yeah... I wish I could take you with us, but with the mana drought, it's going to be a little difficult."

"We'll buy you a souvenir!" Teto chirped.

Beretta nodded, but she looked a little surprised.

"A *Dream Oracle* from Goddess Lariel?" she muttered. "So worship of the goddesses persists, even after two thousand years."

"Hm? You know about Lariel and the others, Beretta?"

"I've heard about them. They are the goddesses the Creator birthed to rule over this continent."

Beretta then enounced the name and function of all five goddesses. It was the exact same as it always was: Lariel, Goddess of the Sun; Liriel, Goddess of the Earth; Luriel, Goddess of the Oceans; Leriel, Goddess of the Skies; and Loriel, Goddess of the Underworld.

"I actually got my little idea of how to fix you thanks to a *Dream Oracle* with Liriel and Lariel."

"Really? Still, to think that you are able to communicate with the goddesses, Master... Your powers truly are impressive."

"Teto also wants to meet the goddesses one day!"

I told Beretta the rest of my conversation with Lariel while Teto pouted next to us. When I was done, Beretta looked down, seemingly a little hesitant.

"Master, is it really impossible for me to accompany you on that journey?"

"You wanna come, Beretta?" I asked.

She raised her head. Her expression was still the same as always, but I could tell by her demeanor that she really wanted to come along. Attendant dolls weren't able to regenerate their mana on their own, so they could only move for extended periods of time if they were in an area with strong mana density—near a World Tree, for example. If we took Beretta out in the world, she would probably only be able to stay awake for at most four hours a day.

She knew that, yet her eyes were shining with determination.

"Do you really want to come?"

"Yes. In the past, you and Lady Teto brought me a cake as a souvenir from your trip."

"Teto remembers! It was delicious!" Teto piped up, drool seeping out of her mouth.

"I was so shocked to learn that such a simple thing was considered a luxury product," Beretta continued.

"Well, that's because sugar is really expensive here. And besides, what matters in a cake isn't the ingredients, but how it's prepared."

I could easily use my Creation Magic to make white sugar whenever I needed it, but most shops in this world didn't have access to large quantities of it.

"That's exactly my point," Beretta said.

"What do you mean?"

"The ingredients you and Lady Teto occasionally bring back from your trips are often things I have never seen before, and the dishes you have gifted me have always been prepared in ways I hadn't even known existed. While it is always extremely enjoyable for me to discover them, I am unable to use the ingredients you bring back home, as I do not know how to prepare them."

Teto and I did, indeed, often bring home rare ingredients or dishes we had found during our trips, and I did notice Beretta not knowing what to do with some of them.

“And so, I think that I should accompany you on one of your trips to update my knowledge of this world, and also to develop new recipes to cook for you.”

So basically, she was just frustrated she didn’t know how to cook these new ingredients, huh?

“I apologize for my brazenness, but if you provided me with external mana storage devices such as mana crystals, I should be able to stay awake for longer periods of time. I understand it might be troublesome, though.”

I was still pondering on it, so I hadn’t said anything yet, so Beretta kept adding argument after argument to try to convince me. I could feel the passion exuding from every single one of her words. I was a bit surprised by her sudden enthusiasm, but it mostly made me really happy.

“Sure. You can come. And I don’t think your asking me to help you replenish your mana is troublesome in the slightest. I’m actually really happy you’re finally asking for my help with something.”

Usually, due to her nature as an attendant doll, Beretta made sure to always act in a subservient manner. But there she was, asking for me to take her along on our trip. I felt so happy to finally see her voice her feelings for once.

“It’s gonna be even more fun than when it’s only me and Lady Witch!”

“Lady Teto, I get startled when you suddenly hug me like that.”

Teto was clearly just as happy as I was that Beretta would be coming along on this trip, and she had all but jumped at Beretta, which startled the poor doll.

We could leave the management of the Wasteland of Nothingness to the other attendant dolls while we were away.

CHAPTER 14

BERETTA'S FIRST OUTING

Spring came and it was, at last, time for us to leave on our first trip with Beretta.

"I will be accompanying our masters on their trip. Please look after the mansion in the meantime," Beretta informed the other attendant dolls who had come to see us off.

"Please leave it to us, Miss Head Maid. We will eagerly await your return and trust that you will successfully carry out the mission assigned to you by the goddess Lariel, Masters," all twenty maids answered in perfect sync.

"No need for such formalities," I told them. "I have both teleportation spells *and* the teleportation gates. We can come home whenever."

"Yeah! We'll come to say hi from time to time!"

We said one last goodbye to the other attendant dolls, got on the flying carpet, and off we went. Our first stop was Vil, the closest town to our home in the wasteland. We popped back in town from time to time to turn in some potions and medicinal herbs to the guild and to take care of a few quests. We didn't want to tread on the other adventurers' toes too much, though, so we only took on the occasional A-rank quest and the boring, routine quests no one wanted. All in all, we didn't really do that much adventuring work these days and had pretty much semi-retired already. Our time was mostly spent relaxing in our mansion while slowly working on the regeneration of the Wasteland of Nothingness. Still, we'd used Vil as our main base for adventuring work for over twenty years, so it didn't feel right for us to leave for Lawbyle without saying goodbye to the people at the guild.

"Welcome, how may I help you today?" a young receptionist greeted us as we entered the building. I had never seen her before—a new recruit, perhaps?

"Stay right there, Beretta," I told the attendant doll before turning to the receptionist. "Hi, my name is Chise, I've been doing adventuring work here for a little while. For a variety of reasons, my companion Teto and I will be moving to the Lawbyle Kingdom for the foreseeable future, so I thought I'd let you know."

"M-Miss Chise? And Miss Teto? M-May I have your guild cards, please?" she asked, looking a little flustered.

Teto and I did as we were told. The second she saw the "A-rank" and our party name—the Carpet Riders—she let out a little panicked shriek. Teto and I had gotten a little bit of a reputation after helping out on a few emergency quests, to the point where bards all over the country were now telling stories about us and people had started treating us as celebrities.

"J-Just a moment, please!" the receptionist told us before rushing over to one of her superiors at the back of the guild.

"You are quite the public figure, Master," Beretta whispered to me.

I sighed. "Is it going to be like that everywhere we go now?" I whispered back.

"It can't be helped, it's the price of fame!" Teto chimed in, a proud look on her face.

I wasn't so happy about this whole situation, though. In this world, a single person could easily change the outcome of a battle, provided their magic and skills were strong enough. A-rank adventurers like us were considered nothing short of national treasures.

But the catch was, there was basically no work for A-rank adventurers anywhere. A-rank quests, like the emergency missions Teto and I got sent on a couple of times, were very few and far between, happening only once or twice a year in a single guild. In the meantime, A-rank adventurers had a few options: they could either take on B-rank quests, relocate to Dungeon City—which was known for its many opportunities—or try venturing into a Demon Den to defeat the strong monsters there.

And after a few years, when their bodies couldn't handle questing and fighting anymore, most of them would either:

Retire and take on a guildmaster position;

Become a guild instructor for the next generation of adventurers;

Join the ranks of the nobility;

Join their country's order of chivalry or their army;

Start a business with the money they made during their adventuring days;

Or buy a plot of land in the sticks and move there.

In that regard, Teto and I must've seemed like quite the oddballs: not only had we not aged a day in twenty years of questing, but we had also spent just as long being semiretired, only taking on the boring quests as not to steal the other adventurers' jobs. And us coming to tell the guild we were relocating must've come as a huge surprise too: we had our flying carpet; why would we feel the need to relocate when we could go wherever we wanted whenever we liked?

"Miss Chise! Miss Teto! The guildmaster is calling for you!" the young receptionist told us, looking even more panicked than earlier.

"Okay. Wait for us here, Beretta."

"Understood, Master."

We followed the receptionist, who ushered us to the guildmaster's office.

"Miss Chise, Miss Teto, I've heard that you plan on leaving the country. May I ask why? Have you perhaps grown to dislike Gald?" the guildmaster asked.

The previous guildmaster, who had been running the guild back when we used to come here all the time with Selene, had retired about ten years ago, and a former staff member of the guild had taken his place. I would always remember how happy he was to see us back in Gald after we had traveled to Ischea to bring Selene to her family. Over ten years had passed since then. By the way, Teto and I had also been offered the guildmaster position, but we respectfully refused, so that's how he got the job.

"Nothing of the sort, no. We love it here; the people are always so nice and friendly. But we've been craving seafood and Lawbyle is a coastal country, so we thought, 'Hey, why not stay there for a while?'"

Of course, this was just an excuse. But I had put some thought into it: both Ischea and Gald were landlocked countries, so Lawbyle was the nearest available option for some proper food tourism.

"You're... leaving because you want to eat seafood?" the guildmaster asked me in utter disbelief. "Not to clear dungeons or to reclaim territories overrun by monsters?"

“Nope, we just want to eat seafood.”

“Yeah! Teto wants to eat fish, and crab, and shrimp, and...”

I sometimes used my Creation Magic to make seafood for Teto and me, but I would actually really enjoy eating freshly caught fish for once.

“You’re moving to another country just for... Well, you two can most likely afford it, I assume.”

“Yes. We’ve been able to accumulate a fair bit of savings in the last decade, all by doing quests for the guild.”

The massive reward we had gotten for sealing the Archdevil in Ischea—fifty truesilvers—was still sitting on our guild cards, along with all of the money we had gotten from questing, potions, and medicinal herb turn-ins, plus the few emergency missions we had been sent on.

But this had started to become a bit of an issue. See, a few merchants and low nobility members had caught wind of our financial situation, and they were plotting to make me and Teto their wives or concubines so they could put their hands on our fortune. Unfortunately for them though, Teto and I very rarely left the wasteland these days, so they didn’t have a lot of occasion to put their little schemes into practice. And even if they did try to force us to marry them—which, to my dismay, had happened a few times already—we were much, *much* stronger than them. The few foolish individuals who dared to lay their hands on us quickly found themselves on the receiving end of a thorough beating, courtesy of our capable selves, before being promptly handed over to the town garrison.

They might not have posed any real threat to us, but the situation was still pretty damn annoying.

“Well, to be completely honest, we’ve also grown a little tired of the weird men trying to marry us for our money.”

“Yeah! Lady Witch is mine; I won’t let anyone else have her!” Teto said, wrapping her arms around my upper body. Not that I blamed her—I also had no intention of marrying her off to a random guy, nor did I want to find a husband myself.



"Oooh, I see," the guildmaster nodded. "I understand. To be frank, I don't want you to leave, but I really appreciate all the hard work you've both put in until now."

He was a kind man. Back when he was still a staff member of the guild and Selene worked here, he would always give her special attention. Things were a bit hard for him when he first became guildmaster, but Teto and I helped him out as best as we could. We always volunteered to take on the most troublesome quests, and Teto even helped the other adventurers train during her spare time. As a result, the adventurers in this town had reached remarkable levels of skill. Judging by his words, the guildmaster was very grateful for what we did for the guild.

"Can I ask one little favor though?" he asked. "Do you think you could potentially still take on quests from time to time, even in Lawbyle?"

"If I feel like it, sure." I shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal.

A smile appeared on the guildmaster's face.

"I see. This reminds me, I've noticed you're always taking on the quests nobody ever wants to do. Is that also because you, ah, 'feel like it'? I'd say that's pretty selfless of you."

"Lady Witch, you've been found out!" Teto beamed at me.

"I'm not doing it out of *selflessness*," I muttered, averting my eyes.

Whenever Teto and I brought potions and medicinal herbs to the guild, we always checked the guild's quest board to see if there were any leftovers. The remaining quests were always either really annoying or they simply didn't pay well. But since we were there anyway, we would always take them on.

"Thanks to you two, our guild actually has one of the highest quest completion rates. I'm really grateful for everything you've done. And if you do that in other adventurer's guilds, it'll be beneficial to all of us as well."

"Well, I'll take the thanks, I guess. Anyway, we really should go."

After saying our goodbyes to the guildmaster, we headed back to the reception area of the guildhall where we met up with Beretta. She was looking around the room, a glint of curiosity in her otherwise expressionless gaze.

"Beretta? Something caught your eye?" I asked her.

"Not particularly. This is my first time outside the Wasteland of Nothingness since you found me, and I was just thinking about how different things are now compared to two thousand years ago."

She finally got to see firsthand how much civilization had declined since she was buried, going from an industrialized world to something that looked more like medieval Europe. It made sense that she would feel a little overwhelmed.

"All righty then, should we go?"

We got on our flying carpet, and just like that, we bid goodbye to the town where we'd worked for the past twenty years and started making our way to the Kingdom of Lawbyle.

CHAPTER 15

FIGHTING CRIME

The three of us were flying along the highway to Lawbyle. I was steering the flying carpet while Teto relaxed with her eyes closed, enjoying the breeze on her face, and Beretta took in the scenery.

“What do you think, Beretta? How’s the world outside of the wasteland?” I asked her.

“The mana concentration of the air is awfully low. It will be difficult for me to stay awake for very long.”

“That’s not what Lady Witch meant!” Teto chimed in, puffing up her cheeks. “She wants to know if you’re enjoying the scenery.”

Beretta stayed quiet for a few seconds before answering: “The vegetation is a lot more lush here. It would be nice if we managed to make the Wasteland look just like this.”

I smiled at her words and Teto nodded. For a while, Beretta kept admiring the scenery in silence before speaking again, as if she had just remembered something. “I meant to ask you, Master, but what is the mission Goddess Lariel entrusted you with? You said she asked you to help her with an issue in her domain, but might I know what that issue is?”

Oh, that’s right, I hadn’t told them the details of the mission yet. I paused, my gaze wandering as I contemplated my response.

“She asked me to seal a seepage point in the leylines.” Well, at least, that was what the little vision she’d left in my head told me.

“A seepage point in the leylines?” Beretta repeated quizzically.

When the leylines were disturbed, their seepage points leaked even more mana than normal, which could lead to sticky situations, especially if a group of monsters built their nest near that spot. Due to the high mana concentration of the air, the monsters would grow stronger. If they were left alone for too long, they would multiply, which,

in turn, might lead to a stampede.

"And that's why Lariel wants us to seal the seepage point and get rid of the monsters that built their nest in its vicinity."

Well, from what Lariel told me, this particular issue had been left unattended for decades, so it wasn't as if it required immediate attention.

"Lots of monsters means lots of magic stones!" Teto said, gulping down the saliva that threatened to spill from her mouth.

"And when we're done with all that, we should definitely go try out some of Lawbyle's seafood."

"Okay, Lady Witch!"

"If that's your wish, Master."

We were steadily making our way toward Gald's eastern border. I could've used a teleportation spell to take us all the way to the city closest to the border, but as I just said, we weren't in a rush to get there. Besides, by going the long way, we might discover some interesting things. Would these be good or bad? Well...

"Lady Wiiitch, I think there's a bandit stronghold in the area."

"Is that so? Give me a minute, I'll make sure."

I looked down and noticed that there were footprints veering off the main road. Using my magic to track them, I found out they led to a cavern nestled on a cliff, a little further away from the highway, and a quick *Life Detection* spell told me that there were about thirty people in that cavern, some appearing to be held captive.

"Well, we can't turn a blind eye to that. Let's go take their stronghold. Do you want to help us, Beretta?" I asked as I steered our flying carpet in the direction of the cavern.

"I will stand in the back so as not to disturb you, Masters."

Once we had reached the cavern, I hopped down from the flying carpet and cast *Sleep*, a Dark Magic spell, on the entire stronghold. Dark Magic was used to inflict various ailments upon its targets, and *Sleep*, as its name implied, plunged anyone within its

range into a profound slumber. I had to use a lot of mana to cover the entire cavern, but in the end, there wasn't a single wakeful body in the whole stronghold.

Teto and I entered the cavern and meticulously assessed each person with magic to determine if they were part of the bandit group. Teto then used makeshift metal handcuffs to restrain the bandits before throwing them into a large jail cell she had set up right outside of the cavern with Earth Magic.

"There's a lot of humans here," I noted. "I think this one's their boss. Looks like he's a former C-rank adventurer."

"What's so weird about the fact that most of them are human, Lady Witch?"

"Well, there aren't a lot of humans here in Gald, so for an entire bandit gang to be almost exclusively human... That's a bit strange."

The leader of the bandit group was still snoring as I lifted him up using *Psychokinesis* before cuffing him and throwing him into the jail cell with the others.

"Lady Witch! I found the hostages!"

Teto found them in a small room while I was busy shoving everything that was in the cavern into my magic bag. Most of them were women, both human and beastwomen, and their bodies were covered in bruises and scratches. They were all still fast asleep from my spell.

"That's awful..." I said when I saw the state these poor women were in. "Well, first and foremost, we need to clean and heal them. *Area Heal! Clean!*"

"Those things around their necks... They're slave collars."

"Oh, Teto remembers these!"

We saw loads of those back when we were dismantling that slaver organization, well over ten years ago now, so I would've recognized them anywhere. In Gald, the only authorized form of slavery was punitive slavery, and only authorized slave traders were allowed to use collars. Official collars also bore the government's sigil, so if a slave's collar didn't have that mark, it meant that they were a victim of illegal slavery. I used a quick *Appraisal* spell to check these women's status, and just as I thought, they belonged to the latter category.

“I’m glad we found them before it was too late.”

“Let’s get them out of here, Lady Witch!”

I used *Psychokinesis* to carry the hostages outside and...

“Welcome back, Masters. I had to use some mana, but I have successfully guarded the entrance of the cavern.”

...was met with the sight of Beretta standing next to a bunch of unconscious, disheveled men. It seemed that the rest of the thieves had come back to their stronghold while we were inside. Too bad for them, Beretta was standing guard.

“You did all this, Beretta?”

“Yes. Thanks to the Type A and C cores you implemented into my body, I was able to repel the bandits.”

Beretta was a Type B attendant doll, which meant her main purpose was to help her owner with chores, whilst Type A attendant dolls were designed for combat purposes and Type C for sexual relief. I had given Beretta the attendant doll cores I had found on two broken Type A and Type C dolls just to see what would happen, and it turned out that all attendant doll cores were, to a certain extent, compatible with each other. By consuming the cores, Beretta inherited the combat abilities of the Type A doll, as well as the mechanism resembling genitalia that was found on Type C dolls.

Beretta and I were tending to the sleeping women when, all of a sudden, a voice came from behind us. It seemed that one of the bandits we had locked in the cage had woken up.

“Hey, you! Ya really think ya can mess with the Yellow Fangs and get away scot-free? Huh?!”

The other bandits also woke up one after the other and started hollering at us.

“All righty then, we should take these women to the nearest town. Teto, can you make us a vehicle to transport them? Beretta, please look after them in the meantime.”

“Roger!”

“Understood.”

“Hey! Don’t ignore us!”

Teto used Earth Magic to make a wagon large enough for all the women to fit comfortably inside, and Beretta gently laid them down on the floor of the wagon, all while ignoring the profanities the bandits were yelling at us as they grew increasingly irritated.

“I’m not usually fond of destroying nature, but oh well.” I raised up my staff and created a barrier so the damage would be contained to the cavern. “*Gravity!*” I chanted, creating a gravitational field around the bandits’ stronghold. Instantly, the wall of the cavern started to crack, and rubble started trickling down the sides as if it was crushed by an invisible force coming from above. After a few seconds, the entire cavern collapsed in on itself.

Then I heard a *splat*.

“Oops. I forgot to cover the sky with the barrier.”

A poor little bird that was flying by accidentally got caught in my spell and came crashing down right in front of the bandits, giving them a hint of what might happen to them in the next couple of minutes.

“I have no intention of showing any mercy to bandit scum like you. I can subject you to the same fate as that bird if I feel like it, you know?” I said, releasing some mana into the air to intimidate them.

“D-Don’t kill us!” the leader of the bandits begged me, his teeth chattering audibly.

Most of the other bandits had fainted in fear, their eyes rolling back and foam coming out of their mouths.

“Shut up, then. You know what’s going to happen if you anger me,” I told him in a low voice before making my way back to Teto and Beretta.

“Lady Witch, what should we do with them?” Teto asked, pointing at the women sleeping inside the wagon.

“Let’s take them to the next town for now. Hmm... How should we move the wagon?”

I thought about it for a bit and came to the conclusion I had more than enough mana to carry both the wagon and the cage with my magic.

"I'm going to have you stay in dreamland for a little longer, okay? *Sleep*." I gently put my hand on all of the women's foreheads to make sure they would stay asleep until we reached the next town. I didn't want them to wake up while they were still in the wagon; it would only confuse and scare them further. Their nightmare was over.

"The next time you wake up, you'll be in a safe place," I softly told the sleeping women. I boarded the flying carpet along with Teto and Beretta and cast *Psychokinesis* on the wagon and cage to transport them with us to the nearest town.

When we arrived, we were greeted by a bunch of adventurers and guards who were staring at us in utter disbelief. Apparently, they had mistaken us for new types of flying monsters.

CHAPTER 16

THE PERKS OF BEING A-RANK ADVENTURERS

I softly set the wagon and the cage on the ground before reaching the town so as not to further panic the little crowd.

“Who are you guys?! Name yourselves right this instant!”

“I’m Chise, an A-rank adventurer and a member of the Carpet Riders. We came across a bandit stronghold during our travels and noticed that they were holding several people hostage so we went to help them. The bandits are in the cage. They call themselves the ‘Yellow Fangs.’”

“Did she say *Carpet Riders*?! And they fought against the *Yellow Fangs*!?” Murmurs of awe and admiration filled the air. I could hear a couple of them express their shock at my young—okay, fine, *juvenile* appearance, saying they thought I would be much older, while others were impressed that we had managed to defeat the Yellow Fangs. Apparently, they were pretty infamous in the area.

“I am impressed by you and Lady Teto’s notoriety, Master. I am very proud to call myself your servant.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I shrugged, noncommittally.

“Ah, Lady Witch, your ears are red! Are you feeling shy?”

Having never stepped a foot outside of the wasteland since she woke up, Beretta hadn’t known about our reputation before. It was pretty embarrassing to have a small crowd of people singing our praises in front of her.

While the three of us were chitchatting, the guards and the beastfolk adventurers had started hollering at the bandits in the cage. After a few minutes, the captain of the town guard joined us.

“Long time no see, Miss Chise, Miss Teto!” he greeted us.

“You’re...”

“I was a member of Colonel Carter’s regiment! I am now the captain of the village patrol squads in this area, and I am responsible for capturing the bandits trying to escape from Lawbyle to Gald,” he explained. I could tell by the way his eyes sparkled that this man held a profound respect for us. He had only been a new recruit when we last saw each other; we definitely had made a big impression on him.

“I-I see. Anyway, can you please check us in and take care of the necessary measures regarding the bandits?”

“Of course! Could you please hand me your guild cards? And these bandits are going straight to the town’s prison!” He gave a few instructions to his men who took the handcuffed bandits away, the adventurers going along, still hollering at the bandits.

“Miss Chise, Miss Teto, might I ask who this lady over there is?” the captain of the village patrol squads asked us, shooting a quizzical look at Beretta.

He was already done checking our guild cards, but Beretta didn’t have any form of identification.

“My name is Beretta. I am one of Master’s maids.”

“She’s our friend.”

“Oh, so she’s with you, Miss Chise! All right, this way, please.”

He didn’t ask any further questions and let us into the town just like that—the perks of being A-rank adventurers, I guess. We followed him to the town’s station.

“Do you happen to have anything related to the Yellow Fangs with you, Lady Chise?”

“I put everything I found in their stronghold in my magic bag. I did destroy the cavern they were using as their stronghold to prevent other bandits from setting up their headquarters there, though.”

“Thank you for taking care of that. I’ll send a survey team later, just in case.”

I nodded and gave him the exact location of the cavern.

"I apologize for the trouble, but could we please go through the bandits' possessions?"

"Sure. There's a lot of stuff, though. Are you sure you want me to take it all out in here?"

"Yes, please."

I did as I was told, taking the things I had found in the bandits' stronghold out of my magic bag one by one. In the meantime, the captain's men took care of finding a suitable place for the hostages to rest. After that, the captain told me all about the Yellow Fangs while we went through their belongings.

"We're really close to the border here; we've been seeing a large influx of bandits from Lawbyle crossing over."

"I see. That explains why most of them were humans." I nodded, finally getting an answer to my questions.

"The Yellow Fangs are actually pretty notorious in Lawbyle too. Their leader is a former adventurer, and I've heard he's pretty strong. They even have magic users among their members."

I hummed. "So *that's* how they built that cavern."

"There are also rumors going around that they're actually former members of that black market organization you and Colonel Carter dismantled several years ago, and we've been after them for a while."

"Just as I suspected."

I had an inkling these guys were related. And here I thought we had gotten rid of every single one of them when we completed that mission! I mentally gave myself a slap in the face for being so naive. Or maybe they were the remnants of the main branch in Lawbyle, and they had crossed over to Gald in an attempt to resume their activities. Either way, I decided to leave it in the government's capable hands. They would know better than me how to deal with all of that.

"All right, I'm done writing the report. What do you plan on doing with the stolen goods? You can keep them, but their rightful owners might want to buy them back from you. Do you plan on staying in town until all of that's sorted out?"

"We're heading to Lawbyle, so I would like not to spend too long here. I'm going to sell them to the guild."

"Understood. Let me take you to the guild, then."

We would probably get a pretty nice reward for capturing the bandits, and I really didn't want to deal with the headache of having to return the things that had been stolen to their rightful owners, so I decided to just let the guild deal with it. And besides, there wasn't really anything I wanted among all that stuff. I got to keep the money, since there was no way of knowing who it belonged to originally, and decided to use half of the profits from selling off the things I'd found in the bandits' stronghold to create a support fund for the poor women who had been kidnapped to facilitate their rehabilitation in society. I planned on leaving that trust with the captain. It may seem like hypocrisy, but I hoped it could provide even the tiniest amount of support to these women.

We arrived at the guild and received our reward for taking down that group of bandits, as well as the money from the stolen goods we sold. After deducting the money I planned on leaving to the women, we ended up with three large golds, one for each of us. But when I offered Beretta hers...

"These coins belong to you and Lady Teto, Master. I cannot accept."

"But you helped us. Here, take it."

"No, I can't."

We kept going back and forth, me trying to get Beretta to accept the coin and Beretta firmly refusing, while Teto looked back and forth between us. We were at it for a while and Beretta just wouldn't budge, so I decided to give up for the time being.

"Fine. I'll keep it for now."

I put half of the money we got on our guild cards and converted the other half into silvers and large coppers.

"Once again, thank you so much for ridding us of these bandits!" the captain said.

After that, we spent the night at an inn, and the next day, we resumed our journey to Lawbyle. Soon enough, we arrived at the border. We had to go through a fortress where

soldiers were stationed to prevent anyone from entering illegally, but we were able to pass through without any issues. I decided to take that opportunity to gather some information about the kingdom.

“How have things been in Lawbyle recently?”

“Well, there’s been a few monster attacks lately, and the country itself is going through a bit of a slump. More and more struggling farmers are turning to banditry.”

This must have been what was keeping gangs like the Yellow Fangs staffed.

“Do you know if any of these bandits can use magic, perhaps? Magic that would allow them to carve tunnels and caves into cliffs, for instance.”

“If they’re skilled enough to do that, they wouldn’t need to become criminals,” the man shrugged.

“I’ve heard about a group called the Yellow Fangs in Gald; do you know anything about them?”

“Aah, those guys, huh? They used to be adventurers, but apparently they ran afoul of the law and got canned. From the sound of it, they’ve turned to banditry, pulling in fellow ne’er-do-wells and peasant folk feeling the hard times.”

I did feel bad for those poor farmers who thought that they had no choice but to turn to banditry, but still, that didn’t give them a pass for aiding and abetting thieves, killers, and slavers. Still, those former adventurers who roped them into joining in the first place were the real ones at fault. As a fellow adventurer, I found their conduct absolutely despicable.

Well, I’m sure these types of things must happen everywhere in this world.

“Thank you for being so patient with me. Well then, we’ll be on our way.”

“Sure thing, girlie. Are you the daughter of a noble? Things are a bit rough in Lawbyle lately, so be careful out there, okay?”

I guess I did look like I could be someone’s daughter due to my youthful appearance. Considering the fact that I was traveling with a gal in armor and a textbook-example maid, most people would probably make the same assumption: that I was the young

daughter of a noble traveling with my guard and my servant. The robe and magic staff must've reinforced that impression too: it could mean that I was from a family wealthy enough that they could afford to pay for magic lessons.

We bid goodbye to the guard and finally arrived in Lawbyle. The first thing we did was head straight to the closest adventurer's guild, where we asked them for more information regarding the region, before resuming making our way toward the spot Lariel wanted us to inspect. But as we were traveling, I looked down at the ground and couldn't help but frown.

"I can't feel any mana in the earth here."

"Teto neither!"

"The mana concentration of the earth is indeed extremely low. I suspect it is due to imbalances in the leylines."

I gathered mana into my eyes and got confirmation that, while it wasn't as bad as in the wasteland, there really wasn't a lot of mana in the earth.

If there was too high of a mana concentration in one spot, the mana would become stagnant, which could result in monsters getting stronger and even dungeons appearing. However, if a place didn't have enough mana, it would result in impoverished soil, which, in turn, meant that crops would have a hard time growing.

"Looks like there's a mana drought in the whole region. This must be related to that seepage point issue. Having all of the mana leaking out from one spot means that there isn't enough left for everywhere else."

We stopped by a few villages where we were told that, just as I suspected, the harvests had been bad recently; I sneakily used that opportunity to pour some mana back into the earth.

"It's only a temporary solution, but at least the crops should start growing again for a little while."

"And the villagers will be able to hold on for a little longer!"

"Thank you for your hard work, Master. You should take a break now."

I simply couldn't stand by and let these villagers suffer without doing anything to help them. I ended up using almost all of my 300,000 MP to supplement the soil near these villages.

"You're really kind, Lady Witch."

"I'm not!" I said defensively. "It just wouldn't feel right to pretend I haven't noticed what's going on."

Feeling a little exhausted after using all that mana, I leaned against Beretta while Teto steered our flying carpet in the direction of our objective.

CHAPTER 17

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN ATTENDANT DOLL

The Attendant Doll Ai's Side

With Master, Lady Teto, and Miss Head Maid Beretta away on their journey, the responsibility of overseeing the Wasteland of Nothingness fell upon us, the twenty attendant dolls, and the countless clay golems.

“Good morning, everyone.”

“Good morning, Miss Acting Head Maid.”

All of us had been brought into existence through Creation Magic to serve our master under the supervision of Miss Beretta. Each of us had even been granted a name by our master. Before she left, Miss Beretta had tasked me with overseeing the other attendant dolls, as I was the eldest.

“The barrier devices are in working order and mana production is stable. There has been a one percent increase in mana leakage compared to last month.”

“The propagation of flora and fauna is on the rise.”

“The sealing device containing the Archdevil is operating smoothly. There have been no visible changes in mana production.”

Master had tasked us with managing and maintaining the magical devices in the wasteland. Master held the administrative privileges over them, but Miss Beretta had given me sublevel access so that I could track the evolution of the fauna and flora in the wasteland, as well as the mana concentration in the air. After I ensured everything was working as it should, it was time for me to assign work to the other attendant dolls. We used a rotation system to ensure everyone was able to perform each task properly.

The first group was in charge of various tasks within Master’s mansion, including room upkeep, laundry, bed-making, and cooking. Although we attendant dolls had no

need for sustenance, we had been instructed by Master to engage in humanlike behavior to gain more experience, and so, every day we cooked and partook in regular meals, mimicking the eating habits of humans. This was also a good opportunity for us to refine our culinary abilities.

"This dish tastes good. I suggest serving it to Master and Lady Teto when they return from their travels."

However, on occasion...

"This tastes... salty."

"I apologize. I have mistaken the salt for sugar."

"Going forward, I suggest we put the salt away when it is not required by a recipe in order to avoid a repeat of this situation."

"Understood."

Miss Beretta could execute any order perfectly and never made mistakes when cooking. She had simply been manufactured that way. However, we had been made through Creation Magic, and while we possessed the same functional capabilities as Miss Beretta, our master had no access to the same knowledge as her "precursors." This meant that for us to master a task, we had to perform it repeatedly to learn how it was done. This had also caused individual variations to emerge among the dolls.

Some were good at cooking; others weren't. Some took care of their tasks quickly but sloppily; others did theirs slowly but carefully. Some liked working; others didn't. Some had good motor skills; others fought to keep their balance daily.

But despite our defects, Master and Lady Teto treated us kindly.

"You each have your individuality. I quite like that," Master once told us.

One day, I went to Miss Beretta and suggested that she share her knowledge with us.

"By combining all of our experience, I believe we would be able to better serve our masters," was the reasoning I gave her.

Attendant dolls had the ability to share information with each other, and Miss Beretta

was our head maid. If we had access to her knowledge, we could optimize our performance further and be more efficient. However, Miss Beretta shook her head.

"I must decline your proposal, Ai," she said. "I forbid all attendant dolls from sharing information with each other. If you want to communicate among yourselves, please do so only through verbal or telepathic means."

"Might I know the reason?"

Miss Beretta seemed to ponder for a couple of seconds before answering my question.

"Master is looking forward to our growth and the personalities we will develop over the years. Our mental records belong solely to each of us, and I am afraid sharing information on the regular might blur the boundaries of our selves."

And so, we were instructed to keep on copying human mannerisms to gain more life experience.

Recently, I noticed that all of the attendant dolls—myself included, had started developing likes and dislikes when it came to food.

"I wonder if this is also part of our 'individuality'?"

Whenever we cooked for our masters, we had to craft dishes tailored to their specific tastes and preferences. But since Master said she liked us having our own personalities, we were allowed to experiment and explore different types of food when we were preparing food for ourselves.

The second group of attendant dolls was in charge of cultivating the fields that surrounded Master's mansion and taking care of the livestock. In the fields, we grew staple crops: mostly wheat and barley, along with seasonal vegetables, perennial fruits like strawberries and raspberries, fruit trees, herbs that could be used for medicinal purposes, and lastly, raw cotton to weave into cloth. We also grew ornamental flowers for Master and Lady Teto's viewing pleasure.

We stored the fresh vegetables in warehouses that Master had made with her Creation Magic and broken magic tools she had found in the ruins under the Wasteland. There were three types of warehouses: storerooms, cold rooms, and freezers; the best part

was that time didn't pass when there was no one in them. They were truly outstanding creations.

Miss Beretta once told us that it was thanks to technologies like these that our Master's "precursors" were able to reach incredible levels of technological advancement: they had found ways to both increase food production and store ingredients for extended periods. This, in turn, allowed them to focus their efforts on other things. However, it seemed that this technological advancement was what led them to their downfall. But since we hadn't been created yet when that happened, we couldn't quite understand what Miss Beretta was talking about. All that mattered to us was being of use to our Masters.

Even when they were taking care of the fields, you could see each attendant doll's personality shine through. Some would quietly and diligently pluck weeds, while others quickly grew bored and found themselves captivated by every passing insect. A few would take charge, providing instructions to their fellow doll attendants on which plants to water and when. There were even some who had developed some sort of attachment to the chickens and goats we were raising as livestock. Lastly, you also had the ones who couldn't resist sampling the crops. As I observed them working, I couldn't help but wonder if such behavior was befitting of attendant dolls. I thought about asking Miss Beretta to discipline them when she came back, but I remembered Master once telling her off for reprimanding one of the other dolls.

"Be nice to them, Beretta. They don't have any life experience; their minds are still fragile."

In the absence of Miss Beretta, I, who had been chosen as the acting head maid, made sure to support and provide assistance to the other attendant dolls whenever they encountered difficulties or made mistakes. I carefully watched over them as they grew into their personalities.

"Everyone, please go change your clothes. You dirtied them while you were working."

"Yes, Miss Ai."

I instructed them to go freshen up and change into clean uniforms in the large bathroom Master had created for us. Attendant dolls were watertight, which meant we could bathe without issue. Granted, we didn't technically *need* to bathe, as we were able to use cleaning magic. But Master had instructed us to behave like humans, and

so we took baths every day. Besides, seeing the other dolls' bare bodies allowed me to make some interesting discoveries. While at first we had all looked identical, I noticed that there were now some slight differences in our facial features, hair colors, and even figures. However, this might just be my imagination; it would require further observation to confirm whether these differences were real or not.

The third group was tasked with expanding the forest.

We attendant dolls relied on the ambient mana to move and talk, and we were only able to stay awake for long periods of time if we were near the forest, as it had the highest mana concentration of the entire wasteland. And thus, this group's main duty was to improve the region's mana density. To do so, they simply had to walk around the forest, along with the clay golems Lady Teto had created—which, we had been told, were nicknamed “bear golems” due to the two clay lumps on top of their heads—to look for saplings to uproot and replant further away to expand the forest's boundaries.

About ten percent of the entire surface of the Wasteland of Nothingness—which was about the size of a small country—was covered with trees, while the river that ran through the entire region covered about three percent of the land. And with the combined efforts of us attendant dolls and the bear golems, there was no doubt the forest would grow to be even larger in the future.

Lastly, the dolls in the fourth group didn't have any tasks to do.

After three days of dutiful work, they were allowed to spend an entire day as they pleased. Once they'd replenished their mana with one of the mana-recharging devices, they could do whatever they liked: spend the day in sleep mode, experiment with cooking, enjoy the books and games our masters had prepared for us... This was all done in an attempt to figure out our favorite pastimes.

When I observed the other dolls, I couldn't help but feel as if I lacked any hobbies or personal interests of my own and never had any idea of how to spend my rest days. But I also hated being unproductive for long stretches, so on that day, I decided to go on a little stroll around the wasteland.

When I walked past the chicken coop, I heard high-pitched little cries coming from inside.

"That's... Hee hee. This is quite exciting."

A group of tiny yellow chicks passed in front of me, chirping away as they diligently followed their mother. It seemed that some of the fertilized eggs we had left in the coop had hatched.

As I watched the little chicks, a smile spread across my face.

I will have to tell Master and Lady Teto about this when they get back, I thought as I resumed my stroll.

CHAPTER 18

THE TOWN WITH THE ABANDONED MINE

The place we were headed to take care of Lariel's request was located in the northern reach of Lawbyle near a mountainous region.

"This is the spot," I announced once the area Lariel had sent me in her vision came into view.

A towering mountain with what seemed to be a tunnel carved into it loomed over a small, desolate-looking town.

"The leylines really aren't doing so great around here," I noted.

"It's not abnormal for a seepage point to appear in the leylines, but I'm afraid the monster nest nearby might be creating imbalances by sucking out all the mana," Beretta said.

I gathered mana in my eyes and surveyed the area. Huge clots of mana emanated from the other side of the rocky mountains—which was most likely where the source of the leylines sat—but just as Beretta feared, the flow gradually waned, leaving the earth at the mountain's base bereft of mana. As a result, all of the fields below looked barren and sad.

"Lady Wiitch, it looks like there are people living here," Teto said, pointing at the little town at the foot of the mountain.

"Let's go ask them for more information."

We hopped down from our flying carpet outside the town so as not to startle the locals and proceeded on foot. It seemed to have once been a prosperous mining town, but now the entire place seemed desolate and impoverished. Normally, my first instinct would be to head straight to the adventurer's guild to ask for information. However, upon reaching what appeared to be the former guildhall, it became apparent that it had been closed down.

"I wonder if it got shut down due to the town's decline," I mused.

The number of buildings suggested that this was a town, but it didn't seem that they were all inhabited. Judging by population alone, it might have been more akin to a village.

"Lady Witch, I'm a bit hungry," Teto said.

"Since the guild seems to be closed, I suggest we find a place where we can eat and try asking for information there," Beretta proposed.

I nodded. "Let's do that."

Although it was well past lunchtime, I assumed it was our best shot at gathering intel. We quickly found an inn that doubled as a tavern and walked in.

"Welcome. Oh, are ye some noble lass?" a dwarf—whom I assumed was the innkeeper—asked from his seat as we walked into the building.

Just like the guards from earlier, he seemed to believe I was the daughter of a noble who was traveling with her knight and servant.

"Nope, we're just an adventuring party. Anyway, can we get some food? And if you don't mind, could you tell us a little bit about the town?"

"I wanna eat something yummy!" Teto chimed in.

But the dwarf shook his head and shot us an apologetic look.

"Sorry, lasses. We dun have enough food 'round here to share with outsiders. I'd love to cook a meal for ye, but the harvests have been bad, and we gotta put ourselves first. Well, I can at least offer ye a place to rest yer heads, though."

So it seemed that the imbalances in the leylines were causing crop failure in this area as well. I reached into my magic bag and started taking out a few things I had brought along just in case.

"I've got wheat flour, orc meat, vegetables, dried fish, fruits, salt, and sugar. Can you cook us a meal with these ingredients?"

The dwarf's eyes shot wide open. "Wh-Where did ye get that much food, lass?!"

I didn't address his question and continued bartering. "So? Do you think you can whip up something for us? We'll pay you your regular price, and if there are any ingredients left over, you can keep them for you and the other villagers."

"Make it super yummy, okay?" Teto added.

In response to my request and Teto's childish words, the innkeeper took in a deep breath and broke into a smile.

"I sure as hell can make ye a real feast with all them ingredients! My skills've been itchin' for some quality stuff to work with. Ye said ye wanted to ask 'bout the town, right? C'mere, I'll tell ye everythin' while I make yer meal."

And so, the dwarf started giving us a rundown of what had happened here.

About three hundred years ago, this place had been a Demon Den infested with powerful monsters. One day, a famous adventuring party emerged and defeated the monsters' leader to reclaim the territory. In the midst of their fierce battle, part of the mountain was destroyed, revealing a large vein of ore brimming with rare metals: mythril, magisteel, orichalcum, and even mana crystals. With the area now monster-free, many dwarves saw an opportunity and decided to create a settlement. Before long it flourished into a vibrant town renowned for its exceptional blacksmiths. Their weapons and armor were not only coveted by adventurers and knights throughout the land, but were also offered as tributes to the royal family and even exported to other nations.

Dwarves proficient in Earth Magic tirelessly delved into the mines, extracting every last trace of precious ore. But thirty years ago, the veins ran dry. As a result, the mine was eventually closed, prompting all of the miners, blacksmiths, and merchants to leave the town.

"Well, one thing led to another, and now there's barely anybody left 'ere," the dwarf concluded.

"I see. Even the adventurer's guild withdrew from the town. But why didn't you guys leave?" I asked.

"We were born and raised 'ere. We ain't got nowhere else to go," the dwarf shrugged. "Good thing we're good at Earth Magic. Managed to dig some fields, and we're pretty robust, so we can tend to 'em just fine. Besides, the mine might've run outta precious metal, but there's still plenty of iron and copper in there."

"I see. Thanks, you've been really helpful."

Beretta, who had been listening quietly to the dwarf's story, gave him a slight bow to show her gratitude; the dwarf looked a little embarrassed.

"Dun mention it. Anyway, 'ere's yer meal. This is the best I could do on such short notice. C'mon, eat up while it's hot," the dwarf said, setting down plates full of food in front of us.

The dish consisted of a thin, wheat-based flatbread cooked on a skillet—a bit like a tortilla if you will—and filled with a mixture of meat and vegetables.

"Teto is super hungry!"

"It looks delicious," I remarked. "I'm digging in."

"Thank you for the meal," Beretta said.

As we ate our delicious meal, the dwarf began asking us questions.

"Ye said yer adventurers, right? What are ye doin' 'ere? We dun even 'ave a guild."

"We're here for the mine," I answered honestly.

"If it's precious metals yer after, then ye're outta luck. There might still be some deep into the mine, but the whole lode's infested with all manner o' creepy-crawlies; nobody dares to venture in."

"Is it really that dangerous?"

Considering the seepage point was inside the mine, any intel we could get about the current situation there would be of help.

"I've 'eard the monsters aren't that strong, but there's a bunch of 'em, and they keep multiplyin'. Seems some of them 'ave started making tunnels all over the mine, turnin' the whole place into a giant maze."

Apparently, the mines were so overrun with these insectile monsters that the dwarves couldn't even venture far enough to reach the iron and copper ores. I was pretty sure the reason these monsters were multiplying so fast had something to do with the seepage point in the leylines. If we didn't seal it, not only would the monsters keep proliferating, but the mana concentration of the earth would get lower and lower and the crops would keep on dying.

"Aren't you worried the monsters might attack the town?" I asked.

"We sure are, but we ain't got no money to pay someone to come get rid of 'em. For now, we got a vigilance committee stayin' in front of the mine takin' care of every monster that crawls outta there."

We had finished our meals and were sipping on some tea the innkeeper had offered us.

All in all, while the mana concentration of the earth was dwindling, it didn't seem like things were going to suddenly worsen in the next couple of days, so there was no immediate need for us to deal with the seepage point.

"Well then, we're going to take a look inside the mine," I informed the dwarf.

He looked at me, surprised.

"You, lasses? I dun wanna seem rude, but I dun think it's a good idea."

"Teto wants to get lots of magic stones!"

"Do we need special authorization to enter the mine?" Beretta asked the innkeeper.

He started stroking his beard, looking a little puzzled.

"Dunno, but... Ye lasses are so young, yer probably newbies, aren't ye? I dun think ye should venture into the mine; it's dangerous."

Teto and I couldn't help the chuckles that escaped our mouths at the dwarf's words.

We were so used to people mistaking us for teenagers or newbie adventurers that it was getting comical. Beretta looked as impassive as ever, and the innkeeper frowned, probably feeling like we weren't taking the situation seriously.

"Laugh as ye may, but I'm really worried 'bout ye. That mine is pretty deep and dark, not to mention the pockets of gas scattered throughout the place. The monsters ain't the only danger there. It's not somethin' to be taken lightly, nor to be throwin' yer life away for."

"I apologize for our reaction. We were just really happy to see you genuinely concerned for us."

"Thank you, Mister! But you don't need to worry, Teto and Lady Witch are actually pretty skilled!"

Teto pulled out her guild card; I did the same. When he saw our ranks and the name of our adventurer party, he did a double take and took the cards in his hand as if to examine them closer.

"We're the Carpet Riders. Our adventuring party has a bit of a reputation."

"Ye kids are *A-rank*?" the innkeeper asked, glancing between our guild cards and us. "Can't say I've ever 'eard 'bout yer party... but that might be just because I'm a country bumpkin. I dun 'ave any skill or ability to check just how strong ye three are, though." The dwarf seemed perplexed.

It seemed that our reputation hadn't reached the countryside yet, and the dwarf innkeeper was so unfamiliar with matters pertaining to adventurers that he didn't fully grasp the significance of us being A-rank. And to measure someone's skills, one would need mana perception abilities at least equivalent to those of a C-rank adventurer. There was no way an ordinary dwarven innkeeper would be able to do it.

"All the adventurers 'round here are D-rank at best. Why in the world would A-rank adventurers even come all the way 'ere in the first place?" the dwarf asked us, looking utterly puzzled.

I stayed quiet for a few seconds, carefully choosing my words. "Someone asked us to come here," I said.

"Someone?"

"Yes. I can't tell you who, but they insisted pretty firmly. We're thinking it might be linked to that situation with the mine."

"I see... Well, I dun really get it, but it's fine. All righty then, I'll let ye go to the mine, but ye 'ave to promise me somethin'; ye lasses must come back 'ere every night for a week, deal? If I see that yer able to leave the mine every night without gettin' lost in there, then I'll trust ye and get off yer back."

He seemed serious. We could've just ignored his demand, but..."Sure. In that case, we'll be staying here this week. Meals included, please."

"If ye lasses truly are A-ranks, there shouldn't be anythin' for me to worry 'bout. But yer so young, I can't just sit back and watch ye put yerselves in danger."

I chuckled. "Thank you for your concern, but I'm actually forty years old."

"And Teto is forty-four!" Teto piped up.

I gestured to him to check our ages on our guild cards, and his eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

"Ye look awfully young for humans; I'd swear ye're kids. You got any dwarf or elf blood in ye?"

"Nothing of the sort, no. We just have a lot of mana," I replied with a smile.

A quick glance outside told me it was a little late to start exploring the mines, so we decided to rest in our room for the evening.

"Master, are you sure that was a wise decision?" Beretta, who had kept quiet the entire time, asked me when we reached our room.

"What do you mean?"

"I was thinking that you and Lady Teto could have simply disregarded that dwarf's warning."

Well, she was right. But...

"We could've, but it made me happy."

“What did?”

“That he was worried about us. I’m over forty, and I’ve been an A-rank adventurer for so many years, yet he was fretting over us like we were children. It was refreshing,” I explained to Beretta.

Judging by her expression, though, she hadn’t quite understood what I meant.

Meanwhile, Teto, true to her carefree nature, had plonked herself down on the bed to test its comfort level.

CHAPTER 19

ARIM, THE DWARF GIRL

When we came down for dinner that night, the innkeeper was in the dining hall with his family.

“Oh, I was actually tellin’ my wife and daughter ‘bout ye, lasses. ’Ere, lemme do the introductions.”

He first acquainted us with his wife, a petite woman about 140 centimeters tall with a youthful appearance, which contrasted drastically with her husband’s strong build and bushy beard. She didn’t look a day over twenty, yet she was apparently forty-five.

Fantasy races sure were something else.

“Oooh, customers! It’s been a while since we last had anybody stay here!” the innkeeper couple’s daughter said when she saw us.

“Oi, Arim. Dun say that in front of the customers, that’s rude,” the innkeeper chided her.

She seemed to be about twelve years old, and if one didn’t know she was the innkeeper’s daughter, she and her mother could definitely pass as sisters.

This might have explained why people weren’t usually that shocked when they learned I was an eternal twelve-year-old; legal lolis were a thing in this world!

“Nice to meet you! I’m Arim!” the dwarf girl told us. “What are your names?”

“I’m Chise. We’ll be staying at your dad’s inn for a week, so we’re going to see each other a lot.”

“Teto is Teto! Nice to meet you, Arim!”

“I am Beretta. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Okay, Chise, Teto, and Miss Beretta!”

She put a “Miss” in front of Beretta’s name, but not ours... I was technically an adult, so being treated like a child by a girl likely younger than me felt a bit uncomfortable. And I was kinda jealous Beretta was getting special treatment.

“Arim! These ladies are more than twice yer age; ye gotta be polite to ’em!” Her father scolded her.

“What, for real?! I thought you were the same age as me, Chise!”

I told the innkeeper it was fine and smiled at the dwarf girl. “Hey, Arim, do you want to see a magic trick?” I asked her.

I opened and closed my hands repeatedly to show her I wasn’t holding anything. Then, I brought my hands together and silently used my Creation Magic.

“All done! Give me your hands,” I instructed.

“Huh? Oh! Whoa! It’s candy!”

I unclasped my hands right over hers, and the hard candies I had made with my magic fell into her palms. They were wrapped in oil paper, and each of them was a different flavor: strawberry, lemon, and orange.



"That was so cool, Chise! Was it really magic? Can I keep the candies?!" she asked me excitedly.

"Of course. These are yours now, Arim."

Candies were a rarity in such a desolate town, where even sugar must have been deemed a luxurious commodity. The lively little dwarf girl seemed to be positively glowing with happiness.

As I watched her share the candies with her parents, a smile adorned my face, but it also stirred a gentle wave of nostalgia within me. Memories of Selene as a child resurfaced, where I would magically conjure cookies straight into her pockets by playfully tapping them while singing a little tune, or perform little "magic tricks" just like the one I did right now to make candy appear in her little hands. I couldn't help feeling a little melancholic whenever I thought about my beloved adoptive daughter.

"Lady Wiitch," Teto whined.

"I know, I know. I'm going to make some candy for you too." I clasped my hands together, conjured another handful of candies, and gave them to Teto.

"Thank you!" she chirped.

The innkeeper couple tore their eyes away from their daughter to flash me an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry. First, ye shared yer food with us, now this," the innkeeper started, but I shook my head.

"Don't mention it. I like making children happy."

We ate our dinner while listening to Arim and the innkeeper's wife tell us about the town and, when we were done eating, headed back to our room.

"Master," Beretta called out to me.

"Yes, yes. Here you go. *Charge!*"

I put my hand on Beretta's back and replenished her mana with a quick spell.

Attendant dolls relied on mana to stay awake, and due to the global mana drought, Beretta couldn't remain conscious for long periods of time. I had given her a mana crystal to wear as a brooch, but even with that, I still needed to replenish her mana once a day. I then cast a quick *Clean* spell on all three of us, changed into my pajamas, and headed to bed.

And the next morning...

"Good morning!" A knock at the door woke me up, followed quickly by Arim's cheerful greeting.

"Ngh... Is it morning already?" I asked, letting out a big yawn.

"Good morning, Master."

"Morning, Beretta..."

Beretta had already changed into her maid uniform and was in the process of opening the window to let some air into the room when I woke up. I slipped out of Teto's embrace and started putting on my clothes. A few minutes later, Teto woke up.

"Good morning, Lady Witch."

"Morning, Teto."

After we were done changing, we stepped out of the room and made our way to the dining hall for breakfast. However, I found myself only able to eat half of my meal. Although the food tasted fantastic, much like the dishes we had enjoyed the day before, it felt a little heavy—the flavors were just too intense.

"Ye didn't finish yer meal, lass. Are ye feelin' sick?" the innkeeper asked me, concerned.

I shot him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, it's just... The food tastes great, but it's a bit much for me in the morning."

"Sorry 'bout that, lass. We dwarves are big eaters, so I gave ye regular-sized portions, but from tomorrow onward, I'll cut it in 'alf for ye!"

I thanked him for his consideration.

“Teto will eat your leftovers, Lady Witch!”

Thanks to Teto’s bottomless appetite, we ended up not wasting food that day. Meanwhile, Beretta, who had been listening to my conversation with the innkeeper, announced she had a request.

“I apologize for my brazenness, but if you don’t mind, could I please prepare Master’s breakfast from now on?”

“You, Beretta?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes. Master tends to not eat much at breakfast,” she explained to the innkeeper. “I am afraid that even if you reduce the portion sizes, the strong flavors might still prove a touch overwhelming for her in the morning. Therefore, would you kindly grant me permission to use your kitchen to prepare her breakfast, starting tomorrow?”

I couldn’t argue with her there. The dwarf’s food was great, but eating such rich meals every single time might end up weighing on my stomach a little. However, it was common for chefs to be protective of their kitchens, so I couldn’t help but feel a slight apprehension that the innkeeper might decline her request. But...

“Well, ye brought yer own ingredients, so I guess it’s fine as long as ye make sure to keep the kitchen clean.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, by the way, there’s somethin’ I gotta tell ye,” the innkeeper said. “I went ahead and took the liberty of seekin’ permission from the town mayor and the vigilante group for ye lasses to venture into the abandoned mine last night. The entrance is guarded, so ye can’t just show up and expect to be let in right away, ye see.”

That made sense. If it was the adventurer’s guild that was in charge of the mine, we’d have no trouble, but since it wasn’t, I had already figured there would be some paperwork involved.

“And when will we get authorized?” I asked.

“Well, it’s pretty uncommon for outsiders to want to venture into the mine, so they said they needed to establish some rules first. Ye should ‘ave the green light by tomorrow.”

It seemed we wouldn't be able to start working on our objective just yet.

"Hey, Chise, you guys don't have anything to do today, right? How about I show you around town?" Arim suggested.

"Oh, why not? I'll take you up on that offer, Arim."

"It's gonna be so much fun!" Teto chirped.

"I'll be the best guide ever, you'll see!" Arim boasted.

The innkeeper wore a concerned expression, while his wife had a serene smile on her face. They saw us off and, following Arim, we ventured into the streets.

"Look, Chise! These are the fields! I help there sometimes!"

I thought that the fields would be desolate due to the imbalances in the leylines but, to my surprise, they were teeming with thriving wheat plants and vegetables, contrasting vividly with the barren fields we had passed on our journey here.

"These look great," I commented.

While we looked at the vast expanse of fields, Arim ran toward a group of dwarves who were doing some farmwork. The innkeeper had said they had no food to spare for outsiders, but it seemed to me that these people were pretty well-fed. They looked much healthier than the people we had encountered in the impoverished villages on our way here.

Arim started helping the other dwarves with the fields. They headed to the nearby river to draw some water for the plants and plucked the weeds that were growing in the fields. When they were done, they all went to the edge of the fields and put their hands on the ground.

"With our mana, we beseech the earth! Grant strength and vigor to our crops! Activation!" they all chanted in unison, Arim included.

Yellow mana came out of their hands and started spreading across the fields, making the earth glow.

So that's why their fields are thriving despite the low mana concentration of the earth, I

mused.

After performing their spell, all of the dwarves looked a little tired, but Arim turned around to face us, a proud grin on her face.

"Hee hee! Chise, Teto, Miss Beretta! What do you think of our fields?" she asked.

"They look amazing," I said, returning her smile.

The *Activation* spell they had cast on the field was the same as the one I had performed in the villages on our way here. Dwarves were naturally proficient in Earth Magic, so they must've known how to adjust the types of nutrients in the fields and probably replenished the mana of the soil on a regular basis. This likely explained how they were able to cultivate enough food to support the entire population of the town, even in a land deprived of mana.

CHAPTER 20

THE DWARVES' WISDOM

We spent the rest of the day following Arim around town.

During both lunchtime and dinnertime, all of the townsfolk headed to Arim's father's inn. They brought the ingredients they had harvested in the fields, and the innkeeper cooked a large meal for all of the workers. We hadn't witnessed it on our first day in town, since it had been past lunchtime when we had arrived and everyone had already eaten. Likewise, the innkeeper had prepared our dinner early the previous evening so we could eat with his family, and we had spent the rest of the evening in our room.

And at last, the next day, we got the authorization to go explore the abandoned mine. Arim's father volunteered to take us there, and we gladly accepted his offer. By the time we were ready, Arim was about to head out as well.

"Papa, Chise, where are you going?" she asked us.

"I'm takin' 'em to the abandoned mine. I'll be right back, okay?"

"We'll be back for dinner," I told the dwarf girl.

"Okay! I'm going to help the people in the fields! And when I'm done, I'm gonna help Papa with the inn!" she told me enthusiastically.

My face broke into a smile. "My, what a hardworking girl you are."

"You're amazing, Arim!"

"Tee hee! Ah, but I play with my friends too, so I'm not hardworking all the time," the little girl said shyly before turning around.

I stopped her right before she left and beckoned her closer.

"Here, I made you some more candy," I said, taking a small pouch out of my magic bag and handing it to the little girl.

“Oooh! Thank you!”

“Give some to your friends too, all right?”

I had actually included a single mint-flavored candy, a flavor that I knew most children hated. I couldn't help but snicker thinking about their reaction. Did that make me a bad person?

“Well then, should we go, lasses?”

“Yes. Lead the way.”

Prompted by the innkeeper, we set off toward the abandoned mine. After climbing a winding path, we reached the gouge I had spotted in the rocky mountain when we arrived in town. The entrance to the mine was right there. A group of dwarves in heavy armor and carrying large hammers stood guard in front of it. These were the vigilante corps the innkeeper had told us about.

“These are the lasses I told ye guys 'bout,” the innkeeper said.

“So ye're those adventurer lasses, huh? I mean, ye got the authorization, so you can go in, but are ye sure ye want to? What business ye got in the mine anyway? Y'wont find much in there,” one of the dwarves asked us, his comrade nodding in agreement beside him.

“We just have to check something,” I said.

“I mean, I won't stop ye, but it really ain't a good idea. That mine's teemin' with monsters, y'know?” the dwarf cautioned.

I forced a smile on my face. Clearly, they didn't believe three frail-looking girls like us would be able to take on the monsters in the mine.

“Do you have any advice for us?” I asked, swiftly moving on.

“Well, be careful 'bout the monsters, potential cave-ins, and the lack o' oxygen,” one of the dwarves said.

“And don't forget 'bout the darkness!” his comrade added. “There was this group o' noble lads who tried venturing into the mine for a little challenge only to scurry back

with their tails between their legs 'cause they forgot to bring a light source."

"A light source? You mean torches and lanterns, right?" I asked.

"Yep. We dwarves can see jus' fine in the dark, so there aren't any torches in the mine. But ye humans ain't so lucky, so I hope ye're prepared."

"And remember: the air can be real scarce in some parts of the mine. Torches can go out in a blink, leavin' you in complete darkness. I'd say ye should for sure bring both regular torches and magic lanterns, if ye have any," the innkeeper added, turning toward us to make sure we had brought proper equipment.

"We're good, don't worry. *Torch! Light!*"

"And we have a few magic lanterns in our magic bag."

I quickly created a torch and a light orb, while Beretta took some of the magic lanterns I had made earlier out of our magic bag to show them to the dwarves.

The dwarves looked at us, their faces a mixture of surprise and amazement.

"Well, if ye lasses can do all these fancy magic tricks, ye should be all right in there," one of the guards told us. "Oh, one last thing," he added as if he had suddenly remembered something. "Ye can deal with the monsters as ye see fit, but try not to harm the bats that live inside the mine, all right?"

"All right." I nodded after a short pause. "We'll keep it in mind."

"Be careful in there, yeah?"

We said goodbye to the dwarves and, at last, entered the mine.

"Lady Witch, what was that dwarf talking about? With the bats," Teto asked me.

I hummed. "I have a pet theory, but I'll explain it to you when we actually see them," I said. "More importantly, Teto, how does this place feel to you?"

"There's some really gross mana toward the bottom. And the path makes no sense!"

I used Mana Perception combined with *Earth Sonar* to see the state of the mine for

myself. However, I quickly got overwhelmed by the flood of information. Not only were there hundreds of winding pathways—both man- and monster-made—but the entire place was teeming with insect-type monsters wriggling and crawling about. I ended up cutting my spell short, unable to gather any actionable information.

All I knew was that the number of monsters in this mine was insane. We weren't talking about a mere thousand or two, but rather tens of thousands, if not more, their colonies seemingly everywhere in the mine.

"I can't see anything like this..." I sighed.

When I saw the abandoned mine from afar, I could vaguely feel that the seepage point in the leylines was located in its depths. But now that I was actually in there, the combination of the mana flowing, the countless monsters roaming around, and the large concentration of miasma deep in the mine—the "gross mana" Teto had complained about—made it impossible for me to figure out the exact location of the seepage point.

And there was one other thing I couldn't wrap my head around: why hadn't these monsters tried leaving the mine?

"Well, that's too bad. For now, let's proceed with our initial plan. Teto?"

"Yes, Lady Witch! Haaa!"

Teto put her hands against a wall and, after making sure we couldn't be seen from the entrance, used her magic. There was a loud rumbling sound as the wall distorted and expanded, transforming into a room.

I put my hand on one of the newly formed walls and chanted: "*Creation! Steel plate.*"

I used Earth Magic to cover the walls with steel plates so the monsters wouldn't be able to dig through them and get in the room. After that, I took a lantern out of my magic bag, as well as two transfer gates and a barrier device to protect the room from any potential threat. I linked the first gate to the Wasteland of Nothingness and the second to another gate I was carrying in my magic bag.

"This room will serve as our base while we're in the mines. All righty then, let's start exploring!"

“Yaaay!” Teto cheered.

“I shall do my utmost to assist you, Master, Lady Teto,” Beretta said.

I used Earth Magic to hide the little room, and off we went. Thanks to the transfer gates, we could always fall back to the room and exit the mine, no matter how deep we ventured.

“And just as we promised to the innkeeper, we’ll be back in the evening,” I said.

Teto nodded. “It’s important to keep your promises!”

But as we were about to start our exploration, Beretta abruptly signaled for us to stop.

“Master, please wait a moment. While we are currently near the entrance, where the air is still fresh, venturing deeper into the mine increases the risk of encountering hazardous gases like toxic fumes or carbon dioxide. These could be dangerous for you, Master.”

“You’re right. That might be a problem down the line,” I acknowledged. “Well, for now, I guess something like this will do... *Barrier! Creation: oxygen!*”

Instantly, a barrier filled with pure, clean air appeared around us. Since we didn’t know where the pockets of toxic gasses and carbon dioxide were located, I decided it would be safer for us to stay in a giant oxygen bubble as we ventured down the mine.

“Ah, Lady Witch! There’s some light here!”

“It seems that the mine collapsed in on itself. Look, there’s a hole that leads to the outside. This must be where the bats that dwarf mentioned are coming from too.”

We started making our way down the mine and, after only a few minutes, we came across a large number of bats hanging from the ceiling.

“There are so many of them! Lady Witch, can you tell me what the dwarf meant now?” Teto asked me as we slowly walked past the bats so as not to scare them.

“These bats are this town’s lifeline,” I explained my little theory to her.

“Lifeline? What do you mean?” Teto asked, her head tilted to the side in confusion.

I opened my mouth to answer, but Beretta beat me to it.

“Are you perhaps talking about the compost they produce, Master?”

“Yup. Well, that’s my best guess, at least. No matter how much mana Arim and the others pour into their fields, they can’t fabricate the nutrients the plants need. Yet their crops still manage to grow, which suggests there must already be nutrients in the soil—and those must’ve come from somewhere.”

The mine had been shut down about thirty years ago, so these bats must’ve been around for a while—ten or twenty years, at the very least. However, there wasn’t that much bat feces on the floor of the mine. The bats would spend their nights outside, feeding on small insects and fruit, then come back to the mine during the day to get some rest. Naturally, the mine should be full of their droppings, not to mention the bodies of the bats who had died here. But there was barely anything.

“Feces tend to ferment rapidly in enclosed spaces like caves and grottoes, making them valuable for fertilizing fields. There’s no doubt to me that it’s what the townsfolk here use to make sure their crops grow—along with Earth Magic, of course.”

If there were no nutrients in the soil, the plants wouldn’t grow, no matter how much mana one poured into it. I was almost positive the dwarves must have been using a guano-based fertilizer to provide their crops with the nutrients they needed.

“I see! Teto learned something today!”

As Teto looked up at the bats hanging from the ceiling with interest, I proceeded cautiously, strengthening the barrier to block the smell.

CHAPTER 21

EXPLORING THE ABANDONED MINE

After a little while, we were finally past the bat zone and reached the spot where the monster-repellent spell the dwarves had cast on the mine came to an end.

“Careful. There are monsters here!”

“It’s already time to fight?” Teto asked enthusiastically.

“Here I go. *Wind Cutter!*”

I pointed my staff at the insectile monsters that were crawling along the walls. Instantly, dozens of wind blades shot out of it, effortlessly shearing through their targets. Meanwhile, Teto had grabbed her sword and was slashing away at the remaining monsters with swift and precise movements.

“Master, Lady Teto, may I please attempt to defeat one of the monsters to test my strength?” Beretta asked.

Teto and I exchanged a knowing glance before nodding, deliberately leaving one of the monsters alive. While Beretta had been able to defeat the bandits in Gald, I wasn’t sure her powers would work on monsters, so I was curious about the outcome of this fight.

“Here I go!” Beretta said, dropping into a fighting stance.



The creature—which was about the size of a large dog—screeched, its chelicerae clacking as it launched its attack. With a short exhale, Beretta delivered a swift strike to the monster. On top of the natural strength that came with her mechanical body, she had also infused her attack with Gravity Magic—a subcategory of Dark Magic. The creature couldn't stand a chance. A large crack formed in its carapace, but Beretta wasn't done yet. She kept raining punches on the monster, its shell shattering into pieces and its body collapsing, splashing bodily fluids around the room.

"And for the finishing touch..." Beretta raised her leg high and brought it down with all of her strength in a perfect axe kick, effectively squashing the creature.

It let out a feeble cry of agony and fell dead. Meanwhile, Beretta adjusted her skirt, which had risen during her final attack, and resumed her usual elegant posture.

I was left speechless by her incredible hand-to-hand combat prowess.

"Master, Lady Teto, I apologize for the unsightly display."

"Beretta, you're so strong! We should totally spar together when we go back home!" Teto praised her enthusiastically.

As for me, I couldn't help but feel a little concerned.

"G-Good job..." I started, before shaking my head. "Wait, that's not what I meant to say! Are you okay? Didn't you hurt yourself with that kick?!"

Given the immense force she had unleashed, I couldn't help but worry about the potential ramifications it might have had on her body.

"Rest assured, Master. I made sure not to exceed my limits. While I did apply some pressure to my joints, the Self-Regeneration ability you granted me ensures that there won't be any lasting aftereffects. I also tried to use as little mana as possible, so you do not need to worry about that either."

"I-I see... Good to hear." Her explanation had been so precise I was positive she wasn't lying to me, but I still had a hard time processing what just happened.

She glanced down and noticed the hem of her skirt had been stained with some of the monster's bodily fluids.

"Some monsters have poisonous blood, so I think it would be wise for me to explore alternative methods of combat," Beretta noted, reflecting on the fight.

"Um, yeah, probably... I don't really know, but it might be best—if only for my nerves' sake."

While some adventurers preferred to fight monsters with their bare fists just like Beretta did, it often led to tense situations where their lack of weapons or proper strategy could prove fatal. I really hoped Beretta would find a bit of a safer combat style.

"I have an idea," Beretta said. "Remember when you took on that humanoid magical weapon? It got me thinking, Master. Might I ask if you perhaps have a metal item of some kind you are not using at the moment?"

"Uh... Ah, I have an iron sword in my bag." I reached into my magic bag and took out the big sword I had crafted from the guillotine blade I had used to defeat the water hydra well over twenty years ago now. Beretta looked at it with interest.

"I see. This sword is too large for me to wield in the mine, but I can change its shape with magic."

She infused some of her mana into the blade. Immediately, the sword—which had been as tall as I was—split into eight sections that levitated midair. With precise adjustments, Beretta transformed the metal fragments into eight distinct small swords that floated around her.

"Whoa! That's amazing, Beretta!" Teto marveled. "How did you do that?"

"The Self-Regeneration skill Master provided me with allows me to liquefy and absorb all metals into my body to facilitate its regeneration. I simply used that ability to transform the blade into eight smaller swords."

Back when Teto was still a clay golem, she had gotten cut in half by an orc, causing damage to her golem core. I had tried using magic stones to repair it, and they had turned into liquid, filling the cracks in the core. *It's probably a similar phenomenon*, I thought to myself as I inspected the swords floating around Beretta. They were all small enough that she could easily wield them, even in the mine.

"I am thinking of using *Psychokinesis* to fire the swords at the enemies, just like you

did with the cannonballs you shot at the artillery golem, Master," Beretta explained.

"Oooh! That's gonna be so cool!" Teto cheered.

Beretta, on the other hand, seemed a little uneasy. "However, there is a slight concern. Although it would keep me at a safe distance from the enemy and prevent their bodily fluids from coming into contact with me, it would also require me to use larger quantities of mana."

"That's fine; I can just replenish your mana whenever we take a break," I reassured her. I decided it would be best to encourage Beretta to experiment with her fighting style until she found something she liked.

"Lady Witch, what do we do with these monsters' bodies?" Teto asked me.

"Hm, just shove them in the magic bag for now. We'll pick out the magic stones later."

I had been so amazed by Beretta's combat prowess, I had completely forgotten to dispose of the monsters' bodies. If we left them in the mine, other monsters might eat them. Rather than providing more sustenance to the tens of thousands of monsters in the mine, I figured it would be wiser to take the monsters' bodies with us and burn them to use as fertilizer.

We progressed down the mine, killing all of the monsters that stood in our way until it was time for us to head back to the inn.

"Master, I suggest we head back to the mine entrance soon."

"Ah, is it time already?" I asked, glancing at the pocket watch I kept in my robes.

The darkness of the mine made it difficult for me to keep track of time. But, thankfully, Beretta was here to remind us of when it was time for us to eat, or in this case, to leave.

"All right, we'll continue from here tomorrow."

Just as we did in the entrance, we created a small room in a corner of the mine, reinforced it with a barrier and steel plates on the walls, and placed the last one of my transfer gates in there.

"Let's call it quits for today."

We passed through the transfer gate, which took us to the little room we had set up near the mine entrance. When we exited the mine, I noticed the two dwarves keeping guard were different from the ones we had encountered earlier in the day.

"Oh, ye're those lasses the others told us about! How did it go in there?" one of the guards asked us.

"For now, we mostly focused on paring down the monsters," I answered.

"Oooh, thanks for that, lasses," the dwarf said, a grin forming on his face.

"Be careful if you go in there, though. For now, we only took care of the monsters on the highest floors. Once we've killed a few more, we'll start heading deeper into the mines," I said.

"Got it. We'll heed yer advice, girlie."

We said goodbye to the guards and headed back to the inn for the night. As we entered, we were greeted by the innkeeper, his wife, and their daughter, who were anxiously awaiting our return. The couple visibly relaxed upon seeing us return unharmed, and Arim excitedly rushed toward us.

"Chise, you're back!"

I couldn't stop the smile that broke across my face upon being greeted at the door by a cute little girl like Arim.

"Yup, we are. As promised, we made it back in time for dinner."

"I'm looking forward to the food!" Teto chirped.

"Thank you once again for your hospitality," Beretta added.

We ate dinner with the innkeeper's family and I told tales of our travels to Arim. After that, we headed back to our room for some well-deserved rest.

CHAPTER 22

THE POISON JAR

The next day, we headed back into the mine. However, rather than resuming our exploration from the previous day right away, we first decided to make a quick stop in the Wasteland of Nothingness.

“Welcome back, Master, Lady Teto, Miss Beretta,” the attendant dolls greeted us in unison.

“Hi everyone. We’ve got a bunch of dead monsters here. Can you guys pick out the magic stones from their corpses? When you’re done, just burn the monsters’ remains and scatter them in the forest or something.”

“Understood.” Ai—the acting head maid in Beretta’s absence—said with a bow. “We will promptly proceed with the task as instructed.”

We made our way to a desolate area in the wasteland, where I proceeded to dump all of the monsters’ bodies on the ground. There were more than two hundred of them, which might have seemed impressive at first glance... until you realized it was merely a fraction of the total number residing within the mine. Teto and I were pretty much used to seeing dead monsters, so we didn’t bat an eye at the mountain of corpses, and Beretta didn’t seem too fazed either. However, I was pretty sure I saw a couple of the attendant dolls grimace.

“There are 214 monster corpses here. These are E-rank at best, yet it’s pretty impressive just how quickly they reproduce. Well then, we’re heading back. I’m leaving this in your hands.”

“Yes, Master.” I didn’t miss the despair in the attendant dolls’ eyes.

We started making our way back to the transfer gate when, all of a sudden, I stopped in my tracks and turned toward them. I saw a glint of hope appear in their eyes...

“There are loads of monsters like those in the mines, so I’m going to bring you more corpses from tomorrow onward to pick out magic stones from, okay?”

...but it instantly disappeared once they heard my words. I inwardly apologized to them. I really did want the organic matter from the monsters' bodies to use as fertilizer for our fields and trees, though, so I decided that from tomorrow onward I would also ask the dwarves to help dissect the monsters. Not only would it allow them to earn some money, but it would also lessen the burden on the poor dolls' shoulders. Two birds, one stone, you get the picture.

We took the transfer gate back to the spot where we'd stopped our exploration the previous day. However...

"It... seems that the monsters have spawned back already."

Not only had the monsters not left the mine, but from the limited information I got using my Mana Perception, it seemed that their number remained relatively constant... which meant that two hundred new monsters had spawned overnight. To my utter dismay, I couldn't even use large-scale extermination magic to kill them faster, lest the mine collapse on us. And so Teto, Beretta, and I had no choice but to take on each monster one by one.

"There are so many of them... What a pain," I lamented.

"And the further we go, the stronger they get," Teto remarked.

Teto was right, but the monsters were still much, much weaker than us; the monotonousness of it all was really starting to wear on me.

"Master, how about spraying some insecticide to kill some of the weaker monsters?" Beretta suggested.

"We can't do that. I'd have to use tons of it, which would definitely pollute the soil." And besides, releasing such large quantities right next to the town might cause harm to the dwarves.

"Ugh, what a pain," I lamented.

"It's okay, Lady Witch! We're making progress," Teto said in an attempt to cheer me up.

"You're right. There are definitely fewer monsters than before. Let's keep going."

"I shall do my best to assist you, Master."

And just like that, two months went by.

Every day, we maintained our pace of defeating around two hundred monsters. We collected the corpses and transported them either to the wasteland or the town, where the attendant dolls and the dwarves would extract the magic stones and dispose of the bodies. We quickly noticed that there were tons of different insectile monsters in the mine, and the strongest fed on the weakest. However, with us killing a couple hundred monsters every day and disposing of their bodies, not only did they have a harder time finding food, but the mana concentration of the mine was gradually dropping as well, which led to the monsters' replacement rate declining. By the time we had killed ten thousand, there were barely any left in the upper stratum of the mine. Over the following month, we focused on eliminating every last insect on the upper floors. We strategically placed monster repellents and barriers throughout the mine to prevent the monsters from the lower levels from ascending, and used Earth Magic to seal and fill the holes and tunnels they left behind. Needless to say, Teto got to feast on magic stones every day for three months.

"Phew, we've finally made it to the middle level."

"It feels pretty icky in here though," Teto pouted.

Just as I had done on the first day, I used a combination of *Earth Sonar* and Mana Perception to investigate the middle level of the mine.

"Just as I thought, that 'gross mana' you mentioned earlier is miasma, Teto. The quality of the air here is a lot worse than on the upper floors."

Not only was the stagnant air getting worse and worse, but the miasma coming from the depths of the mines was really making it hard to breathe.

"Let's see... *Purification!*"

"Oooh, the mana is back to normal!" Teto marveled.

Purification was a pretty nifty spell. Not only could it disassemble malevolent magical life-forms and curses, but it could also cleanse miasma.

However...

"I really hope what's going on here isn't what I think it is... That would be the worst,"

I muttered.

"Master, are you perhaps thinking this mine is a giant poison jar?" Beretta asked me.

"Lady Witch? What is a 'poison jar'?" Teto asked, tilting her head to the side in confusion.

Beretta was the one who explained it to her. To put it simply, a "poison jar" was an ancient type of curse magic. To create it, one needed to trap a large number of poisonous insects in a jar and let them devour each other until only one survived. That last remaining insect would then be used by the person who performed the spell to curse and kill their target.

"It is possible that something similar is happening in this mine," Beretta noted.

"The seepage point in the leylines causes the monsters to reproduce at an incredibly fast pace. They're eating each other, transforming, and evolving, which, in turn, is causing miasma to accumulate in the depths of the mine."

In the worst-case scenario, this could lead to the birth of a monster strong enough it could destroy the entire kingdom. Alternatively, the miasma might start overflowing from the mine, making the entire region uninhabitable for humans.

"Teto doesn't really get it, but it sounds bad!"

Even amidst these dire circumstances, Teto's innocence and cheerfulness lifted my spirits a little. I slapped my own cheeks, as if to tell myself, "Come on, you got this!"

"We still have to fulfill Lariel's request. Teto, is the seepage point this way?"

"Yup! But there are lots of monsters on the way; I'm a bit scared it's going to be too much for you, Lady Witch," she said, shooting me a worried look.

"Master, please leave the fighting to Lady Teto and me and focus solely on purging the miasma," Beretta offered.

I wasn't about to stop them.

Not only did I have to keep on casting *Purification* to cleanse the miasma as we made our way through the mine, but I also had to keep my *Light* spell up, along with *Barrier*

to protect us from the noxious gases, *Air Control* to make sure we had enough oxygen, and the occasional *Charge* on Beretta so she wouldn't enter sleep mode in the middle of the mine. Needless to say, my mana consumption was through the roof. And to top it all off, no one had set foot in the middle level of the mine in literal decades, and I was a little concerned about whether or not the walls would hold. There were already a few spots where the ceiling had caved in on itself. Consequently, I also had to allocate some of my mana towards reinforcing the walls and creating a stable path for our progress.

“At this pace, we can only progress for about six hours a day, huh?”

I was still eating my one strange fruit a day, and my mana pool was steadily increasing, currently standing at a whopping 300,000 MP. This enabled me to cast multiple spells simultaneously, as I was doing at that moment. However, due to the vast amount of mana it cost me to keep all of those spells up at the same time, I found myself unable to explore for long, uninterrupted stretches.

And besides...

“Lady Witch, you’ve been overworking yourself recently! Let’s go back to the wasteland today!”

“Lady Teto is right. We have successfully defeated all of the monsters from the upper levels of the mine, so I would recommend setting aside a week for your body to rest.”

“But I’ve *been* resting, though...” I sighed.

The replacement rate of the monsters was such that I feared they could return to their original numbers within a single day. Yet Beretta’s suggestion resonated with me. Perhaps a much-needed break was indeed in order.

CHAPTER 23

GOING HOME

Teto, Beretta, and I popped by the wasteland about once a week. We had a pretty simple reason to: we still regularly brought ingredients to the innkeeper, and we were starting to worry that the dwarves would get suspicious of us for seemingly having an endless supply of food without ever leaving the mine. And so, we devised a plan where we would feign leaving the town to purchase ingredients, only to secretly utilize the transfer gate I carried in my magic bag to return to the wasteland.

However, Beretta and Teto didn't seem to think that this counted as "taking a break" and sentenced me to a week of forced rest in the wasteland. And so I reluctantly informed the innkeeper, his wife, and Arim that we would be gone for the next three days before pretending to leave town and, when I deemed we were far enough that no one would see us, used my trusty transfer gate to head back to the wasteland.

"Welcome back, Master, Lady Teto, Miss Beretta," the attendant dolls chimed in unison as soon as we arrived.

"Hi, everyone," I greeted them back.

"We're back!" Teto chirped next to me.

"Master, have you eaten lunch already? If you'd like, we can prepare something for you," one of the attendant dolls suggested.

I was about to gladly take her up on her offer when Beretta spoke up.

"That won't be necessary. I shall prepare our masters' meals."

While there was no visible change in the other doll's expression, I could tell she was feeling a little down about Beretta's reply. Between Beretta's possessiveness and the other doll's disappointment, it really felt like they'd made leaps and bounds towards having real human emotional lives. It made me feel a little giddy inside; I couldn't help but chuckle quietly.

"Thank you for your offer," I told the attendant doll. "But I'll have Beretta cook our lunch today."

"We'll have your food next time!" Teto added. "I'm looking forward to it!"

The attendant doll nodded with a polite bow before going back to her tasks.

"I shall start on your meal right away, Master, Lady Teto. Please wait a moment," Beretta told us.

"I'm excited to eat your food, Beretta!" Teto chirped.

And so, Teto and I waited for Beretta to be done with our meal.

All of our food items were stored in these large refrigerated food storage warehouses where time didn't pass. Within the warehouses, we had stored vegetables from our own fields, ingredients purchased from town, cuts of meat from defeated monsters, and the seasonings I had made using my Creation Magic. While we were away, the attendant dolls had harvested and processed a lot of vegetables and fruit, turning them into all sorts of different ingredients. Beretta skillfully incorporated those in her cooking.

"There were some fresh tomatoes in the warehouse, so I made you a platter with a couple of tomato-based dishes and some sides," Beretta explained as she set down our lunch on the table. It consisted of a small portion each of chicken fried rice cooked in tomato sauce and spaghetti with meat sauce. Alongside these, there were also two pieces of fried chicken, a mini hamburg steak, a small salad, and a soup. She had even prepared us dessert: a custard pudding.

"This... looks like a kiddie meal," I commented.

"It looks so good! Beretta, thank you for the food!" Teto chirped, immediately digging in.

I reluctantly picked up my spoon and forced a smile on my face. I couldn't believe I was being served a kiddie meal at the ripe age of forty. I wouldn't have batted an eye being served a regular plate of any of these dishes, but it was the arrangement of them that threw me off. But despite my initial reservations, I couldn't deny that everything tasted amazing.

"This is delicious, Beretta," I told the attendant doll.

"Thank you very much, Master. It is a great honor to receive your kind words. I specifically designed this meal with the intention of offering you a wide array of flavors in a single meal, all while taking into account your small appetite," Beretta explained.

"It tastes so good! Can you make it again next time?" Teto eagerly asked.

Teto seemed to really enjoy her meal, but I couldn't shake off the awkwardness I felt at being served a children's meal at my age. It felt like a personal defeat.

"I-It does taste great, but I'm worried about the amount of effort it takes to make so many different dishes in small quantities. I wouldn't want to burden you too much, Beretta. And besides, I'm not sure it's enough food for Teto," I said, trying to dissuade Beretta from serving us similar meals in the future.

"Now that you mention it, Lady Witch, I'm still hungry," Teto added, contemplatively.

"Thank you very much for your consideration, Master. I did, indeed, neglect to take Lady Teto's appetite into consideration. I shall make sure to adjust and prepare meals accordingly in the future."

Phew, crisis averted. Now I could rest easy! I rejoiced inside and took another bite of my food. The taste was undeniably delicious, and with each bite, a wave of nostalgia washed over me. In a way, the flavors reminded me a lot of what I used to eat during my previous life. And so, I made a decision.

"You can still serve us similar meals on occasion, I suppose."

My adult sensibilities were screaming at me, but I paid them no mind.

After we were done with our lunch, Beretta poured us some tea, and we asked Ai, who had been the acting head maid in Beretta's absence, to give us a status update on the wasteland. The attendant dolls' main duties were to take care of the mansion and to expand the forest inside the barrier. Additionally, we had assigned them tasks like tending to the fields, caring for the livestock, and, for the past two months, extracting magic stones from the corpses of monsters we had defeated in the mine. On their rest days, they were allowed to occupy their time as they saw fit, and it seemed most of them had taken an interest in reading.

"This book was a very instructive read, Master," Ai told me, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she handed me one of the books I had made with my Creation Magic and translated into the language of this world. It contained tons of advice on how to manage a home, ranging from recipes and gardening tips to detailed instructions on caring for livestock.

"I would like to grow some of these vegetables and flowers when spring comes," Ai said, pointing at a page that showed different spring plants. "If it is not too much trouble, could you please provide me with the seeds, Master?"

"Sure thing. I'm glad all of you seem to be having a good time with us," I replied with a smile.

Ai proceeded to tell me more about the book while I used my Creation Magic to make the seeds she had requested, occasionally nodding to show her I was still paying attention. Once we finished discussing the book, Ai resumed updating me on the situation in the wasteland. At some point, she mentioned that little chicks had hatched a few weeks ago, and I could immediately tell she was excited by the news. She also spoke about the other attendant dolls, and I couldn't help the smile that appeared on my face when she told me some of them had turned out to be quite clumsy. I was really looking forward to seeing what kind of individuals these dolls would become.

"Thank you so much for everything you have done for us, Master. There is one last thing I have to report."

"What is it?"

"There has been an increase in the insect population of the wasteland. I believe it might soon be time to enter the next phase."

A smile spread across my face when I heard the news. After so many years of working on regenerating the wasteland, we were *finally* seeing the kind of progress I was really hoping for!

I gave her a slight nod. "Noted, thanks. I'll start thinking about what to do from now on."

"Lady Witch, is it a bad thing that there are more insects now?" Teto asked, her head tilted to the side in confusion.

"Not at all. In fact, it's *great*. Insects are the foundation of the food chain, which means we'll be able to bring animals that feed on insects into the wasteland soon," I explained.

The ever-growing quantity of decomposed organic matter, along with the presence of microorganisms and small critters, as well as the earth that was ripening in Teto's body, had made this place a paradise for insects, particularly for decomposers like ants and earthworms. Not only that, but the abundance of trees we had planted had attracted herbivorous insects. And now, in order to establish a proper food chain in the wasteland, we needed to introduce carnivorous insects that would prey on the herbivorous ones, as well as omnivorous animals that would consume both insects and plants.

"I see. But why is it important?" Teto asked next.

"The forest is going to become hospitable to the birds that feed on carnivorous insects, which means they're going to want to build their nests here. They're going to lay eggs, reproduce, and when there's enough of them, we'll be able to hunt them for their meat."

"Master is already planning on releasing some of the chickens we are currently raising as livestock into the wasteland, but if we don't bring in other animals, the ecosystem won't develop," Beretta added.

Teto gasped. "That's no good! The more animals there are, the more food options we have!"

I laughed at Teto's reaction. I knew she would understand if I explained it to her in terms of food, but this was only part of the reason why a balanced ecosystem was important.

"Liriel once transplanted information about all of the animals populating the world into my head, so I guess I'll try to use these to decide what animal we should bring in next," I said.

"Understood, Master."

And so, Teto, Beretta, and I spent three days relaxing in the wasteland before heading back to the little mining town. However, they made it very clear I wasn't allowed back in the mine just yet. *Well, I thought, I guess I can use that time to hunt wild critters to bring back to the wasteland.*

CHAPTER 24

A REQUEST FOR THE CHILDREN

As we made our way to the little mining town's inn, we crossed paths with two members of the town's vigilante corps.

"Good work out there, lasses. 'Eard ye've been away for a couple o' days, huh? How's the mine exploration goin'?"

"We're making progress, slowly but surely. Part of the reason we left town was actually to tell the client who sent us here about our progress," I lied.

When we had arrived in town the first time, I had told the innkeeper we had been sent here on a mission. I tried to bring it up every now and then so the dwarves wouldn't grow suspicious of us.

"Oh, by the way, we're all done dismantlin' them monsters' bodies ye sent our way."

"Thanks. I just want the magic stones; you can keep the monsters' remains."

We followed the dwarves to the little camp they had set up to take care of that little job I had given them. Before our break, we had gotten pretty deep into the mine and had even encountered C-rank monsters.

"Just like last time, these guys' magic stones were pretty damn big. We'd have a right struggle takin' down monsters like those."

"We're mighty grateful to ye. With you lasses takin' care of them monsters, our workload's been much lighter this past couple o' weeks."

"And we even have access to the iron veins again! Not to mention all the monster parts ye're givin' us for free!"

"Damn right!"

The dwarves at the camp all burst into laughter. Though, I couldn't help but notice

some of them were giving us the stink eye. They were probably still a little worried we were after the mythril and orichalcum hidden deep within the mine. I paid them no mind and collected the magic stones they had retrieved for us.

"Thanks for your help," I said.

"No worries, lass! Besides, this arrangement works in our favor too."

That was true; I only wanted the magic stones and had no interest in the monsters' remains, so the townsfolk were free to utilize them as they pleased. Due to the location and history of this town, most of its residents were well-versed in smithing. Thanks to our complete annihilation of the monsters in the upper levels of the mine, they could now safely access the iron and copper veins that had been untouched for so many years, which had clearly brought some blacksmiths back in business, judging by the sounds of hammer striking metal that could be heard throughout the town these days. From what I'd been told, the blacksmiths even incorporated parts of the monsters' shells into their crafts, and whatever they didn't use they sold to merchants in bigger towns.

The three of us made our way back to the inn, where we were greeted by the innkeeper and his family sitting at a table in the dining hall.

"Oh, welcome back, lasses! How're ye doin'? It's a bit early for this, but d'ye want a drink?" the innkeeper offered as soon as we arrived, setting down a small wine cask on the table. He poured some of it into a cup and presented it to us, a proud smile on his face. Judging by his attitude, I assumed the alcohol had been made in town.

"Thanks for the offer, but I don't drink," I told him.

"I shall abstain as well," Beretta said. "I need to be in full control of my body in case my masters need me."

"Don't worry, Teto's gonna drink enough for the three of us!" Teto exclaimed, beaming.

While I was technically old enough to drink, my body was still that of a twelve-year-old, which meant my alcohol tolerance was pretty low. If I really wanted to, I could use Body Strengthening to boost my liver and make my body process alcohol faster, but I didn't feel the need to go to such lengths just to have a drink. Teto, on the other hand, enjoyed drinking from time to time.

"Here ye go, lass!" the innkeeper said, handing the cup to Teto, who thanked him and instantly downed the entire thing in one go, her throat making a gurgling sound as she drank.

"Phew! It's delicious!" she exclaimed when her cup was empty, a content smile on her face. "Lady Wiiitch," she whined, turning toward me. "Can you give me some of your alcohol too?"

"Sure thing. What about some brandy?"

While I didn't partake in drinking, over the past few years, I had developed a habit of buying alcohol so that the fortune I had earned as an adventurer wouldn't just sit on my guild card untouched. I would buy pretty expensive wines and liquors and store them in my non-time-stopping magic bag or in the basement of our mansion to age. Occasionally, I would even make some alcohol with my Creation Magic and add it to my collection. Why would I do that? Well, I was just wondering how they would taste after a hundred—scratch that, that was not long enough in this world—let's say *three hundred* years of maturation, and most importantly, how much money I'd be able to sell them for. I considered it a sort of investment.

I took a small casket of brandy out of my stash and handed it to Teto, who offered some to the innkeeper.

"Teto loves brandy because it's the same color as Teto's eyes!" she preened.

"Oh, this tastes great! I've never tried anythin' like this before!" the innkeeper said.

Little Arim watched them as they enjoyed their drinks, her eyes filled with curiosity.

"Arim, want a sip?" her father offered. "Just a little, all right?"

"It's really yummy, Arim!" Teto added.

I glared daggers at both of them.

"Hey, don't offer alcohol to children," I chided them.

"Why not? Dwarven kids can handle their booze just fine!" the innkeeper said.

He assured me that dwarves had a very high alcohol tolerance, and even children could

handle the occasional glass with no issue. I watched, dubious, as Arim brought the cup full of brandy to her lips and...

"Whoa, it's yummy! It smells really good, and it makes me feel all warm inside!"

Her father guffawed. "That's my kid for ye, ye know how to recognize good alcohol! That's enough, though. No more booze for ye, kiddo," he said, taking the cup from her.

The little girl pouted in dissatisfaction.

"How about we tell Miss Chise and Miss Beretta what happened in town while they were away, Arim?" the innkeeper's wife interjected.

And so, Beretta and I chitchatted with Arim and her mother while Teto and the innkeeper continued to enjoy their drinks. Eventually, Teto passed out from all the booze she had downed, so we decided to call it a night and headed back to our room. Right as we left, the townsfolk started filing in. It seemed it was dinnertime. The dwarves would probably want some alcohol with their food, so I gave a casket filled to the brim with alcohol I had made with my Creation Magic to the innkeeper.

"Hm... Lady Witch, the mythril is so crunchy..." Teto mumbled as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

"What kind of dream are you having?" I whispered, amused.

I quickly cast a *Clean* spell on her to wash the smell of alcohol and the day's grime off her before closing my eyes for a good night's sleep.

The next morning came.

"Good morning, Lady Witch!" Teto greeted me bright and early, showing no sign of a hangover. I forced a smile on my face and returned her greeting, and we made our way to the dining hall. The innkeeper had drunk just as much as Teto—if not more—but just like her, he wasn't hungover in the slightest. Quite the opposite actually; he was in an extremely good mood, claiming it was all thanks to the alcohol I had given him.

"Mornin' lasses!" he greeted us. "Miss Beretta's cooked yer breakfast!"

"Here it is, Master," Beretta said, setting down a plate in front of me.

"Whoa, papa, it looks delicious!" Arim said, salivating at the sight of the food Beretta had prepared for me.

"Here's yer breakfast, Arim."

It seemed that Beretta was getting along with the innkeeper, and the two of them had even started exchanging cooking tips. Arim watched with envy as I started digging into the food Beretta had prepared for me, so I gave her a few bites, and, in return, she gave me some of her breakfast. All in all, it was a pretty nice start to the morning.

"You're going back to the mine today?" the little girl asked me with curiosity.

"Nope. We've been working a lot this past couple of months, so we've decided to take it easy for the rest of the week," I told her.

"You can play with me then!" she exclaimed, her eyes lighting up with excitement.

"Arim, Miss Chise said she wants to get some rest," her father reprimanded her. "Hanging out with you's only gonna make her more tired!"

A pout appeared on the little girl's face, but I quickly told her father it was fine and that she meant no harm.

"Oh, by the way, Chise, you said you wanted to ask me something. What is it?" the little girl asked me, changing the topic.

The previous evening, I had told Arim I had a little mission for her.

"The three of us are looking for small creatures, you see," I explained to the little girl.

"Yeah, like bugs, frogs, snakes, all that!" Teto chimed in. "Do you know if there's a spot where we can find any?"

We had decided to use the rest of our break to look for creatures to bring to the wasteland.

"Can you tell us what kind of creatures live in the area?" I asked Arim.

"Why are you looking for animals and bugs? You're a bit weird, Chise," the little girl giggled before puffing out her little chest with confidence. "But it's okay! I can help

you! I'm gonna call all my friends, and we're gonna go look for animals for you!"

I hadn't thought of that, but Arim was right: we were going to need some help to capture the creatures. I decided to go along with her suggestion.

"Okay. We'll come with you too," I offered.

"I'm gonna go get the others!" Arim said before dashing out of the inn.

While we waited for her, Teto, Beretta, and I sipped on some tea and discussed what animals we should bring to the wasteland.

"We could get a couple of bats, now that I think about it. They eat insects too," I suggested.

Teto eagerly nodded. "If we release them in the wasteland, they will multiply for sure!"

"Due to the mana drought, mundane animals do not rely on mana as much as other creatures. They would be able to live in the Wasteland of Nothingness without complaint. I also suggest instructing the attendant dolls to create a suitable environment for them," Beretta said.

Before long, Arim was back, her friends in tow.

"Chise, we're back! Let's go to the forest!" the little girl excitedly said.

"Arim, be careful not to hurt yourself out there."

"Yes, mama!"

We bid goodbye to the innkeeper and his wife and followed Arim and her friends outside.

"Where are we going?" I asked the little girl.

"East of the mountain! There's a big forest there!"

According to Arim, it would take us about ten minutes to get there.

"There's tons of animals there!" she added before proceeding to list them all; rats,

rabbits, pigeons, ducks, foxes, raccoons, weasels, and even wolves and bears, although we weren't really looking for carnivorous animals as of yet. For now, our main goal was to bring herbivorous and entomophagous creatures into the wasteland. I also expressed my interest in finding reptiles, amphibians like frogs and newts, freshwater crustaceans, and shellfish, and Arim assured me I would be able to find them in the forest as well.

"All righty then, who wants to compete to see who can find the most animals?" I asked the children.

"Me! Me! Me!" they all cheered before running off into the woods without another glance in our direction.

Arim stayed by our side, and we started slowly walking around the forest. I quickly realized the little girl had a knack for sniffing out animal burrows, spotting them much faster than any of us.

We spent the entire morning exploring and looking for critters. As lunchtime approached, I called all of the children back together so they could share their findings.

"Chise, Teto, look! We found lots of animals!" Arim exclaimed, her little chest puffed out in pride.

She wasn't exaggerating—the children had truly outdone themselves. Frogs, snakes, lizards, newts, geckos, moles, squirrels, rats, pond snails, freshwater crabs, lake prawns... I was seriously impressed. While Teto, Beretta, and I had managed to capture a few rabbits, pigeons, ducks, and beavers ourselves, the variety of wildlife in these woods really took me by surprise.

"I found these in a hole in a tree! And this one in a burrow in the ground!"

"And these ones were in the old well, and these ones in the pond!"

"I found mine in the river!"

I took the cages I had brought along for the occasion out of my magic bag and put all of the little critters inside, ensuring they were separated by species.

"Thank you for your help, everyone," I expressed my gratitude to the children. "Let's see... How about I give all of you one copper coin for every animal you found?" I

offered.

The children who had found the most animals couldn't contain their joy, jumping with excitement, while the ones who had only found one or two looked at them with envy. Nevertheless, they held tightly onto the coins I had given them as if they were their most prized possessions. Arim, on the other hand, was frowning slightly.

"Chise, what about the sweet thingies you gave me last time?" she asked me.

Surprised, I replied, "Huh? You'd rather have candy than money?"

"Yeah! I want the sweet thingies!"

At her words, the other children turned toward me with sparkling eyes. It seemed Arim wasn't the only one who found candy more enticing than money. I chuckled and performed the same little magic trick I had done in front of Arim when we first met—using my magic to make candy appear in my hands—and gave each of the children a few sweet treats.

And so, the next day, I decided that rather than rewarding the children with copper coins, I would give them one candy for each critter they found.

"What are you gonna do with all the animals, Chise?" Arim asked me curiously.

I quickly made up a lie. "We plan on using them as bait for the bugs in the mine."

The mere thought of sacrificing innocent creatures to the monsters pained me, but it wasn't as if I could tell the children that I wanted to breed animals to populate the wasteland. I was a bit afraid the children were going to start booing me and calling me a horrible person, but Arim simply shrugged.

"Well, I feel bad for the little animals, but if it's for your work, I guess you don't have a choice," she said.

"We use worms to catch fish, so it's kind of the same thing," one of her friends added.

"And sometimes we catch moles in the fields to sell their fur to the peddler who comes to town before winter! It makes good money!" another one supplied.

I hadn't expected such a pragmatic response, but I guess it made sense: I had been

born in modern-day Japan, where movements such as animal rights were quite widespread. But for these children, animals were not only adorable companions, but a source of nourishment first and foremost. Their resilience and practical outlook surprised me and I found myself thinking that even twenty-eight years into my reincarnation, this world could still surprise me.

CHAPTER 25

THE BANDITS' ATTACK

As our break neared its end, we sneakily dropped in on the wasteland to entrust all of the creatures we had captured with the children to the attendant dolls before resuming our exploration of the mine. We were still in the middle stratum, and the further we went, the denser the miasma was. Not only that, but the monsters we came across were getting stronger, most of them exhibiting very unusual traits compared to the other monsters of the same type. Granted, they were still no threat to us, though. Our main concern was actually the stability of the mine itself.

It was clear no one had been this deep into the mine in a really long time. Large sections of the walls were either on the verge of collapse or had already given way, obstructing our path. And to make things even more challenging, these parts were also riddled with monster-made tunnels. Teto and I had to burn tons of MP to reinforce the walls with Earth Magic and to fill in the tunnels so the monsters wouldn't sneak up on us. And let's not forget all the mana I was already burning to cleanse the miasma so it wouldn't spread to the upper floors. And so, every day, I would set down a barrier device in the mine while I repeatedly cast *Purification* to clear all of the miasma.

“Lady Wiiitch, I found a mythril vein!”

“Really? That’s great!”

I had Teto use *Earth Sonar* at the end of every day to track our progress; this wasn’t the first mythril lode we’d turned up. We had actually stumbled across several tiny deposits of the stuff during our exploration.

“I will mine the mythril Lady Teto found,” Beretta said. “*Extraction!*”

Every time we found some, we had Beretta use her metal manipulation abilities to pull the mythril from the vein. Well, I was saying that as if we had found tons of the thing, but in reality, all the nuggets we found, when combined, would barely amount to the size of the first joint of my little finger.

“Chise, welcome back! Look, we found more animals!”

“Whoa, thanks, everyone!”

That evening, when we headed home, Arim presented us with the critters she and the other children had found in the forest that day, and we spent a couple of hours telling the little girl and her friends more about our adventures. The next morning, we made a stop at the wasteland to deliver the newfound creatures to the attendant dolls. They would release the critters we’d found lots of into the environments that had been specially prepared for them, while the rarer ones would be taken to the mansion for breeding until their numbers were sufficient. Eventually, they too would be released into the forest.

“It would be nice if the animals came of their own volition, though,” I sighed.

We were still in the process of restoring the wasteland’s ecosystem; I hoped the newly introduced creatures wouldn’t have too much of a hard time adapting to their new environment.

Three months went by; fall came. As we prepared to head out to the mine, Arim curiously asked me about our plans.

“Chise, you’re going to the mine again today?”

“Yup. We still haven’t reached the bottom,” I told her.

“But we’re gonna come home early today! We’re really looking forward to the harvest festival tomorrow!” Teto piped up.

“Once we leave the mine, we’ll assist with the festival preparations,” Beretta added.

We had been in town for about six months, and tomorrow was the day of the annual harvest festival.

Thanks to our continuous efforts, the miasma in the mine had slowly started to transform into mana, which, in turn, had brought a renewed vitality to the soil around the mine. This, combined with the large quantity of mana Arim and the other dwarves released into the soil, resulted in a bountiful harvest for the first time in many years.

“Okay, but you gotta hurry! Everyone’s really excited that you’re gonna be helping us!”

Arim said.

I smiled at the little girl and promised her we'll be back soon.

The townsfolk didn't know exactly why we were exploring the mine, but they might have an inkling that wherever we were doing in there had an impact on this year's harvests. Additionally, the crafts the blacksmith and other artisans made using the remains of the monsters we had slain in the mine went for a pretty decent price in other cities, which really contributed to revitalizing the town's economy. Overall, it had been a pretty good year; everyone was excited about the harvest festival, claiming it was going to be even better than the previous years.

"All right, let's wrap up quick so we can go back to the town and help prep for the festival," I said as we stepped into the mine.

"Roger!"

"While you proceed with the exploration, I shall head back to the wasteland to gather ingredients," Beretta offered.

I nodded; Teto and I took the transfer gate that would lead us to the depths of the mine.

In the past six months, we had destroyed almost all of the monster nests and had cleansed most of the miasma. About ninety percent of the mine was now both miasma and monster-free. All in all, we had defeated over fifty thousand insectile monsters, including one hundred B-rank and five A-rank specimens. The only area we hadn't explored yet was the lowest stratum, which was also where the seepage point was located. For the past few days, we'd focused our efforts on reinforcing the barriers we had set up around the middle stratum of the mine to seal off the monsters and miasma from the lower levels, as well as making the final preparations for our little trip into the mine's depths. But that would wait until after the harvest festival.

"Lady Witch, we should go back soon!"

"Yeah, we've been in here a while. I hope this is gonna be enough," I pondered as I poured some more mana into the barriers.

I had been strengthening the barriers daily over the past few weeks rather than exhausting myself by using all of my mana at once. They were strong enough now that even a high-ranked monster wouldn't be able to pierce through them.

“Let’s go meet up with Beretta.”

“Roger!”

We made our way back to our secret little room near the mine’s entrance where Beretta was waiting for us. The three of us exited the mine, only to notice that there weren’t any members of the vigilante corps standing guard. Not only that, but there was black smoke billowing from the town.

“Lady Witch, there’s a fire!”

“That’s not a normal house fire... The town is under attack!”

“Master, Lady Teto, go on ahead. I shall catch up with you soon,” Beretta said.

I retrieved my flying broom from my magic bag and urged Teto to hop on, swiftly flying toward the town, Beretta following close behind thanks to a spell that let her slip the bonds of gravity. My broom was much faster than our flying carpet, so we reached our destination in a matter of seconds. I assessed the situation as we made a pass over the town. Plumes of smoke rose from all overs and I could see the vigilante corps fighting what seemed to be a group of bandits in the middle of the street.

“Teto, take care of the bandits! I’ll go heal the townsfolk and put out the fires!”

“Roger!”

I lowered the broom so Teto could hop down. She quickly joined the fight, and with one single punch, the bandits were out like a light.

“All righty,” I mumbled to myself before casting a series of spells in rapid succession, “*Air Control!* *Heavy Rain!* *Area Heal!*”

With *Air Control*, I manipulated the oxygen near the fires to stop them from spreading to the other buildings. Then I conjured a large cloud of rain to extinguish the remaining flames and used healing magic to cure the wounds of the injured dwarves. By the time I was done, Beretta had finally reached the town, and I lowered my broom again to ask the dwarves what was going on.

“Chise, Teto, Miss Beretta!” exclaimed one of the vigilante corps members who spotted us.

"Is everyone all right? What happened here?!" I asked.

"Bandits, they came out of nowhere! We gave 'em a good fight, but those blighters outnumbered us. Bastards set the town on fire," he explained.

"Teto and I will deal with the bandits. Beretta, assist the vigilante corps in making sure everyone's all right," I commanded.

"Understood, Master."

I swiftly made my way to Teto. Most of the townsfolk had taken refuge in the assembly hall, and the vigilante corps transported the injured dwarves there as well. Beretta used some of the potions we had in our magic bag to treat their wounds while Teto and I restrained the bandits. Meanwhile, the remaining members of the vigilante corps went from building to building to make sure all of the townsfolk were safe. Teto and I were almost done arresting the bandits when, all of a sudden, a member of the vigilante corps rushed toward us, a group of small children in tow.

"Chise! I can't find the rest of the kids!" he exclaimed, his face pale as a sheet.

I instantly recognized the kids behind him: they were the younger siblings of one of the children who always helped us look for critters to bring to the wasteland.

"What do you mean?! Don't tell me they..."

"M-My b-big brother he—he went to the forest! He... He wanted to co-collect pine cones and... and tree nuts and give them to you!" one of the children managed to say through his tears.

"H-He went with Arim and... and the others, b-but they haven't come back!" a little girl added, her voice trembling with sobs.

The children often went to the forest to play, gather edible herbs, and as of late, look for critters for us to bring to the wasteland. They had probably gone there to collect tree nuts for the harvest festival. But surely they should have been back by now. This could have been bad. We had to go find them.

"Thank you for telling me all of this. I'll find your brother, I promise," I said, forcing a smile on my face to reassure the children.

Yet a nagging sense of unease enveloped me.

I had witnessed similar situations back when we were dismantling that slaver ring. A group of bandits would attack a little town to create a distraction, while their buddies would secretly kidnap the women and children to sell them as slaves. But who knows? Maybe the children were just playing in the forest. Still, I couldn't shake off that sinking feeling in my stomach. I left the villagers in Teto and Beretta's competent hands and headed to the forest, taking a couple of the vigilante corps members with me.

“Earth Sonar!” I chanted, using my magic to locate the children. “This way!”

We headed deeper and deeper into the forest and, at last, we found the children. But I knew something was wrong. They had frantic expressions on their faces and were running almost as if they were trying to escape someone.

And then, my worst fears were confirmed.

“Miss Chise! Arim and the others... They’ve been kidnapped!”

All I could do was look up to the sky as a wave of unease washed over me.

CHAPTER 26

THE PURSUIT

According to the children, bandits had appeared in the forest at the same time as the town got attacked. They captured a few of the children—including little Arim—threw them in a wagon, and drove away. I couldn't help but be infuriated at my own powerlessness. If only I could've stopped this from happening.

"Let's head back into town for now," I told the vigilante corps.

Right now, we needed to bring the children who had managed to escape the bandits to safety. In all truthfulness, I wished I could immediately set off and go rescue the children, but I tried my hardest to set aside my frustration until the ones we'd found were in capable hands. Then, I quickly went to find Teto and Beretta, only to see that they had buried the bandits into the ground so they wouldn't be able to move, with only their heads sticking out.

"Lady Wiiitch, we're all done here!" Teto waved at me when she spotted me.

It seemed that they had managed to completely subjugate the bandits without killing a single one. Beretta and the remaining members of the vigilante corps were currently in the process of interrogating them. Thankfully, they quickly spilled the beans.

Just like the bandit group we had subjugated in Gald—the Yellow Fangs—these bandits were, for the most part, residents of the neighboring villages who were completely ruined due to the continuous bad harvests and felt like they had no choice but to turn to crime to make ends meet. They'd been instructed to attack the little mining town and plunder all of the dwarves' food and valuables.

"So there's a mastermind behind all of this," I noted. "Did they steal anything of importance?" I asked one of the vigilante corps.

"Only the magic sword that was exposed in the mayor's house," he answered.

"So these guys were just acting as decoys while their buddies went to kidnap the children, huh?"

"This one's a real bad guy," Teto informed me, pointing at one of the men buried in the ground.

Just like the others, he was dressed in shabby clothes, but his weapon and the way he carried himself betrayed his true identity: this man was clearly not an ordinary bandit. Teto had instantly noticed something was off, and Beretta poked and prodded at him until he broke down and told her everything. He was actually one of the last remaining members of the slaver organization we had dismantled in Gald well over ten years ago. The organization had been drastically weakened after we had destroyed all of their bases in Gald, and the Lawbylean government had apprehended most of its members as well. But some of them managed to slip through the cracks and instantly planned on rebuilding the organization from the ground up. They sent the Yellow Fangs to Gald while they continued their human trafficking operations in Lawbyle.

"So their goals were to steal the magic sword and abduct the town's children," I summed up.

Having a magic sword would not only give them an advantage in potential battles, but they could also sell it if they were ever in need of money. And, from what I'd learned while fighting the organization ten years ago, dwarven children were very popular and sought-after slaves. And so the mastermind behind this operation lured poor farmers who had nothing to lose into their ranks and used them as decoys while the actual members seized what they'd really come for.

"Beretta, you and the vigilante corps keep an eye on these guys. I'd also like for you to periodically check on the villagers and give healing potions to whoever needs them," I instructed the attendant doll.

"Understood, Master."

"What're ye and Teto gonna do, Chise?" the captain of the vigilante corps asked me.

The answer was obvious.

"We're going to rescue the children."

Most people would've given up on rescuing the children already. The kidnappers had had a head start, and it was very unlikely anyone would be able to catch up with them, especially since, as the other kids told us, they were riding horses. Besides, the sun was already setting. Who knows how much time had passed since they kidnapped the

children?

Most people would've given up. But not me.

"I'm sure ye'll manage. We believe in ye," the captain of the vigilante corps told me.

Everyone was looking at us. Who else could they count on?

With my flying broom, we'd definitely be able to catch up with the bandits. It was much faster than any horse, and on top of that, it didn't require us to take any breaks.

All of a sudden, a woman rushed in front of us.

"Please... Please rescue Arim, I beg you!"

It was the innkeeper's wife, and she wasn't alone. Her husband was with her, along with the parents of all of the other abducted children.

"We will. I promise you, we'll bring her back," I assured the innkeeper's wife. "Let's go, Teto!"

"Roger, Lady Witch!"

The two of us hopped on my broom and took off. I drew a large circle in the sky and stopped the broom for a few seconds.

"The children are..." I mumbled, using my Mana Perception to try and locate their signatures.

One kilometer, five, ten... Nothing.

I extended the range of my Mana Perception.

Fifteen, twenty... Still nothing. I extended the range of the spell even more. I was using my Parallel Thinking skill to process and categorize the vast amount of information I was getting, but even with that, my head was starting to hurt.

Thirty... Found them!

"There's a moving wagon thirty-seven kilometers to the east!"

The wagon was moving fast; I suspected the bandits had cast Body Strengthening on the horses to make them run faster. They were losing daylight, yet the bandits were showing no sign of stopping. They seemed to be running in the direction of the ocean, which made me think they planned on taking a boat to shake off any potential pursuers.

“Let’s go, Lady Witch!”

I put a protective barrier around my broom and cast a spell to decrease the air resistance. The mana emitted by the broom left a sparkling green trail behind us as we dashed through the sky at over one hundred kilometers per hour. Since we were flying, there were no obstacles in our way, and before long...

“There they are!”

We had caught up with the bandits.

“Teto!”

“Roger! *Earth Wall!*”

Teto jumped off the flying broom and, as soon as she hit the ground, used her magic to make a three-meter-tall wall appear in front of the wagon, effectively blocking its path. I leisurely lowered the broom to the ground and went to stand next to Teto, looking at the bandits with disdain.



Arim, The Innkeeper's Daughter's Side

"Papa... Mama..."

Today was supposed to be a really special day. After I woke up in the morning, I jumped out of bed and went to help papa with the inn. Then, I had breakfast with Chise, Teto, and Miss Beretta before joining the others to get everything ready for the festival. In the afternoon, the other children and I headed to the forest to gather ingredients to use in the dishes that the adults would serve at the festival. This year, both the fields and the forest were doing great, and we found lots of tree nuts, berries, and other yummy things! The older kids even managed to catch bird and rabbit monsters, and they said they were super excited to show them to everyone.

I didn't really know why, but ever since Chise, Teto, and Miss Beretta came to our town, everything felt more colorful and fun than before. We decided it would be nice to give them a gift, and we started scavenging for even more nuts and berries for them. I really wanted to make the harvest festival extra special for them. And maybe if we brought her lots of stuff, Chise would give us some more candy!

Candies were made with sugar, which was very expensive, so we very rarely got to eat any. Whenever Chise gave us candy, we would all break them into small pieces to share with our families. I didn't have any siblings, so I only had to share with my papa and mama, but the kids who had little brothers and sisters always made sure to keep some candies for them too.

We were picking up nuts and harvesting berries in the forest when we crossed paths with a group of human men we had never seen before. I was wondering what they were doing in the forest when they suddenly pointed swords at us!

"Everyone, run! Go get the adults!" my childhood friend said, standing in front of us and grabbing a shovel as if to fight the men.

Some of the other kids did as he said, but I was so afraid, my legs wouldn't move. The men were much stronger than us, and they kicked my friend to the ground before we could do anything. Then they grabbed us, stuffed us in a big cloth sack and threw us into a wagon. They drove the wagon so fast it rattled and shook like it'd fall apart any second, and we were being jostled around in the bag. Some of the kids started crying, but every time we made the tiniest bit of noise, the scary men would pound on the walls of the wagon and tell us to shut up.

“We got our hands on some pretty promising goods this time around!”

“I wonder how much they’re gonna sell for at the slave market.”

“Seven girls and six boys, huh? Not too bad.”

“All we gotta do now is get them on a boat to shake off those pesky knights.”

We overheard the men speaking, and my blood ran cold when I heard what they were planning. I felt my heart sink to the bottom of my stomach, and tears welled up in my eyes. What was going to happen to us?

I want my papa and my mama...

I didn’t know how long had passed since the bad men had shoved us in the carriage, but when I managed to catch a glimpse of the outside through a gap in the cover, I noticed the sky had already turned dark. My childhood friend’s face was still all swollen and red from being hit in the face.

“Someone... Please save us...” I muttered to myself. Immediately after, I heard familiar voices coming from outside.

“There they are! Teto!”

“Roger! Earth Wall!”

The next instant, the ground under us shook, the horses neighed loudly, and the wagon abruptly came to a stop.

What’s going on? My heart started racing. There was a huge commotion outside, the men yelling in anger. We all huddled together in a corner of the wagon. I didn’t know what exactly was going on but, somehow, I wasn’t afraid anymore. Why would I be, now that Chise and Teto were here?

CHAPTER 27

THE GANGBUSTER

The bandits had tried to pass themselves off as merchants, but thanks to my magic I could immediately tell that the “goods” they were transporting were actually the missing children. Teto put up her *Earth Wall* and I sneakily lowered my broom behind the wagon before joining her. The bandits, furious, clambered down from their wagon and pointed their weapons at us.

“Did you two do that?!” one of the bandits—a well-groomed elderly man dressed in merchant attire—asked, shooting daggers at us. “What do you want?”

I returned his gaze with a cold and resolute expression. “We came here to rescue the children you’ve kidnapped. Hand them over. Now.”

“Kidnapped children?” the man chuckled. “I think you got the wrong guys here. We bought every single one of the slaves in this wagon fair and square from struggling villages. The harvests in the region have been terrible these past few years, and lots of villagers have started selling their children to us to make up the difference, you see.”

“So you’re slave traders, huh?”

Unlike in Gald and Ischea, selling people as slaves was legal in Lawbyle. This was a last-resort relief measure to poor people by providing them with food and lodging in exchange for their liberty. While most slave traders acknowledged the social stigma associated with their occupation, they saw it as a necessary evil. It was a job that required determination as well as a strong sense of dignity.

The bandit masquerading as a slave trader looked at us with eyes full of greed. At first, he hadn’t been able to tell what we looked like in the mounting gloom, but it seemed that he had finally realized that we were two young girls.

“You got in the way of our work and laid some dire accusations on our heads,” he said. “I’m going to need you two to apologize *very* thoroughly.”

He waved his hand in the air, and his underlings started surrounding us.

“How bothersome,” I sighed.

I used Mana Perception to confirm that there were no more bandits inside the wagon and pointed my staff at it. “*Barrier!*” I chanted.

“Huh?!”

“It would be a pain if you tried to use the children as hostages once you realize you can’t beat us, so I made sure you wouldn’t be able to get anywhere near them.”

The bandits stared at me in disbelief; some of them rushed toward the wagon to try to get in, but were instantly repelled by the dome-shaped barrier.

“Lady Witch and Teto are angry!” Teto said. “Kidnapping children is very bad!”

She started stomping on the ground. Instantly, several earth walls appeared around us, effectively trapping the bandits.

“Wha—? Who the hell are you two?!?” the old man asked us, his voice trembling with fear.

Ignoring him, I concentrated mana in my eyes and used appraisal magic to check out the brigands’ statuses. With how large my mana pool was, I could see absolutely everything written in their statuses, even the parts they were trying to hide. However, looking up every single detail of a person’s status would put a huge strain on my brain, so I decided to make my magic work like a crime-judging jewel and focus only on the bandits’ criminal activities. This told me all I needed to know: every single one of these men had a criminal record, be it for fraud, abduction, theft, robbery, or even murder.

“Oh, I just realized I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Chise, a member of the Carpet Riders.”

“And I’m Teto, the second member!”

Most of the bandits froze at the mention of our names.

“What?! The Carper Riders?! That A-rank adventurer party?!?” one of them asked, bewildered.

I couldn’t help the sigh that escaped me. “The dwarves in the mining town had never

even heard our name before, but *bandits* know who we are? I don't really know how to feel about this."

"Who the hell gives a damn about who you kids are?! Die!" one of the bandits yelled, lunging toward us.

I raised a hand and silently cast *Psychokinesis* on the man's weapon, which halted in midair. A look of confusion flashed across his face, and I wrenched the weapon out of his grip, forcing him to choose between keeping hold of it or dislocating his arm. Once his grip slackened, I snatched the weapon away from him. After that, Teto delivered a powerful blow that sent the bandit hurtling to the ground.

"Eek! You killed him!" one of the other brigands yelled.

"Rude. He's not dead, just unconscious," I said.

Even when I had been tasked by Prince Gyunton of Gald to dismantle the slaver ring, I had managed to capture most of the bandits alive. Sure, later on they might've caught a death sentence or succumbed to overwork while they were doing time in the mines, but at least I hadn't gotten a single drop of blood on my hands.

"Don't cower now!" the old man barked at his underlings. "Grab your weapons and kill them! Damn it! Why did you have to get in our way, huh?! The others were right, you *are* a gangbuster!"

"Oh, is that what your class of scoundrel calls me now?"

Back in Gald, I had destroyed countless black market organizations—slaver groups, illicit drug traffickers, thief gangs... I would go from city to city and enlist the help of the local soldiers to seize the criminals' headquarters and subjugate them. I had no idea underground crime organizations had come up with a nickname for me, though.

Naturally, in my twenty-something years working as an adventurer, I had gained many enemies and had been the target of assassination attempts more times than I could count. Not that it mattered. Whenever I noticed someone was out to kill me, I would just go hide in the wasteland. Thanks to the protective barrier erected by the goddesses, no one else could enter, so I could relax without a care in the world.

"Well, whatever." I shrugged. "Anyway, would you please surrender so I can bring the children back to their parents and hand you guys over to the knights? You can blame

your bad luck for us being in the neighborhood when you decided to abduct these kids.”

“Shut your trap! After you rooted out and destroyed every single branch of our organization in Gald, our entire business went down the drain! Never *mind* the way the government watches us like a hawk these days. Do you have any idea what we went through trying to rebuild?!”

It seemed our reputation preceded us even further than I thought.

The old man was furious, but he was still rational enough to know that he was out of his depth at his age. He gave a sign to the young man dressed in armor standing beside him—probably his escort.

“I’m not gonna let it end like this! Gilbard! Kill them!”

“And here I thought this was gonna be a quick and easy job. You’re telling me I have to fight these two monsters?” the man drawled, taking a step forward. “They’re our organization’s enemy, right? Well, I have an idea: if I win and capture them, you’ll hand over your position to me. I’m so done with being a grunt. How does that sound, boss?”

I took a good look at the young man. Not only was he muscular, but his mana pool wasn’t too shabby either, and it seemed he could use Body Strengthening. However, he was nowhere near the level of the higher-ups we’d fought in the past. Their strength had been on par with A-rank adventurers, but this young man was B-rank at best.

“Sure! If you can defeat these two monsters, you can join the top brass. Actually, you know what? I’ll even recommend you as the next boss!” the old man declared.

A barbarous smile spread across the young man’s face. He drew out his longsword and lunged at us. I had been watching the two men chitchat with disinterest, and when the young man finally made his attack, I simply raised a hand to create a barrier, effectively blocking his blow.

“What?!” the man cried out in disbelief.

“Do you really think a mage like me would just stand in the open with no way to block your attack?” I mumbled in exasperation.

The man was now madly swinging his longsword at the barrier, but he could keep at

it for hours and he still wouldn't be able to make a dent in it. I had put more mana in my barrier than any regular mage had in their mana pool. A B-rank bandit would never be able to break it.

I let out a sigh. "*Air Bullet!*"

"Ugh!"

The young man had been so engrossed in trying to break the barrier that he left himself completely open. Seizing the opportunity, I directed a tiny blast of compressed air at his abdomen. Upon contact, the compressed air rapidly expanded, forcefully propelling him backward. The attack took him by surprise, but he still managed to mitigate the force of the impact and fall back on his feet.

"I'll take care of him. You deal with the others, Teto."

"Roger!"

Teto used Body Hardening and dashed toward the remaining bandits at incredible speed before taking her sword from its scabbard and swinging it at the men, knocking them down one after the other. Meanwhile, the young man and I were glaring at each other.

"You look like a kid, but you're pretty strong, huh?" he told me.

"Has no one ever told you not to judge a book by its cover?" I retorted. "I have to say, you're not a complete weakling either, so you're making it hard for me to hold back."

"To hold back?!"

I had mostly said this to rile him up, but it was true: weak opponents like the bandits Teto was currently fighting were easy to apprehend. You could just use magic to restrain them and call it a day. But for slightly stronger enemies like this guy, it was a little more difficult. He could easily dodge lower-level spells, and even if I somehow managed to restrain him with my magic, it was possible he could break free from the bindings with brute force.

"You seem full of juicy intel, so I'd like to capture all of you alive and hand you off to the knights."

Once you reached a certain skill level, killing someone was easy. All you had to do was aim your attack at one of their vital points, and you were pretty much done. Capturing someone alive, on the other hand, required you to be not just strong, but also ingenious and crafty.

"Not a complete weakling, you say? Capturing us alive, you say? Don't mess with me! You dare mock me, Lord Gilbard the Chaos Blade?! I'll kill you!"

Damn, he got this worked up just from that little comment? This guy sure is easy to set off. Also, "the Chaos Blade," seriously? For a guy with this skill level?

I found the situation so comical I couldn't help letting out a little bemused *snort*, which only served to anger him further.

"I didn't wanna have to do this, but I guess I have no choice but to use my new toy," the man said, taking out the second sword that was hanging from his hip.

The sword he had been using up until now was already pretty decent, but this new one was clearly of a higher grade, on top of being infused with magic. There was, however, something slightly ominous about it.

"That's the sword you stole from the mayor's house," I said, having immediately guessed what that sword was.

"You're right on the money! This is the cursed blade that coward of a mayor's been keeping under lock and key in his house because of how destructive it is. Rumors say, if you're willing to pay the price, you can unleash unimaginable powers!"

"Is that so?" I asked, leisurely. "Come at me, then. I'll show you my abilities are way out of your league."

I raised my staff, ready to take on whatever that bandit would throw at me.

CHAPTER 28

THE CURSED SWORD

As the sword began to take in the bandit's mana, a mysterious glimmer shrouded its blade. I wondered what went into the forging of this sword that made it look so ominous. Maybe it was related to the darkness lurking in the depths of the mine. Lost in contemplation, I was caught off guard when the bandit abruptly lunged at me.

"You're fast."

"What do you think about this?! You can't do anything against my attacks!"

He was much faster than before; he strafed the barrier, slashing at it from a new angle with each pass. Each strike inflicted visible damage, weakening the barrier with every blow, which forced me to fall back while I tried to come up with a counterplan.

"With this sword, he's about as strong as an A-rank adventurer with Body Hardening," I muttered to myself.

Most adventurers struggled to make the jump from B- to A-rank, yet this sword had easily allowed him to overcome that gap. It truly was impressive. From what I could tell, this sword enhanced its user's body in exchange for their mana.

But...

"I suppose strengthening the wielder's body isn't all that sword does," I observed.
"*Wind Cutter!*"

"The more people I kill with it, the stronger it gets—it's the ultimate weapon! Once I've killed you, I'll become even more powerful," the man said, shooting me a murderous grin. "C'mon, die already!"

My spell had been meant to contain him, but he repelled most of my blades handily while evading the remaining attacks thanks to his enhanced physical abilities. Even like that, his attacks on the barrier didn't let up. I threw even more wind blades at him, changing up my angles so that he couldn't parry them all while I evaded his attacks.

Swordsmen usually belonged on the front line, while mages like myself tended to stay in the back. In close combat fights like this one, it was clear I had a huge disadvantage. Not only that but, true to his name, Gilbard the “Chaos Blade’s” fighting style was hugely erratic. His sword would bend at impossible angles, and his attacks were unpredictable. Each strike against the barrier made it creak and squeal until, at last, it shattered.

“Heh, it’s over for you! Diiie!”

The man swung down his sword with all of his strength... only for it to hit a second barrier.

“Huh?!”

“What an idiot. Did you really think I had only put up *one*? ”

“Wha—? Ugh!”

Just like earlier, I had taken advantage of the man being distracted to shoot another *Air Bullet* right in his abdomen, sending him flying.

“I always cast multiple barriers at once.”

“Multiple... barriers?”

Each one of them had more mana in it than a regular mage would be able to put in a single barrier. And by the time the first one was broken, I even had time to create a new barrier.

“You won’t be able to land a single blow like that,” I said, completely shattering any hope the man had of defeating me.

He watched in utter disbelief as the barrier he had just destroyed began to regenerate.

“Impossible... So that’s the gangbuster’s true power...” the old man from earlier muttered, falling to his knees in defeat.

“There’s no point in continuing this. Surrender, now,” I said.

The young man wielding the cursed sword clicked his tongue. “You’re right. I can’t

defeat you with my current power. But..." he marked a pause, pouring even more mana into the sword, its eerie glow intensifying. "I can... I can still fight! Cursed sword! Grant me more power!"

The man's body started transforming. He grew to about twice his original size, and his skin grew dark and ruddy. Not only that, but the sword itself grew to match his monstrous grip.

"Mwa ha ha! I'm even more powerful than before! Now I can kill you, witch!"

"Your appearance has changed too, huh? You don't even look human anymore," I commented.

Due to his sudden growth, the man's clothes had ripped at the seams, leaving him completely naked. He looked more like an ogre than a human. He brought his sword down with a primeval cry, hitting the ground and creating a shock wave that sent all of the other bandits tumbling.

"Shit! Gilbard! Are you trying to kill us?!" the old man yelled at him.

I dashed toward the wagon where the children were and strengthened the barrier I had put around it. Meanwhile, Teto dragged the other bandits—who'd been rendered powerless and prone—further away, so that they wouldn't get hurt by the young man's attack.

"It's still not enough!" the young man roared, turning away from me and pointing his sword at the old man.

"Gilbard?! Who the hell do you think you are, pointing your sword at me?!"

"The more people I kill, the stronger I'll get! You're gonna hand your position over to me anyway, so what do you still need your life for? Let me feed you to the sword so I can get even stronger!"

The old man shrieked in fear as he tried to shrink away from the attack. However, when the sword came down, it was met with yet another barrier.

"Did you really think I was going to stand by and watch you get even stronger?" I asked the young man.

I had cast barriers around all of the remaining bandits, including the elderly man.

“S-Save us, please!” he begged me. “I don’t want to die!”

“You’re all important witnesses and suspects. Even if I wanted to, I can’t let you die just yet.”

“Fuuuck!” the young man roared. “Don’t stand in my way!!!”

He swung down his sword repeatedly, unleashing shock waves in every direction. Some of the barriers shattered due to the sheer force of the attacks, but I swiftly erected new ones to replace them.

“Teto, let’s restrain him.”

“Roger!”

“*Earth Bind!*” we chanted in unison, putting our hands on the ground. Arms took shape from the dirt, rose from below, and seized the man.

He let out a thunderous roar and started swinging his arms in every direction, breaking free from the restraints and flailing at anyone in sight. But Teto and I kept the pressure on to hinder his movements, until, at last, he was rendered completely immobile.

“More! I want more power, cursed sword!!!”

However, it didn’t last long. The bandit poured even more mana into the sword, which granted him even more strength.

“It’s over! You’ll never win against him!” the elderly man lamented when the bandit broke free from his restraints once again.

But Teto and I had already figured out how to defeat him.

“Gaaah! Aaargh!” the bandit roared, sending even more mana into the sword until, at last, he had run completely dry. However, the sword didn’t stop pumping into the man’s resources. Now that he didn’t have any mana left, it had started absorbing his life force. The man’s body shriveled, his hair turned white, and deep lines and creases formed on his face.

“Get away from me! Get away! Shit, I can’t let go of it!”

I was instantly reminded of a sentence I had once read in a video game in my previous life: you cannot unequip a cursed item. It seemed that the sword the bandit was using granted its wielder power in exchange for their mana. However, once you equipped it, there was no way for you to remove it, and in the eventuality that you ran out of mana, it would dip into whatever else you had to spare. In order to keep using the sword without damaging your own body, you had to use it to kill others, stealing both their mana and their life force. In other words, the sword required you to kill if you didn’t want it to kill you.

“Save me! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die!” the bandit started begging me in desperation.

I found that man purely despicable, yet I knew letting him die would weigh heavily on my conscience.

I let out a long, deep sigh and quietly chanted, “*Wind Cutter!*”

Sharp blades of wind flew toward the man, shearing off both of his arms from the elbows down. The bandit’s severed forearms—still attached to the sword—went flying.

“Aaaaaah!” the man cried out in pain. “My arms! My arms!!!”

“Oh, shut up, will you? *Shadow Bind!*”

I used Dark Magic—a subcategory of Origin Magic—to create tangible shadows to restrain the bandit and cover his mouth.

“Guess I have to deal with that for you, huh? *Heal!*”

The man’s pained groans were muffled by the shadow covering his mouth. I paid him no mind and held up a hand, casting healing magic on his severed arms. Instantly, the gaping wounds closed and the skin started regenerating. Meanwhile, his forearms, which had fallen to the ground and were still attached to the cursed sword, had crumbled into dust. The sword must’ve drained the last of their life force.

“Mmh?! Mmh! Mmmmmh!”

The bandit let out more muffled cries of agony when he saw his forearms disintegrate. He started thrashing even more, but no matter what he did, he couldn't break free of his restraints.

"Thank goodness I thought ahead and put up an *opaque* barrier around the wagon; no kid should have to see that," I said with a sigh of relief.

Usually, when someone got their arms cut from their body, the standard procedure was to leave the wounds open, stick the arm back in its place and use healing magic to regrow the skin and merge the two parts back together. However, the only thing left of the bandit's arms was a pile of dust, so there was nothing for me to reattach. It also came with the added bonus of having utterly crushed the bandits' spirits, which made my life easier.

If this man ever wanted to restore his arms to their original state, he would need to hire someone capable of performing high-level healing magic or buy an incredibly expensive potion to grow them back.

The pain and the psychological shock of having lost both of his arms were too much for the bandit. His eyes rolled back in his skull and he fainted, losing control of his bladder as he fell to the ground.

"A cursed sword that absorbs your life force, huh?" I mused out loud. "How terrifying. I guess I shouldn't leave stuff like this lying around."

If I used *Purification* on the sword, it would most likely get rid of the curse. However, the power of the sword relied so heavily on the curse, I was almost one hundred percent sure it would break as soon as the curse was gone.

"Moral of the story: they call 'em *cursed* swords and *forbidden* arts for a reason. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes."

Both this bandit and the B-rank adventurer who had let himself get possessed by a devil to become stronger back in Ischea ended up having to pay a heavy toll for their actions.

"There's no taking shortcuts when it comes to getting stronger, huh?" I muttered to myself. "I guess I could keep the sword and seal it somewhere, but that sounds like a lot of effort for nothing. Might as well just destroy it. *Purification!*"

The ominous miasma that exuded from the sword instantly turned back into regular mana. The sword itself let out a creaking sound, and the blade snapped into three. It even changed color, going from that noxious-looking color to a beautiful silver, the color of the mythril it had been forged from.

Now it wouldn't cause any more problems.

"Oops, maybe I should've asked the mayor for permission before doing this." I belatedly realized.

Oh well, I'll just apologize if he starts yelling at me, I thought as I wrapped the broken sword in a cloth before putting it in my magic bag. When that was done, I gave the place a once-over.

"Lady Wiiitch, I'm all done here!" Teto exclaimed as she threw her arms around me from behind.

"Good work, Teto," I said, turning my head slightly to face her.

"Thanks!"

While I had been dealing with the sword, Teto had restrained all of the bandits. After that, I used my Creation Magic to make handcuffs, which we quickly secured around the bandits' wrists before throwing them into a dirt cage Teto had made with Earth Magic.

Now that the bandits were all taken care of, I dropped the barrier I had set up around the carriage and opened the door.

The children were in there, huddled in a corner of the dark carriage, their arms wrapped around their knees.

"Chise, Teto..." Arim said in a small voice.

"Everything is fine now. We came to save you," I said softly to reassure her and the other children.

"We're going to take you back home!" Teto chirped.

The children's reaction was immediate: they all started crying loudly at once.

The poor things had been terrified, not to mention the fact that the bandits hadn't allowed them to cry, which meant they had to hold back this entire time. But now, the bandits couldn't hurt them anymore. They were safe.

Teto and I stayed silent for a while, giving them time to calm down after everything that they went through.

CHAPTER 29

THE AFTERMATH

It was pitch dark outside; traveling at night was usually pretty dangerous, but Teto and I decided to make our way back to town nonetheless.

“Whoa! It’s so cool!”

“Chise, you’re an amazing witch!”

“We’re flying!”

The kids were having the time of their lives.

Teto and I were riding on our flying carpet; we had used gravity magic to make both the wagon with the children in it and the cage we had shoved the bandits in fly alongside us. Well, I say “fly,” but we were basically just floating a few meters above the ground. Likewise, we had decided to not go too fast, so as not to scare the children. We even took a few breaks along the way for the children to eat and get some rest, slowly but steadily making our way back. By the time the sun was up, we had reached the town.

“C’mon, everyone, wake up. We’ve arrived.”

The children had been so exhausted they had ended up falling asleep on the way back. I gently woke them up. They stared at me with bleary eyes, still partially in dreamland.

“What’s that?!”

“A flying carpet and a wagon? Didn’t they leave on a broom?”

“Who cares ’bout that? They brought the kids back!”

The commotion outside woke up the children, who finally noticed we were back in town. They poked their heads outside and, once they caught sight of their parents, started waving enthusiastically.

“Papa! Mama!”

“Arim!”

One by one, the children rushed out of the wagon and made their way to their families. I was taking in the heartwarming scene when Beretta joined me.

“Welcome back, Master, Lady Teto.”

“Hey, Beretta.”

“We’re back!”

I felt so incredibly relieved now that the job was done. I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my lips when being reunited with Beretta. The streets were filled with the sound of children’s laughter as the mayor, an elderly dwarf, came to find us.

“Thank you so, so much. I don’t know how to express our gratitude.”

“Don’t mention it. As an adult, it’s my responsibility to protect children,” I assured him.

A slightly troubled look flashed across the mayor’s face at my reply. He wasn’t aware of the fact that my body had stopped aging, so he was probably a little confused as to why I was calling myself an adult. I paid him no mind and kept going.

“I have bad news about your sword, though.”

I took the broken sword out of my magic bag and handed it to him. When he saw the state it was in, his eyes shot wide open.

“I saw firsthand that this sword absorbs its wielder’s life force, so I decided to purify it so it wouldn’t create more victims. I’m sorry for doing so without asking for your permission first.”

“This cursed sword was crafted by my grandfather,” the mayor muttered, picking up the sword handle. “He was obsessed with power and would’ve done anything to get stronger. I asked many priests in the past to purify it, but none of them ever succeeded. I am actually incredibly grateful you did it for us.”

I gave him a few minutes to process the news and, once he seemed ready to continue

the conversation, I asked him what we should do with the bandits we had captured.

"We plan on having a few young men go to the next town to ask them for help dealing with the bandits," the mayor told me.

After the closing of the mine, the town had become so tiny that there were no knights who could take care of criminals, no prison to lock them up in, and no place to properly pass judgment on them either. Not only that, but there wasn't even enough food to spare for them. But the biggest problem was...

"Hey, ye bastards! Who the hell d'ye think ye are, attackin' our town?!"

"Come out! I'm gonna kill ye rats myself!"

"We're gonna make ye regret attacking our town!"

...the vigilante corps. The second we had landed, they had started striking the cage with their still-sheathed swords and the shafts of their spears—even kicking it. The cage probably wouldn't break just from that, but I was a tad scared they might start actually attacking the bandits and vice versa.

"We'll take the bandits to the next town tomorrow," I offered. "If you don't mind, could you send someone who's familiar with the knights there to help us discuss with them?"

"Sure," the mayor nodded, turning toward the man standing next to him. "You heard her. They're going to take care of those bandits for us, so go with them to the next town."

After a little discussion, it ended up being decided that the mayor's son and the leader of the vigilante corps would accompany us. We had them sit in the wagon while Teto, Beretta, and I rode our flying carpet. I locked up the impoverished farmers who had attacked the town in a second cage, and just like the previous night, I used my magic to make the wagon and the two cages fly.

We reached the nearest town at about three in the afternoon. It was a pretty big town, with a lot of traffic in and out. The knights and soldiers spotted us and rushed toward us the moment we landed. They were, understandably, suspicious of our flying carpet. We quickly explained the situation to them; they took us into the town, and we handed the bandits over. The knights used their crime-judging jewel on the bandits, as well as

on us, just to make sure we weren't lying, then took our statement. After that, they handed us our reward for turning in the brigands. We actually received a pretty hefty sum for having captured an executive from the underground organization and Gilbard—the bandit with the severed arms—for the many crimes they'd committed. By the time we got our reward, the sun had already completely set.

"Going through all of this after pulling an all-nighter was exhausting," I sighed.

"Teto is tired too. Let's spend the night at an inn and go back to the town tomorrow morning!"

"I suspected you would be tired, so I have already booked us an inn, Master," Beretta told us.

I was so tired I had a hard time keeping my eyes open.

"Sorry 'bout that, lasses. Ye did all that for our little town, and we had ye do all the work," the mayor's son said, sheepishly.

"That's not true," I said. "If you two weren't here, things wouldn't have gone as smoothly with the knights."

While we did have a bit of a reputation, being an A-rank adventurer party and all that, the fact that we looked like two preteen girls usually aroused suspicion. So having these two, who were already familiar with the knights, accompany us acted as proof of our character in a way.

"All righty then, let's eat something yummy and go to bed."

"We have to go home early tomorrow! We can't miss the harvest festival!" Teto piped up.

"Master, how about buying a local specialty with the money we received from turning in the brigands and bringing it to the townspeople tomorrow?" Beretta suggested.

Teto and I thought it was a great idea, and we made our plans for the next day. However, upon learning that we were in his town, the guildmaster insisted on talking to us, which ended up setting us back an entire day. Then, it was the town's lord's turn, which took another day, and after that a priest at the Church of the Five Goddesses really wanted to meet us, extending our delay by yet another day.

"Phew, finally free," I sighed once we left.

"Teto is tired and I miss the food from the inn!" Teto pouted.

"It must have been exhausting, but you did everything you were supposed to, Master, Lady Teto. Thank you for your hard work. However, we spent so long here, I am afraid the harvest festival might be over already."

The three of us were riding our flying carpet, while the mayor's son and the vigilante corps' captain were in the floating wagon. I felt extremely sorry that they might've missed their town's harvest festival because of our impromptu stay in the other town.

"Miss Chise and Miss Teto are amazing," I heard the mayor's son say.

"I thought they were just a group of daredevil kids, but they're actually a pretty big deal, huh?" the vigilante corps' captain added.

The dwarves thought we were just a group of eccentric young girls, but now that they fully realized what being A-rank adventurers entailed—well, Beretta wasn't *exactly* an adventurer per se—they were pretty impressed. Still, I felt really bad for them having to wait around for us to be done with all of our meetings and stuff, so I packed the wagon full of delicious treats they could share with the other townsfolk.

And so, with the kidnapping incident finally behind us, we made our way back to the mining town. Later on, we would learn that the executive we had captured told the authorities everything about the remaining members of his crew, and after all these years, the knights finally managed to shut down the entire thing. And so our reputation became established in Lawbyle, the people remembering us as the adventurers who helped the authorities eradicate the country's biggest slaver organization.

CHAPTER 30

THE FORMER MINING TOWN'S HARVEST FESTIVAL

After a few hours of travel, we finally arrived back in the former mining town with a wagon packed full of yummy treats. Little Arim spotted us in the sky and started waving at us enthusiastically.

"Welcome back!" she exclaimed.

Upon hearing her, the vigilante corpsmen who were guarding the town's entrance looked up and the townsfolk all rushed outside. After a couple of minutes, we finally landed, and Arim ran toward us.

"Chise! Teto! Miss Beretta! Welcome back!"

"We're back, Arim," I told the little girl.

I was so happy to see her.

"We brought lots of yummy treats for everyone!" Teto said, puffing out her chest in pride.

The little girl sneakily peered into the wagon, and a huge grin formed on her face.
"Wow, thank you!"

"Might I ask if you're feeling better?" Beretta asked the little girl, her tone laced with worry.

The children had been abducted only a couple of days ago, after all. She was concerned about the possible repercussions such a traumatic event had on them.

But Arim simply nodded enthusiastically. "We're all doing better! We were waiting for you to come back!"

"You were waiting for us?" I asked, blinking in surprise.

"Yup! We couldn't celebrate the harvest festival without you after everything you did for us!"

The other townsfolk nodded at the little girl's words. They had postponed the harvest festival just so we could attend, huh?

"C'mon, Chise, let's go!"

"Okay."

Arim grabbed my hand and I followed her to the town square with a smile. Upon hearing that we were back, the villagers came to greet us one by one.

"Welcome back, Miss Chise. Now that ye've all returned, we'll start preparing for the harvest festival. It'll start in the evening, so I suggest ye take some deserved rest in the meantime," the mayor told us before leaving in a hurry to go oversee the festival's preparations.

Everything had been set up so the townsfolk could start preparing the food at any time once we arrived in town. Delicious smells started wafting from all of the houses, while some of the men started unloading all of the food and alcohol we had brought from the other town, and the children eagerly helped by setting plates on the tables and doing other small tasks.

"Let's go give them a hand, shall we?" I said.

"Teto's gonna go look for yummy ingredients!"

"As a maid, it goes against my principles to wait around for people to serve me. I shall help with the festival preparations as well."

The mayor had told us to get some rest, but the three of us felt a bit uncomfortable doing nothing while everyone else was working, so we decided to pitch in.

Teto immediately rushed to the nearby forest to go hunt for meat. I was a little worried about letting her run off on her own like that, but... oh well. She would probably make it back before nighttime.

"Y-You shouldn't..." the mayor argued.

But I shook my head. "It's fine. We'd have more fun helping you with the preparations than waiting around with nothing to do," I said with a smile.

"However, I suggest we confine ourselves to making one or two dishes, so as not to disturb the others," Beretta said.

"Fine by me," I nodded.

The two of us headed back to Arim's father's inn, and we asked if we could use their kitchen.

"I don't mind, but are ye sure ye wanna help?"

I nodded. "It's a bit boring watching everyone work from the side," I said with an embarrassed chuckle.

"What should we make, Master?"

"Hm... What about some cookies?"

I had noticed the townsfolk were all making either large casseroles, appetizers that went well with alcohol, or soups. These were all pretty geared toward adults—and, in particular, adults who enjoyed a drink or two—and I didn't see anyone making sweets or anything similar for the children.

"That's a good idea," Beretta nodded. "We can even pretend we bought the ingredients here."

We obviously couldn't buy sugar in this tiny town, but they did sell honey, so we could pretend we had used that. Everything else was pretty standard—wheat flour, goat milk butter, and eggs.

"All right, let's make some cookies!"

"I will prepare the ingredients."

Beretta took whatever we needed out of our magic bag, and we started preparing the dough.

We put butter, sugar, and a pinch of salt into a bowl and mixed until well combined. Then, we added egg yolks, mixed some more, and, lastly, incorporated the flour until a dough was formed.

Since we had only used the yolk of the eggs, we had ended up with a bunch of unused egg whites.

“It’s a bit of shame these will go in the trash,” I said.

“What about mixing them with some sugar and making a meringue cake?” Beretta suggested. “Or we could use them to make some egg drop soup.”

I hummed. “Good idea. You know what? Let’s make both.”

I started making the meringue while Beretta took care of the soup. All I did was add sugar to the egg whites and mix them together until stiff peaks formed. Normally, one would use an electric whisk to do that, but given the world’s dearth of electrical appliances, I had no choice but to resort to witchcraft. All I had to do was use some wind magic to create a small whirlwind inside the bowl and, in a matter of seconds, I had made meringue.

Meanwhile, Beretta was making the egg drop soup. She boiled some chicken bones to make broth, added in a few vegetables and the egg whites, and seasoned with some salt and pepper.

“Master, could you please give it a taste?”

“Sure,” I said and took a sip of the soup. “Mmh, it’s good. It tastes really mild.”

I was certain the dwarves would appreciate eating something so soothing after all the drinking they were going to do during the festival. Although, after giving it some more thought, I’d never seen a hung over dwarf before.

“Ah, the oven is finally hot.”

I put the cookies in the oven. We didn’t have any cookie cutters on hand, so I had used my magic to cut the dough into similar-sized discs. After a few minutes, we took the cookies out of the oven; the delicious smell of butter and sugar permeated the air.

“Papa, mama, I came to help you... Oooh, it smells so good in here!”

Arim, who'd dropped in to take the food her parents had prepared to the festival, caught a whiff of the cookies and peeked her little head into the kitchen to see what was going on. When her eyes landed on Beretta and me, she puffed out her cheeks and started pouting.

"Chise, Miss Beretta! You don't have to help us, you should be resting!"

I chuckled. "We don't really like waiting around with nothing to do. Here, Arim, take a bite. C'mon, say 'aaah.'"

I picked up a cookie and handed it to the little girl. She couldn't resist the delicious buttery scent and took a big bite, the crunching sound of the little girl chewing on the freshly baked treat echoing through the kitchen.

"Mmh?! It's so good! It's so crispy!" the little girl exclaimed, her eyes full of stars.

Her adorable reaction made me feel all warm inside.

I picked up another cookie and took a bite. Just as Arim had said, it was nice and crispy, and the flavor was also very good—buttery and not too sweet.

"Master, should I brew some tea?" Beretta offered.

"Yeah, please. Let's take a little break until the next batch of cookies is done."

I took a little breather and enjoyed a nice cup of tea before baking the rest of the cookies.

When the evening came, Beretta and I made our way to the festival with the mountains of cookies we had baked, as well as my meringue cake and Beretta's egg drop soup. Right as we set them down next to the other plates, Teto came back from the forest, the townsfolk cheering at the sight of the large deer she was carrying.

"Lady Wiiitch, look at what I caught! It's so big, we're gonna be able to make loads of skewers!"

It seemed that she had beaten the animal unconscious in the forest, then hog-tied it and hauled it back to town. Its blood hadn't been drained yet, so the vigilante corps took the beast from Teto's hands and took it to be butchered.

"Good job, Teto. Here, *Clean!*" I quickly used my magic to get rid of all the dirt on her clothes before she jumped at me and started sniffing me.

"I'm back! Lady Witch, Beretta, you two smell so good!"

Beretta and I had spent so long in the kitchen, we probably still smelled like butter and sugar.

A little later, all of the preparations were over, and the mayor announced the start of the harvest festival.

"This year, too, let us thank the earth for its blessings. Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

The dwarves—renowned for their love of alcohol—cheered in honor of their respective deities. The vigilante corps raised their glasses to Lariel, the goddess of war, the hunters and farmers to Liriel, the goddess of agriculture, the blacksmiths to the flame spirit, etc... Despite their differences in beliefs, the dwarves organized the harvest festival as a way for all the townsfolk to gather the necessary strength and courage to face the harsh winter. There was a large bonfire in the center of the town square, and we all enjoyed the food while nursing our drinks and gazing at the flames.

CHAPTER 31

ARIM'S DREAM

"Master, Lady Teto, I have brought you some food and drinks."

"Thanks, Beretta."

"Thankies!"

I took the plates from Beretta's hands while Teto put down a generous spread and wooden tankards filled to the brim with alcohol on the table. As the festival progressed, the dwarves came one by one to our table to thank us once again for everything we had done for the town: healing the wounded dwarves after the bandit's attack, extinguishing the fires, rescuing the children, etcetera, etcetera. After they were done, the townsfolk headed back to their tables and started eating, and we watched them with smiles on our faces. In particular, seeing the children enthusiastically munch on the cookies Beretta and I had prepared made me feel incredibly happy and relieved. It seemed that the edge was already coming off of their recent trauma.

"Hee hee hee, Lady Wiiitch, you're so cute," Teto slurred. "Beretta, you're cute too!"

"Teto, you've had way too much to drink." She had tried to keep up with the dwarves, and now she was slouched all over me, rubbing her cheek against mine.

"Master, I will take Lady Teto to bed. Please enjoy the rest of the festival," Beretta said before hoisting Teto on her back.

"Oooh, I'm being carried by three Berettas!" Teto slurred.

Beretta had sampled all of the dishes and seemed satisfied with her evening. And so, she left to go take care of Teto. I was watching the fire when someone approached me from behind.

"Chise, can I sit here?"

It was Arim.

I nodded, and the little girl thanked me before taking a seat. I noticed that she didn't seem like her usual bubbly self; she'd turned markedly quieter.

"You're actually a really famous adventurer, huh?" the little girl muttered, her eyes glued to the bonfire. "And I was acting so familiar with you this whole time. I'm sorry."

"I don't mind. I would actually be happier if you didn't change the way you talked to me," I told the little girl. I would feel really awkward if Arim suddenly started acting all polite toward me.

"Thanks, Chise. Hey... Can I ask you for some advice about something?" Arim asked me, a serious look on her face.

I nodded.

"I wanna become an adventurer just like you," she confessed. "I wanna become the kind of person who can help people in trouble."

She had probably started seeing me as a proper adventurer after Teto and I saved her and the other children. She clearly felt respect and admiration toward me, and that's why she had decided to tell me about this.

"But I also love this town, and I want it to be as full of life as it used to be."

The little girl spent the next few minutes talking to me about her dreams and her worries. Despite the harvest doing better ever since we came here, the town was still relatively poor. And so, in order to secure enough food for all the inhabitants, the dwarves regularly had to go deep into the forest to harvest wild vegetables. But with the recent events, Arim had started to realize that the further they ventured outside of town, the more dangerous it got.

"I want this town to become rich enough that no one would have to do dangerous stuff like that, and I wanna become strong enough to help the people who have no choice but to do dangerous stuff. I wanna be an adventurer just like you and Teto and Miss Beretta."

"These are both very laudable dreams," I said.

The little girl marked a pause before nodding. “But I don’t know what to do to make them come true.”

“Well, being an adventurer isn’t always easy, so I don’t think it’s a decision you should take lightly. I’d say the first step would be for you to go see what’s outside of this town,” I said.

“Outside?”

“Yeah. You said this town is poor, but it really isn’t that bad compared to some other towns and villages. Besides, there are some really amazing things here.”

Most other towns didn’t have access to the copious guano that fed their soil, or the affinity dwarves had for Earth Magic, which allowed them to infuse their fields with mana. Even putting aside the practical stuff, the town had more than enough charm to spare. Arim’s father’s cooking, for instance, was completely unlike anything I had seen in Gald or Ischea. I was sure there were many more things that I didn’t even know about.

“So you’re saying I should become an adventurer and travel lots and bring things I find outside the town here? Oooh! It’s exactly what I want to do! Thanks, Chise, that was really helpful!”

“Um, if you just want to travel, you don’t have to become an adventurer, you know? You could be a peddler, for example,” I said with a wry smile.

“I’ll think about it,” the little girl said before looking at me resolutely. “Chise, can you help me train so I can become stronger and travel the world?”

I was at a complete loss, unsure of how to respond to her request, when a certain someone joined us.

“Miss Arim is already thirteen years old, and her father has been looking after us ever since we arrived in town. I would suggest respecting her wishes, Master.”

“Beretta?”

Teto must have fallen asleep, so Beretta had come back to the festival and must’ve overheard our conversation. In a way, the reason Arim wanted to travel the world was similar to Beretta’s desire to accompany us on this trip, so she must’ve empathized

with the little girl.

"All right. But there's a condition," I said. "I'll only be training you until our job here is done. After that, no matter if you're satisfied with your training or not, we'll leave."

"Yeah, I know that!" the little girl nodded, a huge smile on her face. "There's not a lot of things to do in the fields in the winter, so I'm gonna have a lot of time. I hope you can teach me lots!"

The little girl was delighted. However, it was getting pretty late, and it was time for the children to go to bed. Most of the children and their mothers had already headed back home, and there were only adults left outside. Beretta and I decided to call it a night as well, and we headed back to the inn, where Teto was already fast asleep.

A lot had happened in the past couple of days, but from tomorrow onward, we would finally go back to the mine and explore its deepest parts.

CHAPTER 32

THE MOTHER

The day following the harvest festival, we resumed our exploration of the mine.

Well, that was the plan, but first we had to patrol the upper floors to see if any new monsters had spawned in the last couple of days and inspect the barriers I had put up. We also made a quick stop at the Wasteland to check on the other attendant dolls.

After three days of relentless monster slaying, including A-ranks, we finally reached the deepest part of the mine.

“This is where the monsters are spawning,” I said.

“Ew, it looks so *sticky*.”

“I am detecting a large concentration of miasma in the air. This is a very noxious environment for humans.”

We were standing in front of a giant pit filled with miasma so dense we could actually *see* it. The vile fumes that rolled off of the cursed sword seemed like nothing compared to this: it looked almost like the hole was filled with some sort of sludge. And right in front of the pit was a giant insectile monster. It was sitting there, its body leaning against the wall. Long tubular protrusions came out of its body and pierced into the ground. If you looked closely, you could see things moving in there, almost as if they were getting sucked up.

The creature’s bloated body expelled eggs at regular intervals, each one plunging into the sludgy pit, where they hatched. Within the depths, a seething menagerie of monstrous larvae engaged in brutal battles, devouring one another. The corpses of the dead monsters sunk into the sludge, while the monsters who survived instantly grew into their final instars before crawling out of the pit.

“So this is how all of these monsters are born... It’s disgusting.”

“They’re being born here, and then they’re moving to the higher levels of the mine,”

Teto observed.

"And due to the immense quantities of miasma they're being exposed to as soon as they hatch, they evolve into these mutant monsters," Beretta added.

The monsters that had crawled out of the pit spotted us; they must've thought we would make for an easy meal, because they attacked us instantly. I unleashed a *Wind Cutter* spell, while Teto brandished her sword and Beretta threw her floating blades at them. The monsters stood no chance and immediately fell dead. Despite having only been born mere seconds ago, they had already been at around the level of C-rank monsters. Had they survived and continued to grow, they would likely become A-ranks. Meanwhile, the giant insectile monster was watching the larvae eat each other in the sludge, trembling with delight as it absorbed the miasma emitted by the grown monsters.

"Disgusting. Lariel probably sent us here to defeat that thing."

"Let's hurry!" Teto said. "Then we can cleanse all of this gross mana."

We pointed our weapons at the giant monster—for clarity, I'll call it the "Mother."

"All righty, let's start with this... *Wind Cutter!*"

I waved my staff from side to side, materializing five wind blades that I then shot at the Mother.

"Take this!"

Teto used Earth Magic to conjure hundreds of small pebbles in her hands, infusing them with Body Hardening before throwing them at the Mother with all of her might. My blades cut through the monster's body, and the pebbles pierced its body like bullets, turning it into Swiss cheese.

"Screeeech!"

"It's working! One more time, Lady Witch!"

This time, she created large, fist-sized stones and flung them in a second volley. The rocks penetrated its abdomen, tearing through flesh before crashing into the rear wall; pebbles came loose and fell in little showers from the ceiling.

"Lady Teto, please be careful. The mine might collapse if you keep delivering such powerful attacks."

"I'm sorry!"

Beretta kept up the pressure on the Mother, slicing through its body with her floating swords. Noxious purple fluids sprayed out of its body, further saturating the room with miasma.

"Our attacks are working, but..." I trailed off, observing the creature's pulsating tendrils as it began pumping a luminous green substance from the ground. Within seconds, its wounds had completely healed.

"Master, it seems that the Mother is absorbing mana from the leylines to regenerate its body."

The beautiful green mana stood in stark contrast to the noxious-looking miasma. This explained why the mana concentration of the leylines tapered off after this point: the Mother was feeding on it, not leaving enough for the rest of the region, which, in turn, caused bad harvests for the surrounding villages.

"With those tendrils, it has access to an inexhaustible quantity of mana... Ugh, what a pain," I said.

"It is rather troublesome, indeed. However, after feeding from the leylines and bathing in miasma for so many years, it seems that its body has become highly dependent on mana to survive," Beretta commented.

I nodded, but Teto tilted her head to one side in confusion.

"Long story short, it looks like the Mother can only survive inside the mine," I explained to her.

"This is only speculation, but I believe the reason why the insectile monsters didn't attempt to leave the mine is because they wouldn't be able to survive outside of it," Beretta added.

This truly was the silver lining in this dire situation; although the miasma generated by the monsters had led to crop failure, the fact that they were confined within the mine meant they couldn't attack the town.

"Still, it's going to take us a while to defeat the Mother."

As Beretta and I were discussing the Mother's regenerating abilities, the monster suddenly brought its arm down on us. It was a pretty straightforward attack, though, so we had more than enough time to evade it, me with my flight magic and Beretta and Teto on foot. It then tried to spit poison at Teto and me, but it got blocked by one of the many barriers I had put up ahead of time.

I let out a long, deep sigh. "Dammit. Its attacks can't hit us, but we can't kill it either."

As I skillfully dodged its attacks, I gathered mana into my eyes and noticed that some sort of murky mana was coiling around its body. Just like the Fear Geist we had fought in the wasteland, it seemed to have its own will. When the Mother screeched, it emitted a discordant blend of two distinct voices.

Meanwhile, the murky mana had started shooting cursed magic bullets at us that would kill anyone upon impact. There was no doubt this monster was much, much more dangerous than anything I had fought up until now. Even the water hydra didn't come close.

"I can block them with my barriers, but these bullets are a real pain!"

I relentlessly unleashed spells at the mother, but her wounds mended almost as quickly as I inflicted them.

"Even with 300,000 MP, there are still monsters I can't beat, huh?"

Despite its crippling dependency and immobility, if I had to classify it, I'd put it even higher than A-rank. It would easily be an S-rank—a calamity-level monster, something I'd only heard of before in legends. If it found a way to survive outside the mine, there was no doubt the world would soon be overrun by a plague of insects. In no time, the current civilization would be extinct and the only form of life left would be the Mother and its children. That thought made me shiver in dread.

"Anyway, there's no time for 'ifs' right now. I need to find a way to cut off its mana supply. Take this!"

I shot ten consecutive wind blades at the monster from different angles, aiming at the tubular appendages that pierced the ground. However, it seemed that the Mother was well aware this was its only weakness and used its massive body as a shield.

Meanwhile, the murky mana coiling around its body started firing magic bullets in every direction, blasting holes through the walls and the ceiling.

The monster let out a shrill cry as my wind blades sliced at its body. There it was: an opening.

“Teto, Beretta!”

“Roger! Taaake this!”

“There!”

I had guessed the creature was going to try to protect its weak spots, so I had Beretta and Teto stand by while I acted as a decoy. Beretta sent her flying sword straight at the creature’s mana ducts, slicing them off cleanly. As mana started pouring out of the severed tubes, Teto put both hands to the ground and dug her finger into the earth. A powerful tremor reverberated through the entire mine, forcefully dislodging the Mother’s remaining appendages from the ground. More mana started spewing from the ground, but Teto quickly covered the hole with bedrock, plugging it tightly.

“We did it! It can’t suck mana from the earth anymore!” Teto cheered.

“Good job, Teto, Beretta. Let’s end this. *Wind Cutter!*”

I waved my hand, unleashing ten razor-sharp wind blades that soared towards the horror. With another wave, ten more followed suit. The Mother, deprived of its source of healing, attempted to draw sustenance from the ambient miasma, but it was too late.

“Screeech!”

Seeing that the Mother was done for, the black mana cloud that had been wrapped around its body flew away in an attempt to escape us.

“It’s ditching its body!” I warned my companions.

Without the mana cloud to strengthen itself, the Mother could no longer endure the onslaught of my wind blades or even support its grotesquely swollen body. It fell to the ground in a splatter of bodily fluids.

The Mother's mana tried to leave the depths of the mine, only to collide with the barrier I had installed there.

"Three, two, one, here I go!"

Teto dashed toward the mana cloud and swung down her sword, cleanly cutting it in half. However, the mana particles immediately gathered together again.

"Lady Teto, the Mother's mana is just like any other mana life-form's right now. We cannot defeat it with conventional methods," Beretta told her.

"What should we do then?" Teto asked. She kept slashing at the mana cloud, only for it to reform over and over again.

"Unlike the Archdevil from last time, it doesn't have a physical form, and it had to give up on the Mother's body. It's just going to disappear on its own," I said.

The mana cloud didn't have a physical body, nor was it tied to a place or object like the Fear Geist had been. Not only that, but its magic stone—the source of all of its powers—was still in the Mother's body and could be destroyed at any point. It wouldn't take much to defeat it.

"I'm going to purify this whole area; buy me a bit more time!" I said.

I gathered all my focus and started casting a *Purification* spell to dispel all the miasma in the mine. The mana cloud noticed what I was doing and started panicking, flying all over the place in search of a new vessel to invade to avoid getting purified. It first went to Teto, but she managed to avoid it by slashing at it with her sword.

But then...

"Beretta, behind you!"

The miasma was so thick I was struggling to keep track of the mana cloud and, when I finally did, it was too late. After getting cut in half by Teto, part of the mana cloud went behind Beretta, breaking the barrier that protected her from the miasma, and dove into the unsuspecting attendant doll.

"*Purification!*"

I unleashed a powerful *Purification* spell to clear the miasma. The dark mana cloud shrieked in agony as the spell disintegrated it, and all the miasma in the mine vanished, the room falling silent. However, I hadn't been quick enough: part of the mana cloud had managed to sneak into Beretta's body. The attendant doll fell to the floor in silence, unmoving.

CHAPTER 33

THE DOLL EARNS A SOUL

Beretta's Side

I felt my body fall without letting out as much as a scream. Everything around me was white. I quickly realized my consciousness had slipped, pulling me into my attendant doll spiritual space.

“A mana life-form has disturbed the system. I need to prioritize saving the information and memories stored inside my body and isolate the mana life-form... Success.”

The Mother’s mana was currently inside my body. I successfully managed to protect the information stored in my system and restrain the Mother’s mana, but no matter what I did, it kept sucking up my mana in an attempt to overtake my body.

“You’re not even human. You’re merely a tool, so why are you alive?”

“How can you allow yourself to live such a comfortable life?”

“You were supposed to protect us, yet you let us die while you went on with your life. Why did you do that?”

The black mana took on the form of a person and started throwing accusations at me. It repeated the action over and over again, each time assuming another form.

“A psychological attack? I see. Good attempt, but I know the people from the shelter wouldn’t talk to me like that.”

I was an attendant doll, a convenient tool created by Master’s “precursors.” As far as I remember, they had never treated me like a human being, and I knew they wouldn’t use words like “alive” to talk about me. My master and Lady Teto were the first ones to do so.

“Could this be a manifestation of my guilt, then?”

Back in the underground shelter, I had only been able to watch, powerless, as the humans killed each other. I had since come to understand that the pang inside my chest every time I thought about it was guilt—a very humanlike emotion.

“I have to say, I do not appreciate that mana showing me all of these images, though. It is truly unpleasant.”

The Mother’s mana was most likely trying to break free of its restraints with these psychological attacks. However, I remained entirely unfazed and decided to face my own feelings head-on.

“Deep inside, I must have always wanted to become a real person, just like Master and Lady Teto.”

Being able to serve my masters with this newly-repaired body of mine was my greatest joy in life. However, unlike my masters who could develop and grow as people, my attendant doll status forced me to remain always as I was. No matter how you looked at it, I could never be their equal. But I still wanted to try: I asked my masters to take me along on their travels and, in the past few six months, experienced many different things. I had told my master the reason I wanted to accompany them was to learn about different types of food, but it wasn’t all there was to it. My main objective was to prove to them—and to myself—that I could do more than stand in the background, letting time pass.

And then...

“I am detecting purification magic. This must be Master’s doing. The miasma should dissipate soon.”

Soon, the black mist surrounding the Mother’s miasma dispersed, revealing a humanoid silhouette. I thought whatever inhabited that monster must’ve been some sort of insect, but it turned out I was wrong. The silhouette was shrouded in darkness, but I detected no miasma coming from it. It was almost like a shadow.

“This silhouette... What are you?” I asked.

“I am a spirit who lost its form,” the shadow answered. Its voice was distorted; I couldn’t tell if it was a man, a woman, or even a child.

“You can speak? You must be a rather high-ranked spirit,” I noted, but the shadow

shook its head.

"I told you I lost my body, didn't I? I got eaten by that insect."

It must be talking about the Mother.

Legends about creatures that consumed mana life-forms, like spirits and ghosts, had existed well before my time. They were commonly referred to as Spirit Devourers—the apex predators of the mana ecosystem.

"You have kept your consciousness, though," I pointed out.

"You're wrong. After being eaten by that monster, any semblance of consciousness I had disappeared, and I was turned into an evil spirit. I barely have any of my sanity left, if at all."

"Then how are you talking to me right now?"

"Who knows? It might be because I'm on the verge of death. I did just get hit by a Purification spell, after all," the shadow said with a self-deprecating laugh.

It seemed aware of the fact that it was about to disappear along with the rest of the miasma.

"Is there really no way for you to survive this?" I asked.

"Nope. I don't have a body anymore, and my consciousness has been corrupted. Now that I've lost my vessel and the miasma has been purified, I will disappear. Frankly, I'm fine with that. I'd rather die than keep causing harm," the shadow said, and it looked almost as if it was smiling. I noticed it had started turning transparent.

"Why are you making that face?" the shadow asked me. "I've been living a nightmare ever since that monster ate me. By now I'm just glad it's over."

I was making a face? I hadn't noticed. The shadow had, though, and it was attempting to reassure me.

"I see," I said slowly. "All right, then. As a maid, allow me these words: it must have been very difficult for you. Please get some rest now." I punctuated my sentence with a deep bow, and the smile on the shadow's "face" grew even larger.

"I'm glad I got to talk to a real, living person before disappearing. My mana will scatter and birth new spirits, but a part of me will forever live inside you."

It called me a "living person" and treated me just like a regular human...

But as soon as those words left its mouth, the shadow scattered, and, seeing as the threat was gone, my body rebooted, pulling me back to reality.

The Witch's Side

"Here I go. *Purification!*" I chanted, trying for the umpteenth time to clear the miasma in Beretta's body.

The Mother's mana was trying to gain its power back by feeding on Beretta's own mana, but I didn't let it do as it pleased, casting countless *Purification* spells until, at last, it disappeared, and Beretta woke up.

"Mmh... Good morning, Master, Lady Teto."

"Beretta!" I cried out in relief.

"You're up! Phew, thank goodness!" Teto said.

Beretta slowly stood up, her gaze never leaving our faces.

"Beretta, are you all right? How's your body feeling?" I asked.

"I am fine, Master, thank you for your concern. My body simply shut down in order to preserve my consciousness. And thanks to the *Purification* spell you kept casting on me, the miasma inside my body completely vanished."

"I see. I'm so glad."

"We were so worried about you, Beretta!" Teto whined, her eyes filled with tears. She pulled Beretta in a hug and started wailing loudly.

I had to be honest here: I was pretty much on the verge of tears myself. I was just so relieved Beretta woke up.

“I apologize for making you worry, Master, Lady Teto.”

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” I said again. “Although that miasma did a number on your mana, huh? Here, let me help. *Charge!*”

Beretta was still holding Teto and patting her head to console her, as I went around her to replenish her mana. I put my hand on her back and noticed a bizarre shift in her mana, which made me do a double take.

“Beretta...” I breathed in shock. “Your body’s producing mana.”

“It... What?!” Beretta asked, just as flabbergasted as I was.

Being magic tools, attendant dolls weren’t supposed to be able to produce mana. But at the present time, Beretta’s body was slowly, yet steadily, generating mana, as if to replenish its core.

I had a little theory of my own on what had happened.

“Beretta, I’m going to use an *Appraisal* spell on you, okay?”

I used my magic to inspect Beretta’s status. I regularly did that whenever I replenished her mana and, up until now, it had always said “attendant doll” next to her name. But now, it was different, almost as if she had evolved.

NAME: Beretta (Mechanoid)

CLASS: Waiting Maid

TITLE: Witch’s Servant, Battle Maid

GOLEM CORE MANA: 27,000/100,000

SKILLS: Hand-to-hand Combat Lv 8, Body Hardening Lv 1, Dark Magic Lv. 5, Regeneration Lv 1, Mana Regeneration Lv 1, Mana Control Lv 8, Service Lv 10, High-Speed Calculation Lv 5, Thought Organization Lv 5, Etiquette Lv 7, Supervision Lv 5, various others...

Beretta was now a mechanoid, which I could only assume meant a “machine demon.” I didn’t know what exactly caused this change, but, just like Teto, it seemed that she had left her old state of being behind.

“Beretta, you’ve become a demon. A mechanoid, to be precise.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, tears started streaming down Beretta’s face, and Teto and I gently wrapped her in a hug.



"Congrats, Beretta! Wanna have a magic stone?" Teto offered, holding out a small magic stone for Beretta to eat.

Beretta clearly hadn't been expecting that offer and broke into laughter, her eyes still brimming with tears. She accepted the magic stone from Teto and started licking it just like one would a piece of candy.

When she calmed down, Beretta told us what exactly happened with the Mother's mana.

"I see... So it was a spirit, huh?" I mused.

"Beretta, you're just like Teto!"

Teto had become an earthnoid in a very similar manner, by merging with a spirit who had been trapped inside a magic stone. It seemed that the spirit that invaded Beretta's body had been a dark spirit, and this was how she got turned into a demon.

After we were done listening to Beretta's story, we all took a look around the mine.

"This place sure does look awful, huh?"

While I had successfully managed to cleanse the air and the miasma had completely dissipated, the Mother's cooling corpse still lay on the ground, and the large hole was still filled with that thick, sludgy miasma. If one truly wanted to purify such a vast concentration of miasma, they would need the help of dozens of mages and priests, and even then, it would take weeks for it to completely dissipate.

"Hmm, but if we leave it like this, there's a nonzero chance that the miasma might overflow."

If that happened, the people living in the town right beside the mine would be in a lot of trouble. But as I stood there, pondering what to do with it all, mana started flowing from the leylines, the particles gathering right before our eyes. I got ready to cast another *Purification* spell: had I not been thorough enough earlier? Did part of the Mother's mana remain? But then, the mana started taking on a human form, and *she* appeared right in front of our eyes.

"No way... Lariel?!"

CHAPTER 34

REQUEST COMPLETE

"Heya, Chise! And you two must be Teto and Beretta, right? Nice hustle out there!" Lariel greeted us, sounding awfully casual—as she always did.

"Nice to meet you!" Teto piped up. "Lady Witch has told me lots of things about you!"

"It is an honor to meet you, Lady Lariel. Thank you very much for what you did for us."

Teto and Beretta both introduced themselves to Lariel and Beretta took that opportunity to thank Lariel for helping me come up with a solution to fix her body.

"Why are you here? I thought I could only talk to you through dream oracles," I said with a frown.

I had no idea what she was doing here, at the bottom of the mine, next to the body of a giant monster.

"Well, this is my territory. Under certain circumstances, I can occasionally descend here." She chuckled before proceeding to tell us that she simply used the large quantity of mana sprouting out of the leylines to come talk to us.

"There are loads of things I want to ask you. First, why did you want us to defeat that monster?" I said.

Lariel had told me she wanted my help fixing a little issue within her domain, but she had never told me what exactly she wanted me to do, nor had she given me a specific deadline. I was sure she must've had her reasons, being a goddess and all, but still, I would've liked a heads-up that we were dealing with miasma. Thankfully, no one got hurt, and Beretta even got to evolve into a mechanoid. But still, it had been pretty nerve-racking. I thought I was about to lose my companion!

"Well, it's a bit of a long story. Liriel told you about the catastrophe from two thousand years ago, right? At that time, the leylines got all messed up, and I had to get a powerful dark spirit who lived in the mine to restore them."

The spirit Lariel had hired to do her bidding—which later disappeared and created the spirit that had invaded Beretta’s body—had apparently roamed this land for hundreds of years and was very skilled at manipulating the earth. Lariel had it supervise this region and fix the leylines by sharing the mana she got from the prayers of her believers with it.

“I don’t like managing my domain.” She pouted. “So I delegate a lot.”

At Lariel’s request, the dark spirit regenerated both the leylines and the soil in the region. And as a side effect, some of the mana leaked from the leylines, creating veins of magic metal throughout the underground. However, thirty years ago, things took a turn for the worst.

“The dwarves accidentally pierced a hole in the leylines, which led to mana seeping out and the birth of that Spirit Devourer,” I said.

“Yep, that’s pretty much the gist of it,” Lariel confirmed. “At first, the Spirit Devourer was pretty weak, but then, more and more monsters started appearing. They would fight with each other, releasing miasma into the mine, and before long, the Spirit Devourer had grown to become quite the fearsome creature. I would’ve never imagined things might take such a turn. All because of human greed.” Lariel chuckled.

She had watched over this world for tens of thousands of years, so she must’ve seen her fair share of human blunders.

“I really think you’re taking this situation way too lightly,” I said. “You’ve known about that monster for thirty years, yet you haven’t done anything about it until now.”

“Well, I have my reasons for that. The best scenario would’ve been for the humans to figure out a way to defeat the monsters themselves without me needing to intervene. I only asked for your help to avoid things getting too out of hand,” Lariel replied with another chuckle.

Gods sure had a different outlook on things compared to the rest of us, huh? I did see her point, though: while I prevented a major disaster from happening by dealing with the situation myself, the humans didn’t have to do anything, which meant they wouldn’t be able to learn from that mistake.

“And besides, that monster could only live in the depths of the mine,” Lariel continued. “As long as no one approached it, they wouldn’t have been in immediate danger.”

Again, she had a point. For the past thirty years, the only threat had been the occasional monster crawling out of the mine, and the vigilante corps were dealing with those just fine.

"Well, if everything was fine, why did you ask me to help you? What do you mean by 'to avoid things getting too out of hand'?" I asked.

"See, monsters, just like other creatures, have a certain life span, even that Spirit Devourer. Considering how long it's been around, it would've probably died in about twenty years or so, and the remaining insectile monsters wouldn't have lasted a whole lot longer. Their remains would've mixed with that thick miasma and spread through the leylines."

The monsters had all been naturally poisonous, and the miasma had only made them stronger. If the scenario Lariel had just told me about actually happened, all of those toxins would've traveled through the leylines, polluting the earth and making the world at large's monster population more fecund and considerably beefier.

"The toxins and miasma would've spread to about half of the country before flowing into the ocean, and before long, the eastern part of the continent would've become completely inhospitable to humans. It would've been a pain for both me and my sister Luriel, who oversees the ocean."

So this was what could've happened, huh? The annihilation of an entire country because of toxins and miasma was, indeed, a worrying scenario. This put things into perspective for me: it was a good thing Lariel had given me so much time to deal with this. In the end, I was able to solve the problem without anyone getting hurt or even noticing something was wrong.

"Well, things turned out fine, and you're almost done here!" Lariel said with a smile.
"You just have to cleanse that mana sludge and we're all good."

"Uh, yeah, about that... It's going to take me a really long time to clear it all," I said.

"Ah, but think about the reward for your trouble." Lariel beamed at me. "It's actually right inside these walls. You should check it out."

"Okay!" Teto said before using her magic to dig a tunnel through the wall Lariel was pointing at. At the end of the tunnel were veins of silver and red-colored ores, as well as green crystals.

"Lariel, what are those?" I asked.

"The remaining mythril and orichalcum veins that appeared in the mine over two hundred years ago. And the green things are cavorite!"

"Cavorite? Isn't that the stuff that creates floating islands?"

There were two key elements when it came to managing the leylines: to make sure that no place was lacking in mana, and that no place had too much mana. The latter would create a mana hot spot, which could cause dungeons or giant monsters to appear, or, in certain cases, cavorite crystals to form in excessive quantities. And when there was too dense a cavorite lode in one spot, it would detach it from the rest of the continent and turn it into a floating island. Liriel once told me that floating islands were even more annoying for the goddesses to look after.

"Well, you're not gonna make any piece of land float with crystals that size." Lariel shrugged. "At most, I'd say you could make a ship float."

Well, that was already pretty impressive.

There were many airborne threats in this world, including dragons, wyverns, and even giant birds. These were incredibly difficult to deal with. Most countries used ballistae to counter aerial threats, while some mages would fly to duel the monsters in the sky and dragon knights would use their own flying mounts. However, with clever cavorite-powered devices like skyships, as Lariel suggested, people wouldn't need to rely on mages and dragon knights as much, and dealing with these threats would become slightly easier. And if things went well, it might even lead to the birth of new means of airborne transportation. Granted, I had to acknowledge the risk of humans using these floating ships to fight each other.

I breathed a long, deep sigh. "You've called it a 'reward,' but you just want us to deal with these crystals for you, don't you?"

Lariel chuckled. "You've found me out. I think it's still a bit too early for humans to get their hands on things as powerful as these. I didn't trust humanity at large with them two thousand years ago, and I'm not about to start now."

One day, people would find the crystals and study them, but Lariel seemed to think it was still too early for that.

"Well, I don't really need them, but I can't just leave them here, huh? Thanks, I guess."

Lariel's form was already starting to fade away, but she had one last thing to say. "Beretta, after absorbing that spirit's powers, you have now become a demon. As one of the five goddesses of this continent, let me welcome you to this world. I hope you'll have fun out there. See ya!"

And just like that, she disappeared, leaving only glowing mana particles behind her. The mine fell into complete silence. This wasn't the end of our adventure there, though: I still had to find a way to clear all of that miasma sludge. But I decided to call it a day for today. We retrieved the Mother's body and used our transfer gate to return to the entrance of the mine.

"Hopefully, the crops in the region will be able to thrive now," I said as we left the mine.

Now that the mana wasn't getting siphoned by that monster anymore, the flow of the leylines was back to normal, and before long, the entire region's land was looking more vibrant.

CHAPTER 35

THE LEYLINE MANAGING DEVICE

Even though we had defeated the biggest threat to this town—the monster in the mine—it didn't bring any significant change to the dwarves' daily lives. With the harvest festival over and winter settling in, they didn't need to tend to the fields anymore, and most of them spent all of their time at Arim's father's inn, sipping their stiff drinks and chatting with each other.

"Have a good day, Chise, Teto, Miss Beretta!" Arim saw us off that morning again.

"We're off!"

Despite the Mother being dead and the leylines' flow being back to normal, we still had the miasma sludge to deal with, and we would go to the mine every day.

"All righty, let's get to work. *Purification!*"

I poured almost all 300,000 of my MP into that spell, only for it to cleanse a teeny tiny amount of the sludge.

"Phew, all done for today."

It only took me about thirty minutes a day, but I had nonetheless decided we should stay in town until I was completely done cleansing the sludge.

"Good job, Lady Witch!"

"Thanks, Teto. Let's head back to the wasteland and meet up with Beretta."

Today, there was something important for us to do in the wasteland, so I had sent Beretta there to get everything ready in advance.

"Welcome back, Master, Lady Teto. We've been waiting for you," Beretta said as we arrived in the wasteland through the transfer gate. She had gathered all the other attendant dolls, just as I had told her to.

“We’re done with the miasma for today. Thanks for calling the others, Beretta.”

“We want you all to pick the magic stones from the big monster we killed last time!” Teto announced.

At her words, all the attendant dolls took out their dismantling tools, ready to get to work. We’d been making them pick magic stones out of monsters’ corpses for over six months now, so they were used to it.

“I have set up a dismantling station, Master. Right this way.”

We followed Beretta and the others to a barren part of the wasteland, and I took the Mother’s body out of my magic bag. Teto then proceeded to cut it into smaller chunks with her sword, and the attendant dolls got to work immediately.

“Master, I have come across a large magic stone,” one of the dolls told me.

“Okay, thanks. *Psychokinesis!*”

I used my magic to lift the large purple stone before giving it a rinse with some Water Magic. Judging by the size of it, it must’ve been an S-rank stone.

“It’s such a pretty color! I wanna eat it...” Teto—who was done cutting up the Mother’s body—said, her gaze fixed on the stone and drool seeping out of her mouth.

The stone was twice the size of the one we had found in that thirty-something-floor dungeon, so I wasn’t too surprised by her reaction. However, I already had an idea what to do with it, so I couldn’t let Teto have it.

“Sorry, Teto, but I have plans for this stone. It can help us with the regeneration of the leylines here.”

“Aw, what a shame,” she said before taking a handful of magic stones out of our magic bag and munching on them.

In the past six months, the attendant dolls had extracted magic stones from over fifty thousand monsters. While Teto now had to share with Beretta, there was still more than enough left to keep her satisfied for the time being.

“Having a more efficient way to manage the leylines is going to speed up the

wasteland's regeneration a lot," I said.

We had managed to get a pretty large forest as well as the beginnings of an ecosystem going, and the air was brimming with mana. However, this was limited to the surface of the wasteland, and the leylines in the underground still hadn't been fixed. If we gave it enough time, the surface mana would probably end up spreading through the ground and the leylines would regenerate on their own, but there was a possibility mana would accumulate in one single spot, which could lead to dungeons or monsters appearing.

"This is why I want to create a device capable of managing the leylines for us."

Just as Lariel had asked a dark spirit to regulate the leylines, I was planning on using a magical device for the job.

"All righty, let's go. *Creation*: leyline managing device!"

Using my remaining mana as well as a few mana crystals, I created the device, which ended up costing me 1,500,000 MP. For the control system of the device, I had taken inspiration from the attendant dolls' cores I had analyzed, as well as the humanoid magical weapon I had defeated more than a decade ago now. With that knowledge, I came up with a machine compatible with the control device I was using to manage all of my barrier devices. All the mana gathered in one spot and, in a matter of seconds, the device appeared—a pedestal-shaped machine with a hole the exact size of the magic stone I had extracted from the Mother's body.

"Beretta, can you tell me where the best spot for it is?"

"I suggest setting it up in the mansion's annex. If you link it with the control device, you should be able to monitor the leylines relatively easily."

"Okay. Thanks, Beretta."

Beretta installed the device in the annex, and I set up the Mother's mana stone. After that, we linked it with the control device, and it gave us an overview of the leylines, which were in a deplorable state.

"This is really awful, huh?"

The leylines were represented as red dotted lines on the monitor. Just as I thought,

some of the mana from the surface had started seeping into the ground, and it seemed that certain parts of the leylines were already regenerating, but at this rate, it would take forever for them to get back to normal. And so we used the new device to redirect some of the mana from the surface into the leylines to speed up their regeneration.

It would also allow us to suck up any surplus mana in one single spot to prevent it from accumulating, which we could then store in the magic stone powering the device or release into the air.

“Well, this is going to have to wait. Right now, I’m focusing all of my efforts on cleansing that nasty miasma in the mine,” I said.

“We shall manage the leylines in your absence, Master,” Beretta told me.

I nodded. Attendant dolls had very high calculation skills and were quite good at managing such devices. Having them do it for me while I was away would be a huge help.

After we were done setting up the device, we double-checked the Mother’s body to make sure we hadn’t missed a single magic stone, and I used Fire Magic to burn the remains, since we had no use for them.

With all that taken care of, we took the transfer gate back to the mine and made our way to the entrance. There, we were met with the sight of...

“Heeey, Chise! Teto! Miss Beretta!”

“Arim,” I said, surprised to see the little girl waiting for us.

“Tee hee! I couldn’t wait anymore, so I came to get you!” the little girl said.

I had promised her I would help her train to become an adventurer, and it seemed she had been so excited by our training session that she had come to wait for me all the way at the entrance of the mine. I shook my head in fake exasperation, but there was a fond smile on my face. The three of us left the mine and made our way to an empty plot of land outside the town. There, I started instructing Arim on how to fight. Back in Gald, I would often train newbie adventurers, but most of them had been beastmen, and it took me a little while to figure out a training regimen that would work for a dwarf like Arim. By the time we were done, Arim was so exhausted, Teto had to piggyback her back to the inn.

CHAPTER 36

THE GODDESS'S PROPHET

And so, for the remainder of the winter, I spent my days slowly cleansing the miasma sludge in the mine and training Arim in combat. Her parents had no objection with that or the fact that she wanted to become an adventurer, but they had seemed a bit worried about how much our training would cost them. If one wanted to learn how to fight at a swordsmanship dojo or a big town's adventurer's guild, they would have to pay a monthly fee, as well as a course fee. Initially, I offered to provide Arim with training free of charge, but they vehemently declined. I then proposed that they waive our lodging costs instead, although I insisted that we would keep supplying them with ingredients for our meals. It took some time, but it seemed they were satisfied with that arrangement.

As for Arim's training...

"Haah... Haah..."

"Fix your running posture! One more lap!" Teto yelled at the little girl.

"Y-Yes!"

It was going all right. For the time being, I had decided to make her work exclusively on the basics while I tried to identify her strong suits.

"How is Miss Arim doing, Master?"

For now, her training regimen consisted of running under Teto's supervision to build up her stamina, and, when she got too tired, meditating to enhance her mana and improve her control over it. After that, Beretta would teach her basic martial arts techniques. In the evening, after she had dinner, I would teach her how to read and write, and we'd tell her about all the different types of quests we had to fulfill in our twenty-something years working as adventurers.

"Well, for now, we're just focusing on improving her physical abilities and making sure she has all the necessary skills to make her adventuring debut. When we're done, she'll

hopefully have reached E-rank."

If she diligently followed her training regimen, she should have no difficulties clearing entry-level quests when she would finally join a guild. After that, she would need to practice using a weapon, learn Body Strengthening, and gain some more experience to become a D-rank adventurer. Once she reached that milestone, she would be able to join an adventuring party and fulfill her dreams of traveling all around the continent. Unlike Selene, she hadn't been training since she was small, so it would take her a lot of time and effort to build a solid foundation. But despite all that, I hadn't heard her utter a single complaint.

Days went by and winter was almost over.

"Purification!"

And at last, after many weeks, I had finally managed to cleanse the last of the miasma sludge in the mine. The bottom of the now-empty hole was covered in shells and rotten insect flesh, but all I had to do was cast a little fire spell, and it all crumbled to dust.

"Phew, we're finally done with Lariel's request. Hm, but..."

"Lady Witch, is there a problem?"

"I was just wondering if it was all right for us to leave the mine as is."

The seepage point in the leylines had been sealed, but the mines were still dangerous. We had killed all the monsters down there, but there was nothing stopping others from building their nest in the mine. And, unlike the insect monsters, these would probably have no trouble getting out, which would, in turn, put the townsfolk's lives in jeopardy. Well, I still had time to give this more thought and hopefully come up with a solution.

Our job in the mine was done, so I made sure to retrieve my transfer gates before leaving. As usual, Arim was waiting for us at the entrance.

"Chise, Teto, Beretta! Please help me train today too!"

"Sure. Ah, but just so you know, we just got done with our job in the mine, so we'll be leaving town soon."

A sad smile appeared on the little girl's face.

"I see..." she muttered before giggling. "Hee hee! I have to work extra hard today then!"

And she did exactly that, pushing herself to her limits.

That night, when I fell asleep, I found myself in the white place where I always ended up whenever I was having a dream oracle.

Good. I had a few choice words for Lariel for letting me deal with that annoying mana sludge. But then...

"Ouchie! Stop this, it *hurts!*"

"You idiot! You made Chise, *my* reincarnator that *I've* been looking after for so many years, take care of your problems, and you can't even give her the courtesy of dealing with the cleanup yourself?!"

Well, well, I had stumbled across a pretty interesting scene: Liriel was holding Lariel in a cobra twist, all while yelling at her. Not only that, but Beretta and Teto were actually standing right next to me, looking utterly confused.

"Oooh, this isn't a dream oracle. It's just a regular dream, huh?"

"Lady Witch? Lady Lariel's getting beaten up by a lady I've never seen before," Teto said.

"Master, Lady Teto, I believe this must be some type of mental manipulation," Beretta said warily.

"Don't worry, this is just the goddess Liriel. Ah, but why am I telling you that? You're just fragments of my dream," I said.

Unlike my earlier assumption, I was probably just having a normal dream.

"Pl-Please, save me! Chise! Teto! Beretta!" Lariel cried for help.

"It's all your fault!" Liriel fumed. "You never, ever use that empty brain of yours! And I'm always the one who ends up having to deal with *your* messes!"

She then proceeded to torture her sister with a bevy of wrestling moves under Teto, Beretta, and my dumbfounded gazes. When Lariel had used up all of her strength and couldn't fight back anymore, Liriel let her go, straightening her posture before turning to face us.

"Hello, Chise. And nice to meet you, Teto, Beretta. I am Liriel—the goddess who brought Chise into this world," she greeted us with a pleasant smile. She sounded like the normal Liriel, but the sight of Lariel laying down motionless behind her reminded me that this was just a regular dream.

"So I'm just dreaming right now, huh?" I said out loud. "Teto and Beretta are here, so it can't be a dream oracle anyway."

"You're not dreaming, Chise," Liriel said. "Not only did my idiot sister send you on this annoying mission, she made you deal with the aftermath of it all by yourselves. So I punished her for you. Ah, and since you are my prophet, Chise, I can invite your friends and family to the dream oracles if I wish."

So it's not a dream? I thought, dumbfounded, as I looked at Teto and Beretta.

"Wait, hold up. What do you mean, I'm your prophet? What does that mean?"

"A prophet is a god's messenger. See, us gods can only interact with humans in so many ways, so, instead, we nominate prophets to communicate our will to the people. Well, I only managed to make you my prophet thanks to all the mana you emitted by cleansing out that sludge per my stupid sister's request."

She went on to mutter that she hadn't wanted us to take care of Lariel's request for that exact reason, that Lariel always left out the important details, as well as a few words that I wasn't going to repeat here.

"Well, you can't nominate a prophet without using just *gobs* of mana, so in a way, I guess it wasn't too bad that you cleared that sludge yourself," Liriel shrugged.

Meanwhile, Lariel had stood up, not looking sorry in the slightest.

"You don't have to take this whole prophet thing too seriously, Chise. It just means we'll be able to communicate with you more easily. Any fervent believer would probably cry out in joy if they received that title, but it really just means that you're our friend!"

"Yaaay, we've got new friends, Lady Witch!" Teto jumped up and down in joy.

"It truly is impressive that you have become friends with the goddesses, Master" Beretta said. "Ah, now that I have the opportunity, please allow me to thank you for giving my master advice on how to repair my body, Lady Liriel."

Teto and Beretta were rejoicing at Liriel's words.

Meanwhile...

"Don't you think calling your prophets your 'friends' is a little too casual?" I said, a wry smile on my face.

"Aw, you don't want to be my friend, Chise?" Liriel asked me.

"No, it's not that. It's just... You feel more like a partner working toward the same goal as me, rather than a friend."

Everything I was doing to refurbish the Wasteland of Nothingness—planting trees, capturing animals, building an ecosystem—I was doing because I wanted to see it evolve from a barren landscape to a green and vibrant place. Liriel had the same vision as me, so in a way, the two of us were already akin to partners in my mind.

When I told her that, she wrapped me in a hug. "Thank youuu, Chiseee!" she exclaimed.

At first, Liriel had come off as a little cold and standoffish, but as we'd talked, I realized that, on top of being intelligent, she was also a very hard worker; I wanted to be able to support her.

"There, there," I said, patting her on the head. "You're doing amazing," I said.

"Lady Witch told us everything you've been doing for the continent! It sounds really hard."

"Thank youuu," Liriel said, and I noticed tears had started running down her cheeks.



She must've been bottling up these feelings for so long that the dam couldn't hold anymore. She rambled for several minutes, profusely thanking me for everything I did for the wasteland, all the trees I'd planted, all the animals I'd hunted and released there, my recent attempt at fixing the leylines, etcetera etcetera.

To be honest, I was also thankful to her. Thanks to her tasking me with the regeneration of the wasteland, I felt as if I had finally found the place where I belonged.

We were still hugging when I remembered there was something I meant to ask her.

"Hey, can I have your advice about something? I'm a little unsure of what to do about the mine."

"The mine?" Liriel repeated.

"Yeah. I'm worried monsters might make themselves at home in there if I leave it like that, but I also don't see myself destroying an entire mountain," I explained.

"I see. Leave it to me! I'm the earth mother, after all; this is my area of expertise. I'll make that mine crumble on itself, so nothing can ever enter it again."

A wave of relief washed over me at her words. Now I could leave the mining town without worrying about something happening to the dwarves who had so kindly let us live there for over a year.

Liriel had more or less calmed down now, and she was back to yelling at Lariel, who was pretending not to be able to hear her.

"It's all your fault in the first place! After *your* reincarnator killed that monster in the mine three hundred years ago, people discovered the mythril and orichalcum veins and decided to start exploiting it! Yet you're asking *my* Chise and her friends to clean up after *your* reincarnator!"

"How was I supposed to guess something like *that* would happen?!" Lariel retorted.

"And besides," Liriel continued, ignoring Lariel's comment. "You made her deal with the aftermath too! I don't care if you're the goddess of the sun or whatever, try to think about the earth for once! If that miasma had seeped into the leylines and contaminated the region, what would you have done? Huh?!"

I threw Lariel a death glare while Beretta and Teto tried to calm Liriel down. When she had regained her composure, Liriel turned back toward me. "I am very grateful for everything you've done, Chise. And now, you've even started fixing the leylines with that device of yours. Thank you so, so much. I had hoped to do it with more ceremony but... I hereby nominate you, Chise, as the prophet of the earth mother, Liriel, and bestow the blessing of the goddesses upon your companions, Teto and Beretta," Liriel declared, her eyes slightly swollen from crying. "Let's keep on working together from now on, Chise."

"And since you're now my little sister's prophet, you're also my friend!" Lariel chimed in. "We'll see more of each other in the future, Chise!"

And with those words, we woke up from the dream oracle.

"That was pretty intense, huh? So I'm Liriel's prophet now..."

After waking up, I started pondering about building a church to worship the goddesses when, all of a sudden, I heard droplets hitting the window. I opened the window and saw that it had started raining heavily. While long bouts of rain were often common in early spring, I couldn't help but think this was a miracle brought by Liriel.

"Look, Lady Witch, it's raining so much!"

"Master, I would advise against going outside in this weather," Beretta said.

"Liriel's the one causing this rain. I'm sure she's going to use it to do something about the mine."

The three of us stayed in our room for a while, listening to the sound of the rain. It ended up lasting for three days and three nights, which made us stay in the mining town a little longer than we had planned. Not only was it pouring heavily, but there were strong gusts of wind that made the inn's windows shake.

The rain was so strong it penetrated the mine, and the Earth Magic spells the dwarves had used to strengthen it got weaker and weaker until, at last, the mine crumbled in on itself. Thankfully, the town's buildings and fields didn't get damaged by the rain, and no one got injured either. And with the mine now sealed, not only was there no risk of monsters building their nests there, but no one would be able to access the leylines.

While most of the mine had collapsed, a tiny section remained, and the bats quickly made it their new home. Not only that, but it seemed that the part left over was brimming with iron and copper, which meant that the townsfolk wouldn't be too impacted by the collapse.

I was a little bit worried that the fact that the mine collapsed right as we were done with our job might arouse the dwarves' suspicion, but my fears were unwarranted. Teto, Beretta, and I were the only ones who knew this rain had been a miracle caused by Liriel.

As a side note, when we headed back to the wasteland later that week, I used my Creation magic to build a church dedicated to the five goddesses a little way from our mansion, which I decorated with statues of Liriel and Lariel.

CHAPTER 37

HEADING TO A COASTAL TOWN FOR SOME WELL-DESERVED REST

Teto, Beretta, and I finally said our goodbyes to the townsfolk and set out toward our new destination. The rain had not only demolished the mine, but it had also thoroughly moistened the soil in the region, which seemed much healthier than before.

"Chise, Teto, Miss Beretta, you're really leaving?" Arim—who had gotten really attached to us—asked, tears streaming down her face.

"Yeah. We'll never forget about this town," I told her.

"Yup! Teto had so much fun here!"

"Lady Arim, please stop crying. We would much rather see you smile one last time before we leave," Beretta softly told the little girl.

Depending on where our adventures would take us next, it might be a while before we came back to this town—if ever—so I didn't make empty promises to Arim that we would come to see her again. I did, however, make sure to tell her I would never forget our time together.

"Okay! I'll make the best of what you've taught me and for sure become an adventurer, just like you, Chise! And then, I'll make this town as rich as it used to be!"

The three of us smiled at her words.

"I'm sure you can do it. I'll always be cheering you on from afar, I promise."

We left the town and kept waving at the people who had come to see us off until they were out of sight.

"I wonder what this feeling is called. Sadness, perhaps?" Beretta whispered, and I

couldn't help the wry smile that formed on my lips.

"Maybe. Teto and I are used to these types of farewells, so it doesn't really get to us too much anymore."

Well, I said that, but I was also feeling pretty down. I decided not to dwell on these feelings too much, and focus instead on remembering the happy memories I had made in the mining town. And besides...

"We'll get to see loads of new things on our travels! Teto wants to go to the ocean and eat some yummy fish!"

I nodded. "That's right, Teto. The more we travel, the more we'll get to experience new things."

Beretta's face lit up. "You're right, Master. This is a very nice way of looking at things."

We kept walking when, all of a sudden, Beretta completely stopped in her tracks.

"What's wrong, Beretta?" I asked her, turning around.

"Beretta, hurryyy!" Teto urged her, but Beretta remained unmoving, her gaze fixed on us.

"Master, Lady Teto, please forgive my brazenness, but I would like to return to the wasteland."

"Huh? Why?" Teto asked while I looked at Beretta in silence.

Beretta had told me she wanted to accompany us on our travels to learn more about the world and take this opportunity to experience different types of food, so she could recreate them for us. We were craving some seafood, so we had decided that our next stop would be a port town. Beretta would for sure be able to learn a lot of new things and try out some new foods there, yet she was saying she would rather go back home.

"After accompanying you on your travels, learning about the outside world, and associating with Lady Arim and the others, I became a mechanoid," Beretta started.

"That's right. Doesn't that make you want to travel even more?" I asked.

Unlike before, Beretta was now able to produce her own mana, which meant she didn't have to rely on me to charge her anymore.

"While it is true that I can now stay awake for longer periods and my body has become much stronger, I have been thinking recently about what it is I really want to do." She marked a pause, taking in a deep breath as if to organize her thoughts, and Teto and I waited for her to keep going. "I want to look after the Wasteland of Nothingness while you are away and educate the other attendant dolls so that one day, they will also get the opportunity to become mechanoids. I want to welcome you home whenever you come back from your travels. I believe this is my duty."

So this was the reason Beretta wanted to go back to the wasteland. She had decided to accompany us on our travels to learn and experience more things, and the conclusion she had come to was that she wanted to look after our home—the Wasteland of Nothingness—while we were away. It may seem that she hadn't evolved that much compared to before, but it was clear to me that she had.

"Okay. I'll get a transfer gate ready for you."

"But you'll still come with us from time to time, right?" Teto asked Beretta as I took the transfer gate out of our magic bag.

"Of course. From now on, I shall devote myself to looking after the Wasteland of Nothingness, but I would love nothing more than to accompany you in your travels again in the future," Beretta said with a polite bow. "Well then, Master, Lady Teto, please have a safe trip."

"We're off, Beretta. We'll pop by the wasteland when we have a minute."

"And we'll bring you lots of souvenirs!"

"Understood. Well then, please excuse me."

Saying that, Beretta passed through the transfer gate, a smile on her face. I put the gate back into the magic bag and turned toward Teto.

"Should we get going? I'd say we look for the nearest adventurers' guild, take on a few missions and clear those while making our way to a coastal town."

"Roger! And if we find some yummy food, we'll have to tell Beretta all about it!"

I nodded and took our flying carpet out of the magic bag, and the two of us got on. We started making our way to a coastal town to do some sightseeing and enjoy some seafood.

Unlike our earlier travels, we now had the insurance that the wasteland was well looked after, and we would be able to enjoy ourselves without a care in the world.

EXTRA STORY

THE MINING TOWN, ABOUT FIVE HUNDRED YEARS INTO MY WITCH LIFE

After being so busy with work for the past few weeks, things had finally calmed down, and I had time to go somewhere with Teto and Beretta.

“Master, you are very recognizable in these clothes. I would advise changing into a different outfit to avoid attracting too much attention,” Beretta warned me.

I hadn’t thought of that, but she was right. In the past five hundred years, our names had become widely known all around the continent, and going out wearing my trademark pointy hat and black robe would stand out. They would immediately recognize that I was Chise, the Witch of Creation—their nickname, not mine. And so I heeded Beretta’s advice and changed into a dress and traded my pointy hat for a wide-brimmed straw hat.

“How many centuries has it been since we last came here?” I said once we stepped into what we used to call the former mining town. “The place has changed so much.”

This town had made a strong impact on me, and I would always remember it as the desolate and dusty little town at the foot of the mountain. It had once been a prosperous mining town, which was almost completely abandoned when the mine ran out of precious ore. But, as we strolled into town, I was shocked by how different it looked. There were large orchards on the outskirts, the buildings had been rebuilt with bricks, and paved roads replaced the bare paths.

“Dwarves are a long-lived species, but everyone must be dead by now, huh?”

Dwarves would live for a hundred and fifty years at the longest. The people I had once known had most definitely all passed away, and the town was now populated with their great-grandchildren or people who had come to live here after I had left. The town had undergone such drastic changes that I could barely recognize it, which made me feel a little bit sad.

"Lady Witch! Let's go there! They're selling snacks made from the fruits of the orchard!" Teto said, excitedly, pointing at a store.

"Please calm down, Lady Teto. The shop isn't going anywhere."

As per usual, Teto was wearing a leather outfit and her sword was dangling from her hip. Beretta hadn't changed either, still clad in her usual classical maid uniform. I was the only one who had changed into a more neutral outfit, and it must've looked as if I was a young noble lady traveling with my guard and servant.

We strolled around the town for a little bit. The main street was bustling with tourists and merchants, and I couldn't believe just how animated the little town had become. Occasionally, we would stop at a shop and peruse their wares. I noticed most of the merchants were selling things made with fruits from the orchards: sweets, fruit wine, smoked foods made using wood chips... We sampled a couple of them as we made our way down the main street, until we reached the town square. A bronze statue of a petite dwarven girl stood proudly in the middle of the plaza, and a dwarven woman was telling the history of the town to a group of tourists.

"This statue has been made to honor a native adventurer from this town and a key figure in its development: Arim, the Rockwall."

Her words stopped us in our tracks; we listened to the woman's story. The adventurer Arim had traveled the world, all while devoting herself to the development of the town. One time, she found a mysterious fruit deep inside a monster lair and brought it back home. The townsfolk planted it and started cultivating the fruit, which quickly became the town's specialty product. Thanks to the dwarves' natural affinity for Earth Magic, they had no trouble cultivating it, and soon the barren little town turned into a well-known orchard.

After that, Arim set on many travels to find the best possible artisans to turn the fruits into alcohol, all while fulfilling quests left and right for the adventurer's guild.

"Nowadays, Arim is considered a model adventurer. She would've done anything to help people in need and was adored by all. Thanks to the many connections she made along the way, the once barren town turned into a prosperous fruit orchard. However..." the woman said, marking a pause to catch our attention, and the three of us leaned forward, hanging on her every word. "Arim's biggest enemy turned out to be her own brethren—the dwarves themselves! It is well known that we dwarves love a

good drink, and so, the people started drinking their own wares under the guise of ‘sampling’ them!”

The woman’s joke elicited hearty laughter from the tourists, and we also couldn’t help but chuckle. She then continued her story. After many twists and turns, the dwarves finally found the ideal brewing method for their fruits. Not only that, but they even made all the distillation equipment themselves using the metals left in the only part of the mine that hadn’t collapsed. All that was left was to find a way to age the alcohol. The dwarves decided to use bricks to reinforce the little mine and started storing their barrels there. As it was dark, cool, and moderately humid, it made for a perfect place to age the brew. And so this “mine brandy” became the town’s specialty, and was now considered a key part of the town’s history and development.

“Our mine brandy was only made possible by centuries of history and development,” the woman concluded. “The next time you enjoy its mellow fruitiness, please try to think about the history of this town and what went into its creation.”

After she was done with her story, the dwarf tour guide showed us around different places in town: the liquor store, where prototypes of the first ever distillation devices were debuted, the glasswork studio where they made bottles to store the alcohol in, sweets and alcohol stores, etcetera, etcetera, all while gesturing animatedly as she told us about the different stores.

“And lastly, let me quote our famous adventurer, Arim: ‘My dreams have come true. I hope you will enjoy our amazing town.’”

The woman concluded by telling us that she didn’t know what exactly Arim’s dream had been or if Arim had anticipated such a surge in tourism, but that she hoped that we were having a good time in the former mining town.

“Lady Witch, are you crying?” Teto asked me.

“Huh? No way,” I muttered, surprised by my own reaction. I pulled the brim of my hat down to hide my face and gratefully accepted the handkerchief Beretta was offering me.

When the woman quoted Arim, I felt as if I had heard those words in her voice.

“Teto, Beretta, I have a feeling these words were meant for us.”

“Teto agrees! So both of Arim’s dreams came true, huh? She became an adventurer and she managed to make the town rich again!”

“Lady Arim must’ve lived a very fulfilling life,” Beretta said softly.

The three of us looked up at the bronze statue of Arim. I could only imagine what kind of life she had lived based on that tour guide’s words, but I thought it was a little unfair for Arim to have left a message specifically for us. Was I getting more sentimental with age?

“All right, let’s stop the sentimental talk here. We’ve got lots of things to see!” I said, clapping my hands to switch gears.

“Teto wants to go eat something yummy!”

“Master, if you would allow me, I would like to go look at glass utensils. The hot season is approaching, after all.”

“I want to try fruit picking and maybe even go visit the mine where they store the booze.”

I had momentarily been swayed by nostalgia, but I quickly got myself together and focused on enjoying the present and making new memories. Then, the next time I visited this town, I could marvel over how much it had changed, all while trying to look for things and places that had stayed the same so I would be able to reminisce about the past.

AFTERWORD

To new readers and old readers, hello. This is Aloha Zachou.

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.

The previous volume was so well received, I was a little worried about not being able to meet your expectations this time around, but I did my best. For this volume, I decided to make some changes to the web version. One of them was incorporating a "main character." See, unlike volume 3, which had Selene, there had been no "main character" in the fourth part of the web novel. And so, I decided to expand Beretta's story and number of appearances to make her a central character in this volume. As a result, the story took a slightly different direction than the web novel.

Furthermore, I made a few changes and improvements to some parts of the stories in order for it to have a better structure and be easier to read. As a result, the word count of this volume exceeds that of the previous volumes and the book is much denser, but I still hope you found it enjoyable.

As a side note, I was actually in the process of writing the fourth part of the web novel when the first volume came out, and Beretta actually makes a small appearance in the prologue. One of the perks of being a web author is being able to publish things while already knowing more or less exactly what's going to happen in the next volumes!

The unaging witch Chise and her companion Teto now have a new friend, Beretta. I'd love for you to keep watching over them as they continue exploring the world and occasionally relaxing in the Wasteland of Nothingness.

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 STORIES

WITH SWEET AND SOUR JAM

“Master, Lady Teto, what are in those baskets?” Beretta asked us when Teto and I returned from our stroll around the Wasteland of Nothingness.

The baskets we were carrying were brimming with fresh raspberries; their tart aroma filled the air.

“We stumbled across some wild raspberries, so we decided to pick them,” I replied.

It had been several decades since vegetation started sprouting in the wasteland. To this day, I couldn't pinpoint the exact reason for this miraculous growth: did the seeds I had made with my creation magic finally sprout? Or maybe it was the ones Teto had mixed in the soil with her magic? For all I knew, the seeds that had started growing might've even been mixed with the feces of the birds that occasionally flew above the barrier. Either way, plants started growing, and some, like the raspberry bushes and a few grapevines, had started bearing fruit. Not only that, but we even had some fruit trees growing now: apples, oranges, peaches... Soon, we'd be able to harvest them too.

“The raspberries are so sour my face got all scrunched up when I ate some!” Teto said, squeezing her eyes shut to mimic the expression she made.

Well, we might have raspberries now, but they were, as I said, wild raspberries. And, well, they didn't *exactly* taste good.

“What do you plan on doing with the raspberries, Master, Lady Teto?” Beretta inquired.

“Well, they're too sour to eat as is, so I was thinking of turning them into jam,” I said.

“We're gonna put lots and lots of sugar in them!” Teto chirped.

“Please let me help you,” Beretta offered.

With our baskets full of raspberries, we headed to the kitchen. The three of us washed

the raspberries, picked out any spoiled ones, and dumped the rest into a pot. We covered them with sugar, added a bit of lemon juice and, when the fruits started letting out moisture, we hung the pot over a low flame and let it simmer for a while, occasionally scooping out the foam with a ladle. Meanwhile, Beretta was preparing some scones for us to enjoy with the jam.

"It's starting to smell so good!" Teto exclaimed, a blissful look on her face.

The tartness of the raspberries along with the sweetness of the sugar and the delightful aroma of baked goods filled the kitchen with a mouthwatering scent. As Beretta and I saw Teto's happy expression, we couldn't help but smile, and a warm feeling spread through my chest.

Not too long after, the jam had reached the perfect consistency, and we carefully poured it into jars that we had sterilized by heating them over the fire.

"Master, the scones are ready as well."

"Let's taste them then, shall we?"

We put the scones on plates and prepared some black tea to complement them before sampling our work.

"The jam is so glossy and such a beautiful color, it looks like a precious gem!" Teto marveled, holding up a spoonful of jam before spreading it on her scone. "I'm digging in!" She took a bite of her scone and instantly hummed in delight. "It's so sweet and tart, I love it!"

"I'll try it too," I said, biting into my scone before nodding in approval. "The texture is really nice; there are still bits of raspberries, and even some seeds."

I really enjoyed smashing the raspberry bits under my tongue, and the subtle crunchiness of the seeds added a nice touch to the jam.

Beretta's eyes closed in reflection as she sampled the jam. "This jam would make a wonderful topping for a no-bake cheesecake," she suggested.

"Oooh, you can eat it like that too? That sounds so yummy, Teto wanna try!" Teto chirped, an expression of pure bliss on her face as she imagined what that would taste like. "Ah! But if Teto eats all of the jam, there won't be any left to put on the

cheesecake!" she exclaimed, glancing at how much jam was left. She had been wanting to go for seconds, but she ended up stopping her hand in midair, torn between enjoying more of the delicious jam and saving it for later. But despite her best efforts, her gluttony got the best of her, and she couldn't resist eating a second scone anyway.

The next morning, she spread the jam on her toast, and the morning after that, and the morning after that... Within a week, we had completely run out of jam.

Fortunately for us, there were still many wild fruits growing in the wasteland, and, since we were the only ones living here, it meant no one else would get to eat them. And so, gathering fresh fruits and processing them into all sorts of yummy goodies became Teto's, Beretta's, and my daily little pleasure.

THE THINGS WE DISLIKE

It was quite late at night, and Teto, Beretta, and I were sitting in front of the fireplace, sipping on mugs of hot milk Beretta had prepared for us. We were chitchatting about our day and plans for tomorrow when, all of a sudden, Beretta asked us a rather unexpected question.

"Master, Lady Teto, I think I have a good understanding of your hobbies, but I was wondering if there were things that you particularly disliked," she said.

I took a sip of hot milk, trying to think of something I didn't like.

"I can't really think of anything," I said, my expression remaining unchanged.

But Teto's next words took me by surprise, and a sudden chill ran down my spine.

"Lady Witch doesn't like swimming!" she chirped.

"T-Teto!" I exclaimed, outraged.

Beretta was taken aback at my sudden outburst, as I was usually known for being calm and composed.

I cleared my throat and explained, "Teto's right, I... I can't swim. But I can use both

Flight Magic and Barrier Magic, so it's not like it's hindering my everyday life."

"Teto thinks that side of you is very cute, Lady Witch!" Teto said, and I threw her a glare.

How dare she reveal my biggest weakness!

"I am rather surprised you can't swim, Master," Beretta said, staring at me without blinking. I felt a little embarrassed under her gaze, so I awkwardly took another sip of hot milk, avoiding eye contact.

"And by the way, what Teto hates the most in the whole world is when Lady Witch is in danger!" Teto said.

"That does not surprise me," Beretta said.

"Really? Lemme think of something else then!" She hummed, trying to come up with something that she disliked that was a little less predictable. "Ah, I know! Teto haaates it when goblins and orcs and other monsters smile! It's so icky!"

"I don't think there's a single woman in the world who doesn't hate that," I pointed out.

Goblins and orcs tended to look at women with creepy, lustful gazes, which always made my skin crawl.

"What about you, Master? I know a lot of people feel disgusted at insects, for instance, but how do you feel about them?" Beretta asked me.

I brought a hand to my chin and pondered over the question.

"Well, I like gardening and I spend a lot of time in the forest when I'm working on quests, so I don't *mind* most insects, I guess," I said, before remembering certain, um, *incidents* from the past. "There are still some that I don't like, but I can just use my magic to deal with those."

I could either burn them with Fire Magic, or use *Psychokinesis* to throw them away where I'd never see them ever again. And since I could make potions, I also had the option to create insect repellent, ensuring no creepy crawlies could approach me. I had myriad options to deal with insects, so I didn't tend to panic around them.

"I see. So to sum it up, you can not swim, and you also feel disgusted by things most humans dislike," Beretta summarized.

"What about you, Beretta? Are there things you dislike?" I asked, feeling it was only fair for her to share her dislikes as well.

"Things I dislike..." she repeated, pensively. "As an attendant doll, I do not really possess such things. However, if I had to say, it would be entering sleep mode, as it blocks my sensory perceptions."

"You dislike sleeping? That's unusual," I noted, and I could tell Teto was surprised too.

"I sometimes find myself wondering if I am currently dreaming and if you and Lady Teto will still be here when I wake up," Beretta explained.

Teto and I looked at each other and nodded in unison, each of us grabbing one of Beretta's hands.

"Then, how about we sleep together tonight? You might feel more at ease this way," I offered.

"I'm lending you my spot next to Lady Witch, but you have to let me sleep on your other side, okay? So the three of us can cuddle!"

"Master, Lady Teto..."

"All righty then, now that that's decided, let's continue this conversation in bed, shall we?"

It took us a little longer to convince her, but Beretta finally agreed to sleep with Teto and me that night. From that day onward, Beretta had overcome one of her dislikes.



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Making Magic: The Sweet Life of a Witch Who Knows an Infinite MP Loophole Volume
4

by Aloha Zachou

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