



Making Magic

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

Aloha Zachou
illust. Tetubuta



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Chapter 0: Christmas in the Other World: The Witch's Influence

As the end of the year approached, Teto and I headed to a certain country far from the Witch of Creation's Forest to take care of some personal business. As we strolled down the streets, I took in the festive ornaments adorning the surroundings.

"Look at this crowd. It reminds me of the Christmas season back in my old world," I commented.

"Teto always gets super excited when it's this time of the year!" Teto chirped.

The streets sparkled with Christmas lights crafted from magic stones, and the shops were bustling with products for the Winter Solstice Festival, which was the talk of the town. Couples and families filled the streets, their laughter echoing in the crisp air.

"I remember when every region used to have its own winter traditions. But nowadays, everyone celebrates the Winter Solstice, huh?" I noted.

Teto nodded. "It's everywhere now!"

About a hundred years ago, a bunch of merchants all around the world worked together to try to boost sales during winter by coming up with the Winter Solstice Festival—a bit like Valentine's Day in my previous world. Before, the winter celebrations were all religious events to offer prayers to the gods, spirits, and the deceased, but they had gradually evolved into more secular forms, losing their spiritual essence as they homogenized across the planet.

"Look, Lady Witch! A Winter Solstice Bear!"



The Winter Solstice Bears were pretty much this world's equivalent of Santa Claus. According to a legend from a specific region, brown bear spirits emerged from the forest during the Winter Solstice season. They would leave basic necessities—such as food, firewood, and medicinal herbs—in front of the houses of good-natured people to aid them in surviving the winter. Simultaneously, they would confront and thwart any unsavory individuals attempting to harm the forest. Thus, parents always told their children to behave well if they wanted to be on the Bears' "nice list" and get presents for the Winter Solstice.

"I still can't believe your bear golems became the Winter Solstice mascots."

Because, of course, they had; the Winter Solstice Bear legend had first emerged in one of the regions surrounding the Witch of Creation's Forest. Apparently, the bear golems Teto had created to monitor and look after the forest would occasionally sneak out to the nearby villages and offer them supplies during particularly harsh winters. As the years passed, the legend spread worldwide.

"They're always super excited at this time of the year!" Teto said.

"Well, that's not too surprising; they get to play with all the kids, after all."

This whole Winter Solstice Bear tradition got reverse-imported back to the Witch of Creation's Forest; during winter, the bear golems donned red hats and clothes, wandering through the forest to distribute presents to the children.

As we strolled through the town, immersing ourselves in the Winter Solstice Festival ambience, I noticed something familiar on the screen of the magic communication device down the street.

"That's one of our World Trees, isn't it?" I said.

"Whoa, it looks pretty from there!"

Now that magic-powered cameras were available for purchase anywhere in the world, people could take pictures of anything and everything. We didn't allow outsiders deep into the forest, so I assumed someone must've taken that picture from right outside. Hundreds of years had passed since we planted those trees, and they were now so large one could see them clearly even from

afar. Judging by the scenery, it appeared the photo was snapped during winter: the World Trees stood tall, dominating the leafless forest, their lush leaves emitting a faint glow, with what seemed like colorful orbs dancing around. These were actually spirits, attracted by the World Trees' rich mana.

A voice emanated from the device. "This spot near the Witch of Creation's Forest is a particularly popular sightseeing attraction during winter. You can admire the beautiful, lush World Trees as well as the natural festive lights created by the spirits gathering around them. And if you go there on the day of the Winter Solstice, you'll even get to attend the Stargazing Festival—an event that has been celebrated for centuries in the Witch of Creation's Forest! I highly recommend you choose it as your next winter date or sightseeing spot!"

Magic communication devices had evolved significantly since I first created them, with the latest version functioning much like a TV.

A little smile graced my lips as I listened to the anchor's explanation. "The Stargazing Festival, huh? When was the last time we attended?" I muttered.

"Around a hundred years ago, maybe?" Teto said.

"Oh, you're right. We stopped going when it turned into a holiday tourism thing."

The Stargazing Festival we organized every winter in the forest had been around for way longer than the Winter Solstice and used to be a completely separate thing. At first, it had just been an occasion for everyone to gather together and eat good food around a bonfire while doing a purification dance to guide the souls of the deceased to the sky. However, the bigger the population of the forest got, the larger the scale of the festival became, and the more traditions were born out of it. For instance, the inhabitants started installing evil-repelling bells on their front doors and ringing them on the day of the Winter Solstice to pray for good health for the upcoming year. Over the years, this became a tradition of the Winter Solstice Festival as well.

As I reminisced, a wave of nostalgia swept over me, and I pondered how people celebrated the Stargazing Festival nowadays. "Maybe we should go this year," I suggested.

"Good idea, Lady Witch! Teto wants to go check it out too!"

We hadn't attended the Stargazing Festival in a hot minute; it seemed that there was always something coming up around this time of the year and, being immortal and all, we always told ourselves that we'd go "next year." But it had been so long since the last time we went, I was curious to see how it had changed.

"All righty, let's make sure to keep our calendars open for the Stargazing Festival this year."

"Yep! Teto's sooo excited to spend one more winter with you, Lady Witch!"

We resumed our walk, wandering through the lively streets that were abuzz with anticipation for the Winter Solstice Festival. We did this every year, experiencing all of the new and subtle changes in the atmosphere.

This is the story of how the witch came up with a festival to guide the dead to the sky, as per a certain goddess's request. It is also the story of the witch and her guardian preparing to resume their travels and entrust the land to their people.

Chapter 1: The World Trees Pierce the Sky

A year had passed since we finished relocating the refugees who had lost their homes in the stampede. After taking in three thousand refugees, the Wasteland of Nothingness was officially renamed the Witch of Creation's Forest. The once-barren land now possessed all of the necessary resources to sustain all of these people.

"Lady Witch, how is the barrier?" Teto asked me as I put a hand against the large barrier surrounding the region.

"It's much weaker than before. At the rate things are going, it should disappear within the next thirty years or so."

That barrier had been erected by the gods to cut the land off from the rest of the world. With our trees producing so much mana—which was then consumed by the demons and mythical beasts, multiplying its density—the forest had a much higher mana concentration than the rest of the world. This led to the great barrier slowly getting weaker and weaker, to the point where some of its functions had already stopped working. The only thing it did now was ward off uninvited individuals, but thanks to Teto's ever-growing bear golem security net, even that might soon become unnecessary.

"Let's head home, shall we?" I said.

"Roger!"

I straddled my staff and had Teto sit behind me, and the two of us soared into the sky. Looking down, I could see wild critters darting through the trees in the forest. Most of them had either migrated from the other side of the barrier voluntarily or were the descendants of the animals we had brought in when we were trying to rebuild the wasteland's ecosystem. Different areas of the forest were separated by rivers, springs, and plains, with the occasional settlement visible in the clearings. In contrast, the center of the region was densely forested, with one enormous tree standing out conspicuously among the others.

“It’s really gotten huge, hasn’t it?”

“All of the World Trees have merged together!” Teto chirped.

That’s right: in the one year we spent in the refugee camp in Ischea, the forest had undergone a drastic transformation. Many years ago, I had planted World Tree saplings to generate mana in the wasteland and built the forest around them. However, in the past year, the World Trees—which were already much taller and thicker than the regular trees—had somehow fused together into a colossal, one-hundred-meter-tall tree. On top of that, the ratatosks and other mythical beasts had helped even more World Trees sprout, and these too had merged together, creating several more giant trees.

“World Trees sure have a weird growth process, though,” I noted. Well, this *was* a fantasy world—I supposed I shouldn’t be too surprised.

“It’s so impressive how big it got!”

I nodded and said, “Let’s stop here for a bit.”

“Roger!”

I halted my staff right above one of the highest branches of the World Tree at the center of the forest, which was the biggest and oldest of all the World Trees, and the two of us hopped down. The branch was so thick it didn’t even budge under our weight. Sitting down, I took in the forest landscape. I hadn’t stopped here for any particular reason other than to enjoy the scenery with Teto by my side.

Most creatures never flew or climbed this high, so it was just the two of us up there; the only sound came from the leaves rustling in the wind. We stayed there for a bit, taking in deep breaths of fresh forest air and admiring the landscape in silence, when all of a sudden, a growl came from Teto’s stomach.

“Teto’s a bit hungry,” she confessed.

“I can tell, yeah,” I said with a little chuckle. “Let’s head back to the mansion, then.”

And so we did just that.

“Welcome home, Master, Lady Teto,” the mechanoids greeted us as soon as

we walked in.

“Hi guys, we’re back!” Teto chirped. “What kind of snack did you make for us?”

“We have prepared custard pudding using milk from the gaurens, eggs, and honey,” one of the maids explained.

“Master, there are some reports for you to go through regarding the newly established settlements. We have put them in the office,” another one told me.

I nodded. “Noted. I’ll go take a look at them later.”

My workload had skyrocketed ever since we took in the three thousand refugees. While I could technically foist it all onto Beretta and the other mechanoids, I refused to do that. I wanted them to have time to rest and find hobbies to keep themselves occupied, just like regular humans. After all, they had evolved to become real people—I could hardly treat them like soulless machines anymore.

To alleviate the burden on Beretta’s and the others’ shoulders, we took in children above a certain age as apprentice servants and had them work in the mansion. Of course, we made sure they received a proper education. This went smoothly: not only did Beretta and the other maids have a lot more free time on their hands now, but the kids *excelled*.

As the two of us strolled through the mansion, we stumbled across a group of children receiving instructions from one of the maids.

“Ah, welcome home Master, Lady Teto!” a little girl said when she spotted us.

“Hi, Naia. You’re not calling us ‘big sis Chise’ and ‘big sis Teto’ anymore, huh? Pity.”

“Teto’s a bit sad.”

“U-Uh... I’m sorry!” the girl exclaimed, looking flustered.

Naia, the little devilkin girl we had met at the refugee camp, was now working alongside the other kids at the mansion. She always had the funniest reactions, which made me want to tease her even more.

“No, *I’m* sorry, I was just messing with you,” I said, opening my magic bag and

taking out a little pouch. “Here, have some candy and get back to work.”

“Come, everyone! We have candy for you!” Teto announced to the other children.

We resumed our walk to the kitchen, handing out candy to all the kids we saw along the way. I really hoped that we’d manage to raise these children into knowledgeable workers able to look after the different settlements in the forest, as well as exchange with the outside world.

We swung by the kitchen to get some custard pudding and headed to the office. Beretta was already there, taking care of some office work along with a few maids, demons, and other refugees who had volunteered to help us with all of the paperwork. All of them had experience working on administrative tasks and were pretty helpful to have around.

“Welcome back, Master,” Beretta greeted me. “What brings you here? Today is supposed to be your day off.”

“Hey, Beretta. It’s snack time, so we brought you guys some pudding,” I said.

“Time for a break!” Teto added.

As soon as the words left our mouths, the office staff looked up from their desks and shot pleading looks at Beretta.

“Understood. You went out of your way to bring it to us, after all. You may take a break, everyone,” she told the staff.

“Thank you very much, Miss Beretta!” they replied in perfect sync as they stood up and started preparing some tea and plating the pudding.

A smile curled on my lips as I watched them.

“Master, Lady Teto, please have some tea,” one of the maids offered, setting down two cups in front of us.

“Thanks. I’m digging in!”

“It looks so yummy!” Teto chirped.

I brought my spoon to my lips, and my eyes instinctively closed in delight when the smooth yet rich custard flavor hit my tongue. Beside me, Teto was in

a similar state. The slightly bitter taste of the caramel mixed with the sweetness of the vanilla custard was nothing short of heavenly. Whenever my mouth got tired of the sugary taste of the pudding, I took a sip of black tea to reset my palate, ready to savor the flavors once again. Needless to say, I devoured the sweet treat in the blink of an eye.

“That was delicious,” I commented before turning to Beretta. “Beretta, how are the new recruits doing?”

“Are they handling their work well?” Teto asked.

The office staff froze mid bite and shot anxious looks at Beretta. I could understand why; after all, if Beretta told me she was dissatisfied with their work, why would I keep them around? This must’ve been the thought that raced through their minds as they waited for Beretta’s answer.

The tense atmosphere lingered until, finally, Beretta spoke. “They are doing well. All of them have their own strengths and weaknesses, and we cannot entrust them with important matters just yet, but I believe it should not take long for them to get there.”

As soon as they heard Beretta’s response, some of the office staff let out quiet sighs of relief, while others discreetly smiled and rejoiced.

“I am especially impressed by Lucas over here,” she said, gesturing at a young human in his midteens. “He is highly educated and handles his tasks with remarkable efficiency.”

I was a bit surprised to see a young man like him working in the office, since most of the human refugees we had taken in were either babies or seniors. Lucas was still in the middle of eating his pudding; when he heard Beretta mention his name, he looked up at us with surprise and hurriedly shoveled the rest of his snack into his mouth.

“Slow down, you’re not in trouble.” I smiled to reassure him. “Well then, keep up the good work, everyone. Careful, though: you’re not allowed to slack off or get cocky just because Beretta complimented you, all right? She’ll notice for sure.”

“Y-Yes!” the office staff all replied at once, finishing off the last of their

pudding to recharge their batteries before resuming their work.

“The maids told me we’ve received reports from the new settlements; can you take them out for me?” I asked Beretta.

She nodded and grabbed a thin stack of papers on one of the desks. “Here they are.”

I quickly scanned all of the documents. The forest was undergoing a period of transition as all of the newly arrived refugees fumbled around, trying to get used to their new lives. It seemed that things were going pretty smoothly—at least according to the reports. The corners of my mouth lifted up into a relieved smile.

“Lady Witch? Are you happy with the reports?” Teto asked me.

“Very. With the way things are going, we’ll soon be able to fully implement the council system we’ve been envisioning.”

I was technically the ruler of this land, but I had spent the past year away from home and helping the refugees, leaving all of the administrative tasks to Beretta and the others. And to be completely honest, I didn’t have the slightest interest in ruling over anyone; all I wanted was to keep on enjoying my sweet, relaxed life with my friend. For that reason, I came up with the idea of forming a council with representatives of all of the forest’s different races and having them take care of the administrative tasks.

“Reign but not rule,” I muttered.

We had already started laying the groundwork for the council, which would have Beretta and the other maids at its core. This would lift a huge weight off of my shoulders, and I was looking forward to it.

However, just as that thought crossed my mind, there was a ruckus outside of the mansion’s main entrance.

“We request an audience with Lady Witch!”

Chapter 2: To the Demons, Strength Is Everything

“What’s that?” I asked, rushing over to the window along with Beretta and Teto.

Meanwhile, the office staff were all frozen in shock.

Looking out the window, I could see a fair number of youngish demons—mostly devilkin, oni-kin, and minotaurs—insisting that the maid at the door let them in.

“Master only receives visitors who have requested an appointment in advance. Please leave,” she said. “You are scaring the children.”

“Listen, girlie, we ain’t got time to deal with you. We need to talk to Lady Witch about this ‘council’ thing!” one of the demons said.

Behind him, his comrades echoed, “That’s right!”

“Then please fill out a report and send it to Master.”

The maid wasn’t budging, and I could see sparks of tension forming in the air.

“We should go see what’s going on before they explode,” I said. “Beretta, Teto, let’s go.”

“Roger!”

“Understood, Master.”

We hurriedly ran down the corridor and exited the mansion through the front door.

I quickly raised my hand to cast a soundproofing barrier around the demons, the maid, and us, and said, “You guys want to see me, right? Well, here I am.”

“You’re going to startle the children!” Teto chided them.

“Lady Witch!” one of the demons exclaimed, a grin splitting across his face. “There is something we need you to reconsider. Please!”

The demons’ eyes were fixed on Teto and me, almost as if Beretta and the

maid were invisible.

“Fine, I’ll hear you guys out,” I said before turning to the maid. “You can head back inside now.”

“Understood, Master.” She bowed and returned to her tasks.

Switching my attention back onto the demons, I asked, “I’ve heard you guys yelling about the council system. What’s the matter? You’re not satisfied with it?”

“Not at all!” one of them replied, outraged. “We want to report to you directly. We don’t mind cooperating with those equal to us, but why do we have to negotiate with those *beneath* us?!”

“And we’ve heard you wanna have that little maid girlie be the head of that ‘council’ or whatever it’s called. We won’t accept that!” another added.

“Damn right! Why do you surround yourself with weaklings anyway? You’re so strong, you should have an entourage full of strong or good-looking people, not *children*!”

They kept at it for a few more minutes, telling me in great detail why they would never accept the council idea.

“So, basically, you’re all right with reporting to Teto and me because we’re strong, but don’t want to cooperate with the others, as you don’t know their strength and you’d much rather order them around. You also think that my attendants aren’t anything special and that they shouldn’t have such a high position in the forest’s hierarchy. Is that right?” I summarized.

“Succinctly put, yes.”

At least these guys don’t beat around the bush, I thought.

A lot of the demons were fervent believers in a “might makes right” philosophy and, for that reason, refused to report to or cooperate with people weaker than them. I had observed a similar sentiment among a few of the settlement representatives, but they hadn’t been the majority. Teto and I had participated in the stampede, so they respected us, and the same went for the Great Elder, the godkin, and the dragonkin. But Beretta and the other

mechanoids had mostly been working behind the scenes, so the demons were still skeptical about their abilities.

“The representatives of the settlements have all agreed to the council system, though,” I pointed out.

“Well, we don’t! We have no interest in reporting to people whose only merit is that they’re close to you!”

So I might have managed to convince the representatives of the settlements with my ideas, but the young people still weren’t okay with it, huh?

“Then if Beretta proves to you that she’s strong, you’ll agree to cooperate with her?” Teto asked.

The demons all burst into laughter. “Ha ha ha! Sure! If that girlie is stronger than us, then we’ll listen to her!”

It seemed that they had taken Teto’s suggestion as a joke. I was seeing red; they were making fun of Beretta, and I didn’t like it.

“Then how about you fight her?” I suggested. “If she wins, we’ll proceed with the council, if not, we won’t. Beretta, is that okay with you?”

“If that is your command, Master,” she replied with a polite bow.

Instantly, the demons became serious once more. “For real? You’ll cancel the project?”

“Yes. Well, if you win, that is,” I said, a provocative smile curling on my lips.

They enthusiastically agreed to the fight.

“All right then, let’s move to a more suitable place for the battle. Let’s see... The maids’ training grounds perhaps?”

“There’s nothing there, so you can go all out!” Teto added.

And so the three of us led the demons to the transfer gate and headed to the plain we used as our training grounds. The ground was bare in places, the uppermost layers having been stripped off during our many hours of training. Beretta used telekinesis to retrieve her adamantium gauntlets from her own shadow, put them on, and took up a combat stance. The mechanoid race was

created after Beretta, who was still an attendant doll back then, merged with a dark spirit. This had granted them the ability to use advanced Dark Magic, including telekinesis and gravity spells, along with the capacity to hide objects in shadows.

“Please come at me in whichever order you prefer. You may attack me all at once,” she declared.

“Beretta, you sounded so cool right now! Good luuuck!” Teto cheered.

“You’re using your gauntlets, huh?” I noted. “You’re armed to the teeth.”

So she wants to show them the full extent of her strength, I mused, unable to suppress a wicked grin. I could tell that the demons were surprised by the sudden change in Beretta’s aura; their own smiles quickly faltered.

“Come!” Beretta urged them.

“U-Uuuoooh!” One of the demons lunged forward, swinging his weapon and attacking in earnest. Beretta easily blocked his attack with her gauntlets.

“You have good momentum, but you should always think of a backup plan in case your first attack gets intercepted,” Beretta lectured him. She grabbed at his weapon and pulled it, throwing the demon off-balance and making him roll to the ground with a pained cry.

“Who’s next? Come at me together!”

“Ooooooh!” This time, three demons rushed her, each from a different direction.

Beretta dodged all of their attacks at the last second, occasionally using her gauntlets to block some of the hits as she prepared for a counterattack. One by one, she grabbed their arms, threw them off-balance, and swept their legs out, making them tumble to the ground.

“Try to stop my attack with those skinny arms of yours!” a young oni-kin man roared as he threw his club at Beretta.

The force of his attack made the weapon spin in midair, but Beretta effortlessly bent backward under it. But the oni-kin wasn’t done: seeing as Beretta’s focus was on the club, he quickly closed the gap between them, and

was about to bring his fist down on her, when...

“Good strike. However, your form could use some improvement,” Beretta said, stopping the man’s fist with her hand.

Her form was still perfectly intact as she grabbed the oni-kin’s arm and sent him flying.

“No way... We couldn’t win with numbers, and she easily defeated the strongest of us too...” one of the demons muttered in shock.

“Surely, she won’t be able to stop my spell! *Flare Burst!*” a young devilkin man chanted, extending both hands in front of him and creating a massive fireball. It split into countless flaming projectiles, hurtling towards Beretta.

“Magic, hm? Not bad. However...”

Beretta raised a hand. In the next instant, eight short swords flew from the shadow beneath her feet, intercepting the incoming barrage of fiery missiles.

“I have spent years coming up with methods to protect Master. Such a weak attack is not enough!”

“Oooh, I almost forgot she had those,” I noted. “I wonder if she’s been practicing that technique with the other maids.”

“The range of my telekinesis is quite long too,” she said, launching one of her swords at the demon who had cast the spell and stopping right in front of his face.

“W-We can’t win against her...”

“We’re not done yet! Keep the pressure up; eventually she’ll run out of energy!”

“Right! If she uses up all of her mana, she’ll be helpless!”

If they couldn’t win against Beretta through numbers, close-quarters combat, or long-range attacks, then their only hope was a war of attrition. An amused smile curled on Beretta’s lips as they lunged at her.

“Impressive willpower! Show me your determination!”

“Looks like she’s having fun,” I noted.

“Teto wants to go play too!” Teto pouted next to me.

“Just sit back and enjoy the show this time.”

It was already obvious who would win. Still, the demons refused to let up, and Beretta was clearly having fun turning this battle into a teachable moment. I found the spectacle quite amusing.

Finally, after three hours...

“Haah...haaah... D-Damn it! We lost!”

In the end, the demons hadn’t been able to exhaust Beretta’s mana. Instead, they were the ones lying on the ground, completely out of breath.

“You’ve considerably improved your coordination. Keep up the effort,” Beretta told them.

Despite fighting for hours, she didn’t have a single hair out of place, looking as refined as ever.

“There is one last thing I would like you to see. It is a little too dangerous to use against other people, so I have refrained from using it during our fight.”

The demons slowly sat up, looking at Beretta with quizzical looks on their faces; Teto and I did the same.

“Haaa!” Beretta thrust her right fist towards the sky, emitting a shock wave that instantly dispersed the clouds overhead.



“I directed it upward to avoid damaging the ground or causing harm to anyone, but I have become quite adept at it,” she said lightly, as if she hadn’t altered the weather with a single punch.

In contrast, the demons were at an absolute loss for words. By now, they had understood that Beretta was a force to be reckoned with, way above their league.

“Whoa! Beretta, that was so cool! How did you do it?” Teto asked excitedly.

“She probably released all the shock she had absorbed with her gauntlets all at once,” I surmised.

Beretta’s adamantium gauntlets—the Protector of the Earth—could absorb any shock waves and redirect the force in whatever direction she wished. She had spent three hours blocking attacks from the demons, which had been enough to bring forth a shock wave that could split the sky.

“Good work out there, Beretta,” I said, walking to the little group. “So, what do you guys think? Is Beretta strong enough?”

“Y-Yeah... We won’t oppose your ‘council’ project anymore or go against Lady Beretta from now on.”

The demons all scrambled to their knees and bowed deeply in front of Beretta.

“You’re always welcome to let us know when you’re not pleased with something,” I said with a wry smile. “But you disrespected Beretta just because you arbitrarily decided she wasn’t strong enough, despite never having seen her fight. I couldn’t let it fly.”

“If you have a good reason to not want something, Lady Witch will hear you out!” Teto assured.

Well, I couldn’t anticipate the forest’s residents to be perfectly rational actors. This simply wasn’t how humans worked; quite the opposite actually. Emotions, such as the desire to follow the strongest or the wish to repay someone for their help, were what drove people to act.

“Got it... We’re not really the brainy type, but, next time, we’ll try to give it a

bit more thought before coming to find you.”

“Good to hear. I’m looking forward to seeing you guys again, then,” I replied with a smile.

The demons’ mini rebellion had come to an end. In all fairness, they hadn’t been the first ones to oppose the council idea: when I had run it by the settlements’ representatives, a couple of them had similar reactions; just like this time, it had taken Beretta making a little show of strength to convince them. The demons headed back to their settlements, where they received a warm welcome and were comforted by those who had already experienced Beretta’s prowess firsthand.

Chapter 3: The People under the Witch's Protection

The forest's council was finally established—although not without some trouble—and their first meeting was a success. I had decided to sit this one out to really teach the council members how to make decisions without my input; currently, I was reading the report Beretta had written.

"I see. So you guys mostly talked about expanding the variety of goods we export," I summarized when I was done.

"Yes. We plan on adding honey produced by the queen bees and fabric woven by the arachnes to our trade inventory," Beretta explained.

Melissae and arachnes were two matriarchal demon races. The melissae's specialty was using flower nectar and pollen to make honey, and the arachnes all lived in tree houses; needless to say, the forest was the perfect environment for them. As it turned out, the honeybees we had introduced to the forest a few years back were a very helpful addition, as the melissae relied on them to gather pollen to make high-grade honey and beeswax. The same went for the red-eyed spiders one of the maids had insisted we start raising—which had since then evolved into albino spiders, a completely new subspecies, thanks to the cherry blossom tree's mana. The arachnes used a mix of the string they produced themselves, webs from the albino spiders, and cocoons from the silkworms to weave glossy cloth that they then dyed using natural pigments. Every single woman living in the forest dreamed of having clothes made from that fabric.

"Honey would do well as a luxury item. And the arachnes' fabric has a nice feel to it; you never want to stop petting it," I noted.

Beretta and the maids had already made several dishes and desserts using the queen bees' honey, as well as pajamas with the arachnes' silky fabric. Teto seemed to like the latter as much as I did, as she was always rubbing her face against them.

"The queen bees' honey is really sweet and yummy!" Teto chimed in. "But the

oni people were saying they wanted to use it to make alcohol. Would there still be enough?”

The “oni people” she was talking about were the oni-kin, a humanoid demon race. The men were all burly and strong, while the women looked almost exactly like regular humans if you ignored the horns on their heads. Most oni-kin men were mercenaries, as their superhuman strength allowed them to make short work of most monsters. The women stayed home for the most part, looking after the village and brewing alcohol for supplemental income. Teto was looking forward to tasting the oni-kin women’s mead, so she was worried there wouldn’t be enough honey left if we started exporting it.

“That question came up during the meeting,” Beretta said. “For now, we plan to prioritize local demand by treating it as a luxury item and only trading small quantities. The melissae have also insisted on sending you honey on the regular.”

Apparently, the maids had used the melissae’s honey to make the custard pudding from last time. Teto and I almost drooled thinking back on how delicious it had been.

“This has caused a bit of a commotion among the representatives of the other races. They all want to send you things too,” Beretta added.

I hadn’t been expecting that. “Make sure to tell them not to push themselves too hard just to load us up with gifts,” I told Beretta, feeling slightly exasperated.

The melissae and arachnes were just doing what they were good at; there was no need for the other tribes to risk their health by copying them.

“Well, sounds like the demons are doing well. What about the humans?” I asked.

There were around a thousand humans living in the forest, and they could pretty much be divided into two categories. First were children who had been left to die by their former communities during the stampede for being mixed-race, ill, or too young to pull their weight. There were about three hundred of them. The other seven hundred were elderly people who had similarly been left behind for being “useless.” There were a handful of strapping young humans,

but their number was limited. Therefore, the human race didn't have a representative in the Forest; Beretta had taken on that role.

"The children living in the orphanage you built seem to be getting used to their new lives. The elderly folk often teach the ones who cannot work at the mansion about farming and other manual tasks," she told me.

"We see the kids who work at the mansion all the time, but we never get to say hi to the nice grannies and grandpas," Teto pouted.

She had a point; the kids who worked as apprentice maids and butlers came to the mansion on a regular basis thanks to the transfer gates we had installed in all of the settlements, so we crossed paths with them a lot. However, we were so busy that we pretty much never had time to visit the old folks. Teto seemed pretty down about it, which was understandable; she had the sort of nice girl aura that set off indulgent grandparent instincts on sight.

"That's true... We have some free time today; how about we go check on them?" I suggested.

"Teto wanna go!"

Beretta nodded. "Understood."

The three of us took the transfer gate to the human settlement. Cute little old men and old ladies were resting on the porches of their houses, enjoying the sun while bear golems and earthnoids went from house to house distributing food and daily necessities to each of them. Most of the elderly in the forest had bad backs and legs, so the golems and earthnoids helped them move around the little village by carrying them on their backs. All of the earthnoids had similar personalities to Teto, so the older folk were particularly fond of them.

"Hi everyone! We came to hang out!" Teto chirped.

"Hello Teto, sweetie... Oh, my! Lady Witch!" one of the old ladies exclaimed.

One by one, all of the elderly folks living in the settlement barged out of their houses, bowing their heads to me.

"Welcome to our village, Lady Witch. What grants us the honor of your presence today?" the oldest man of the village—who acted as the

representative—asked, his head hanging low.

I sighed inwardly. I had just come to visit them, there was no need to make a big deal out of it. I supposed some things were unavoidable.

“We just came to check on you guys,” I replied. “How’s everyone doing?”

A quick look at the crowd told me that they were all happy and thriving.

“Thanks to you, we can finally take it easy.”

“I didn’t want to simply rely on others for my last few years in this world. Thank you for giving my life a purpose.”

“We’ll never be able to thank you enough for your kindness.”

A fond smile curled on my lips. “Anyway, we’re just going to take a little walk around the village; don’t mind us.”

The elderly folk nodded and returned to their activities, and the three of us resumed our little stroll. But no matter where we went, I could feel them staring at me with reverence, so we made a few stops along the way to exchange pleasantries with them.

Out of the seven hundred elderly folks who had moved into the forest, thirty of them had already passed away in the past year, and I knew it was only a matter of time before the others would reach the end of their journey as well. That’s why I decided to take my time and greet them all one by one, cherishing the moment.

Chapter 4: The Witch's Boarding School

When we were done visiting the human elders, we headed to the boardinghouse next door where all three hundred of the orphans lived. The maids taught the kids who worked at the mansion etiquette and basic life skills—reading, writing, and counting—while their elders next door occasionally came to teach the younger kids other skills. I planned on building a training facility like the one in the orphanage in Apanemis one day so that the kids would have an easier time finding work in the future, but we weren't quite there yet.

When we arrived, the little kids were playing on the playground outside, supervised by a few earthnoids and bear golems.

"Ah, Lady Witch! Hello!"

"Lady Witch, Miss Teto, good afternoon!"

"Thank you for the yummy food and the warm bed!"

"Miss Teto, come play with us again soon, 'kay?"

As soon as they spotted us, the kids rushed over, their faces lighting up with excitement.

Looking around the playground, I spotted a few cù-siths and cat-siths who must've been playing with the kids. Well, they most likely hadn't come here *just* to play; they were here to make sure the kids would be safe, and hey, if they could snack on their mana at the same time, then all the better. Besides, the children loved having the fluffy little critters as their playmates.

"Lady Witch," one of the kids tried to get my attention. "Teach me magic!"

"Aaah, not fair! I wanna learn magic too!"

"Me too! I wanna become super good at magic just like you, Lady Witch!"

"I wanna move the ground like Miss Teto!"

The kids' eager voices overlapped, every single one of them asking me to

teach them how to use magic. I was so taken aback by the sudden request that I didn't know what to do; magic wasn't something that could be learned that easily, but I couldn't outright refuse. That'd break the kids' hearts. I couldn't bring myself to say no to them when they looked at me like I had hung the moon in its place.

"U-Uh... How about we play a little magic game, then?" I offered.

"Teto wants to play too!"

I decided to teach the kids a bit about Mana Control and Mana Perception.

"First of all, let's try to feel the mana. Everyone, join hands and form a circle," I said, and we did just that.

I was standing on one side of the circle, with Teto on the other and around thirty kids between us. We were all set and ready to go.



If you were wondering where Beretta was, she'd gone to discuss the education of the children with one of the maids who worked at the boardinghouse.

"I'm going to let out some mana through my hands, so try to focus on how it feels, okay?"

I channeled a tiny amount of mana through my hands, eliciting surprised little cries from the children as they felt the warmth pass through their palms. My mana flowed seamlessly across the circle until it reached Teto, who absorbed it into her body.

This first little game was a success: the kids all managed to feel my mana.

"How did it feel? A bit surprising, huh?" I asked the kids with a smile. "Next, I'm going to release my mana in small bursts to create a little rhythm. Try to feel it."

I made up a little rhythm in my head and released my mana.

Pam pam pam, pa-pa pam pam.

"Pam pam pam, pa-pa pam pam!" the children sang.

"Good job, everyone. I'm going to make the next one a tiny bit harder, okay?"

Paaam, paaam, papapa-pam!

"Paaam, paaam, papapa-pam!" The children got it right again.

We continued playing like that for a bit longer, and soon the kids were able to manipulate their own mana. I then had them form pairs and play the game with each other. One child would create a rhythm, and their partner had to guess it. They were still young, so even though they could let out some mana, they didn't have a lot to work with, which was why I'd put them in pairs. Later on, they'd teach this little game to the other children, and all of them would work on their Mana Perception and Mana Control in a fun, low-stakes way.

"Let's play another game now," I suggested before raising a finger and chanting, "*Mana Ball!*"

A little clump of mana appeared above my finger. I gave it a little flick, and the

mana ball flew, drawing a parabola in the air until one of the cat-siths jumped and chomped it down midair.

“Mythical beasts love eating these little mana balls. Here, I’ll do it again. C’mon, fetch!” I said, repeating the process. This time, it was a cù-sith who ate it.

“Wooow, it’s so cool!”

“The puppy and the kitty cat ate them!”

“It’s so fun! I wanna do it too!”

The kids focused all of their energy trying to materialize their own mana balls, letting out little grunts as they did.

Mana Ball was a spell I had come up with, taking inspiration from the *Mana Blast* spell, which was basically a shock wave of pure mana. Unlike *Mana Blast*, though, it wasn’t an attack spell—just a fun little trick and a nice snack for the mythical beasts.

“Lady Witch, Teto wants to eat the mana ball too. Can I?” Teto pleaded.

“Sure. *Mana Ball*!”

She chomped it down and let out a blissful hum. “Lady Witch’s mana is the yummiest!” She beamed at me.

I usually used *Charge* whenever Teto needed a mana refill, but it looked like she enjoyed this method too.

After that, I taught some more magic training games to the kids by slightly modifying children’s games from my previous life. We played for the remainder of the afternoon, and when the sun was about to set, one of the maids who worked at the boardinghouse came to take the children home.

“Bye-bye, Lady Witch, Miss Teto!”

“Thank you for playing with us!”

“Come back soon, okay?”

The children bid us goodbye; Teto replied with all her usual vigor. “Bye-byyyye!”

I waved goodbye to the kids as well, though I'd never live up to Teto's enthusiasm.

"Thank you for your hard work, Master, Lady Teto," Beretta said when the three of us regrouped.

"Today was so much fun!" Teto chirped.

"Wasn't it just?" I replied. "I'll make sure to watch over the children until they're ready to spread their wings. I don't want to see them sad ever again."

"They'll be fine, Lady Witch! They have lots of food and nice beds; they're already doing so much better!"

Back at the refugee camp, the kids had been scared and depressed. Seeing them happily playing with the mythical beasts today reassured me that taking them in was a good decision.

A few months later, we built a school-slash-training facility beside the boardinghouse. The kids were all of different ages, so we decided against grouping them following a traditional grade system. Instead, we created different levels for each subject; whenever a child demonstrated proficiency in a particular level, they would advance to the next. We required them all to take basic life skills lessons—reading, writing, and counting—and they could choose one or more elective classes based on their interests, like farming, carpentry, potion-making, and fighting, to prepare them for the future.

A few weeks after classes had started at the school, Beretta came to find me. "Master, we have received a request from several of the demon settlements."

"A request? What is it?"

"They would like their children to be allowed to attend lessons at the school and for you to teach them magic."

The school was doing pretty well, and its reputation was starting to spread across the forest. It was only a matter of time until the rest of the population wanted in on it.

There was a slight issue, though...

"I don't mind letting their kids attend, but we don't teach magic there."

“It seems that they have caught wind of the games you taught the children and mistakenly assumed these were magic training lessons.”

Well, I mean, they are magic training exercises, so I see where they’re coming from.

“First, make sure to clear up that misunderstanding. I’d say we let the demon kids attend the regular lessons if they’re interested, but I’ve got some reservations. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I asked Beretta.

“I believe the difference in physical strength and overall abilities between the different races might cause some issues. Besides, having demons join the school so abruptly would disturb the learning environment.”

“Bingo. We could create new classes specifically for the demon kids, but we don’t have anywhere near enough teachers for that...”

We decided to discuss it some more with the maids who worked at the school. I considered the school nothing more than a stepping stone for the human kids to learn a few essential skills for the future; I didn’t think the demons would benefit much from it, but it seemed some of them were interested in it nonetheless.

“Guess I’m going to have to come up with a new system...”

In the end, we decided to build small schools in every demon settlement, where they would be taught all the same material covered in the human school’s curriculum. They also had access to several elective classes where they could learn whatever skills their race was the most suited for, as well as a few more varied subjects for the students to explore based on their individual interests. The demon kids started mingling with the students from the other school, who taught them the little magic games I had demonstrated.

Years passed, and kids from the human school finished their studies. Some of them became artisans, some left the forest to become adventurers, and others decided they wanted to help the dragonkin and the godkin with trade, which led to the establishment of a trading company in the forest. Some fell in love with demons and stayed in the forest to raise a family; some decided to become teachers at the human school to pass their knowledge to the next generation. My modest goals going into the whole affair had been blown out of the water.

With them all grown up, the school had technically served its purpose. We ended up repurposing the building so that more students—of human and demonic lineage alike—could attend. Centuries later, what started off as a temporary school to help refugee children find their path in life became one of this world’s most prestigious universities.

Chapter 5: The Lamias' Cosmetics

Before the stampede, a tilted tower had washed up in the forest. As it turned out, this tower was a piece of planar driftwood—an artifact that had passed through many realities. I had repurposed it since then; presently I was using it as my research tower. It was located pretty far away from civilization, which allowed me to carry out all of my experiments in it, from magic research to magic tool creation, and even monster raising. I had also installed an alchemy room in the tower, where the mechanoids and I would mix potions using medicinal herbs, which we would then distribute to the inhabitants of the forest. Ever since we took in the refugees, the demand for potions had shot up to the point where we couldn't meet it anymore. That's when we decided to hire the lamias to help us, as they were quite proficient with magical herbs.

But just as I was starting to think everything was going swimmingly, Beretta came to find me, an uncharacteristically cold look on her face. "Master, we have discovered a case of theft at the research tower. We have already apprehended the culprits," she told me.

Behind her, three lamias kowtowed in front of me. "W-We're very sorry!" they said in perfect sync.

I was slightly taken aback by the situation. "Uh... Can you explain to me exactly what they did?" I asked, rubbing my temple with my fingers. I already knew this situation was going to be headache-inducing.

"These three lamias work in the brewing room. They have stolen medicinal potions several times now," Beretta explained.

"Well, I'm certainly not happy with that...but was it really necessary to get *me* involved?" I asked, puzzled.

"We're very sorry! Please only punish us and do not kick our sisters out of the forest!" the lamias begged me.

"I won't punish an entire race because of three bad eggs," I sighed.

If Teto was here, her bright personality would've helped the lamias calm down, but she was currently participating in a mock battle with some of our demon neighbors, so the atmosphere was rather tense.

I should ask why they stole from us before punishing them.

"Why did you steal the potions?" I asked. "We distribute them to all of the settlements on a regular basis. Did you run out already?"

"Um... Sometimes when we make the potions, we hurt ourselves with the knives, or we get burned by liquid splashing..."

The lamias had quite a...*girlie* reason to steal the potions. From what they told us, they mostly stole ointments to cure wounds and burns. At first, they had been using regular medicinal potions to tend to their injuries, but they noticed that the ointments were much better at treating burns—not to mention that they worked wonders on old scars and made their skin feel soft and rejuvenated.

"We thought that using those would make us more appealing to males... We're very sorry!"

"We're sorry!"

I nodded. "So that's what it is. Well, for you guys, I suppose being appealing to the opposite gender is quite a big deal, huh?"

To think that our burn relief ointments would end up being used for skin care...

I could see where they were coming from, though; lamias could only reproduce by mating with males from a different species. The dryads and alraunes were in the same boat, but they didn't really care about reproducing, for the most part. In contrast, insect-type demons, like the melissae and the arachnes, would occasionally abduct male travelers for mating purposes. The lamias weren't any better; they had a history of using aphrodisiac incense to seduce men.

"Well, I suppose Beretta already lectured you about why what you did was wrong," I said.

"Y-Yes..."

If we ran out of medicinal potions and ointments, we might not be able to cure injured individuals in time.

“Beretta, remind us all, please: how are they to be punished?”

“Yes, Master. In case of theft, the perpetrator must give compensation to the affected party, either in monetary form or through labor. In this particular case, as it involved the prepared remedies provided by you, Master, they will have to pay you back directly. You may choose to have them repay you in whatever manner you choose.”

“Hm, let me think... As your punishment, you’ll have to help me with my research and act as my clinical trial subjects for a while,” I declared.

“We humbly accept our punishment...” the lamias replied dejectedly.

I nodded. “Now that that’s settled, you may go home.”

“Master, you are too soft on them,” Beretta reproached me when the lamias were gone.

“Do you think so?” I replied absentmindedly. “Still, I didn’t think there would be a demand for ointment to use as *face cream*, of all things. I’m sure we can do something better than this, though...and while I’m at it, I might as well make a few more skin care products.”

If all I did was punish them without addressing the root of the problem, I had no doubt this accident would repeat itself in the future. But if I were to make an actual face cream specifically tailored for cosmetic purposes and sell it, it could eliminate the temptation to skim off the production line. Our little trio of sticky-fingered serpent women would settle up with me by making sure the improved product was up to snuff.

“I’m going to start with the herbs we use in the burn ointments, but we’ll need to find new materials to make it into a proper skin care item,” I noted.

“Allow me to help, Master,” Beretta offered. “You seem to be enjoying yourself—I’m glad.”

I strolled through the forest, picking up materials I thought would work well in a face cream. The next day, I called the three lamias to my personal research

room at the top of the tower. They stood there with tense expressions, looking in turn at the materials I had assembled and me.

“I’m going to teach you how to make burn ointments.”

“Lady Witch has prepared all the materials you’ll need!” Teto—who was assisting me with my research today—chirped.

“So you need to use damijan flowers and World Tree leaf extract to make burn ointment,” one of the lamias noted. “That’s quite luxurious.”

“Mogimo herbs too—you know, the ones we use in incense,” another added. “So that’s what relieves the inflammation.”

“Eek! So much mana goes into these! No wonder they work so well...”

Other than the World Tree leaves, all of the ingredients used in the ointment were quite basic and easy to grow. The sheer quantity of mana pumped into the ointments—around 10,000 MP, greater than the mana pool of three regular adventurers combined—was what made them truly special.

“Don’t worry; I prepared mana potions for you to recharge your batteries later,” I told them.

“O-Oh...”

I instructed them to pour around half of their mana pool into the ointments. They complied, albeit hesitantly. Their first attempt was a success, most likely because the three of them were already pretty high-level potion makers.

“Yeah, it’s coming along nicely,” I said. “I’m sure the four of us will be able to come up with a good face cream.”

“Huh?” The lamias gawked at me as Teto headed to the stockroom to put the ointments they had made away.

“I’m going to keep you around to help me and test the product until we’ve made the perfect face cream.”

With those words, I started my experiments. The three lamias seemed hesitant, most likely wondering if they really deserved the opportunity to work on a face cream after being caught for theft. Nevertheless, they began concocting their own ointments. They quickly got the hang of it, downing mana

potions to top up their MP when they were getting low. I was still working faster than them—by the time each of them had made one ointment, I had already made three—but I was pretty satisfied with their work.

When we were done, I lined up the face creams we had made and used an appraisal spell on them.

“Numbers seven, fifteen, and twenty are more skin condition treatments than regular face cream,” I noted. “Number twenty-three seems to be the most promising as a general beautifying cream.”

I discarded the other creams and had the lamias try the ones I selected. After that, we made some other adjustments, such as adding a fragrance and adjusting the stickiness and moisture levels of the cream, until we were finally satisfied with the product.

“Phew!”

“We’re finally done!”

“We’re free!”

Their skin might’ve been glowing thanks to the cream, but all of this mixing and testing had taken a toll on them; they were exhausted. I could tell just how happy they were to finally be done.

“You’ll be in charge of making more beauty products from now on,” I told them. “Aaah, I’m so glad I finally have a moisturizer I like.”

“Teto will apply it on your back after we’re done bathing,” Teto offered.

I might’ve been immortal, but my skin wasn’t perfect; it always got really dry in the winter, especially after I bathed. It was also very delicate and was prone to irritation if I didn’t moisturize it enough, so I was glad to finally have access to a good moisturizer.

Still, I knew the lamias and some of the other residents of the forest wanted a nice beautifying cream, so I decided to have the lamias keep on making more skin care products. Needless to say, they weren’t happy when they realized they’d be stuck in the mixing room for the foreseeable future. Despair was plastered all over their faces.

Their skin care products became quite popular among the women of the forest, and after the three lamias had spent a long time working in the mixing room, Beretta finally deemed their atonement complete and hired more people to work on their products. As a side note, we made sure to properly compensate the lamias; they hadn't been working for free.

Later down the line, we started selling the forest's skin care line to other nations, as well as in the stores the former refugee children had opened, and it quickly became a huge hit among affluent women all around the world, to the point where, for centuries, all of our items were bestsellers.

Chapter 6: The Multi-eyed Demons' Magic Eyes

Among the demon tribes that had moved into the forest were the multi-eyed demons. As their name suggested, they all had an extra eye in their foreheads. No one knew how they'd come to be.

Their third eye was imbued with mana, which granted them unique powers: they were able to see the past, the future, the flow of mana, and spirits; practice clairvoyance; and paralyze, hypnotize, or read the mind of any target through their gaze alone. Their third eye was the only peculiar feature on their bodies and easy to hide, meaning that they had no trouble mingling among humans. Before the stampede, most of them used to make a living by reading people's fortunes.

I had come to visit the werewolves in their village when I stumbled across an odd little group: a werewolf and a devilkin man, both of them covered in bruises, were chatting with one of the mechanoids and a multi-eyed demon woman whose name was Faye.

"What are you four doing together?" I asked as I approached them. "Did something happen?"

"Look, Lady Witch, they're hurt!" Teto exclaimed, pointing at the bruised men. "What's going on?"

Faye and the mechanoid turned towards us and lowered their heads.

"We've caught wind of someone having committed a minor offense in the werewolves' settlement a few days ago. We are currently conducting an investigation into the matter," the mechanoid told us.

"If you give me a minute, I can tell you exactly what happened," Faye said.

The mechanoid nodded and readied herself to write down the details of the incident. Faye held out a hand in front of her, opened the third eye on her forehead, and channeled her mana into it.

"Yes, I can see. These two men were fighting..." She started recounting the

events as she saw them unfold, most likely through her Retrocognition skill.

“What even was going on in the first place?” I asked the mechanoid.

“From what they told us, it seems that the werewolf has accused the devilkin of stealing something from him, which resulted in a fistfight,” the mechanoid explained.

Most conflicts that escalated to this point tended to arise from misunderstandings, or because both parties were at fault.

“The food I kept in my cupboard is gone!” the werewolf said. “You came into my house uninvited while I was out; you definitely stole it from me!”

“Screw you! The door was already open when I arrived. The only reason I went in was out of concern for your sorry self!” the devilkin replied.

Teto had to step in to prevent things from escalating further. “Stop fighting!” she chided them.

“Are these two friends?” I asked the mechanoid.

She nodded. “It seems that they bonded during their time at the refugee camp. They live in different settlements, but they often hunt and work the fields together.”

Quite the dynamic duo, huh?

Well, I supposed that was to be expected: the higher the population, the harder it was going to be to avoid private conflicts between the locals. In rural areas like the forest, a lot of people didn’t bother locking their doors and didn’t usually mind their friends (or even acquaintances) letting themselves in occasionally. But to someone like this particular werewolf, who had spent his entire life oppressed and living in hiding with very little to his name, it wasn’t a surprise at all that the situation had escalated.

“Could we rewind a little further to uncover the root of the conflict?”

“Of course,” Faye acquiesced.

I watched in silence as she dug deeper into the past.

“Um... It seems that...the culprit isn’t that devilkin man,” she said.

“See? Told ya! You just ate all your food and forgot!” the devilkin told his friend.

“No, he didn’t,” Faye asserted. “He did store his food in the cupboard. The thief is...one of the cù-siths.”

A realization seemed to hit the werewolf. From what he told us, it seemed that that particular cù-sith liked to spend time with him. He didn’t exactly know why—perhaps the cù-sith simply liked his mana the best—but didn’t mind either way, and often found himself sharing his food or petting the little critter. Now, while cù-siths were highly intelligent creatures, there were still times when their beast instincts took over. They’d still eat your food, break things on purpose—just overall dog stuff.

“Hey, dude? Um, I’m sorry for accusing you of stealing my food,” the werewolf told his friend.

“It’s all good; I kinda overreacted. So it was the cù-sith all along, huh? Didn’t expect that.”

I turned to face the mechanoid and Faye and nodded to express my thanks. “I can’t leave you two looking all beaten up, though; your families will worry. *Heal!*”

“And remember, fighting is *bad!*” Teto scolded them cutely.

The two men nodded sheepishly and exchanged a handshake of reconciliation.

“Thank you for looking into this case,” I told Faye.

“You did amazing!” Teto chirped.

Faye bowed her head to us, a look of hesitation on her face. “I’m glad my power could be of use to you, Lady Witch. Um... I have a request, if you don’t mind.”

“A request?” I echoed, blinking in surprise.

It didn’t seem like she was going to ask for a reward for resolving the case; she looked gravely conflicted.

After opening and closing her mouth a few times, wondering if she should

Speak up, she eventually found her spine. “We multi-eyed demons are honored to have been tasked with such important duties. Therefore! I ask that you please ensure our safety. Also, would it be within your power to requisition us a magic device that suppresses one’s ability to lie?”

“Um... Why?” I asked flatly.

Big mistake. I was simply curious as to why she felt like she needed such a thing, but she seemed to have taken my tone as skepticism and started bawling.

“S-Sorry! I’m weally sowwy for diswespecting you!” she hiccuped.

“I’m not mad! I just...” I trailed off with a sigh.

I hadn’t meant to make her cry. Now I looked like the bad guy, which made *me* want to burst into tears.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, Lady Witch isn’t scary, I promise,” Teto cooed to comfort Faye.

I decided to leave the job to her and turned towards the mechanoid to ask her for an explanation.

“Through their third eye, the multi-eyed demons can use skills like Retrocognition and Precognition to see the past and future, as well as Appraisal, Telepathy, and Mana Vision, which allows them to see anyone’s status, memories, and mana flow. This, in turn, means that they can accidentally discover people’s deepest secrets.”

I nodded. “So that’s why she’s concerned about her safety.”

At no point in history had anyone gone without reason to worry for themselves when their neighbors or their leaders came to believe they knew too much. Living with natural powers of insight into the secrets of others meant living perpetually at risk of imprisonment, endless surveillance, and preemptive violence. This must’ve been weighing on Faye’s mind.

“Furthermore, in this case, we ended up relying heavily on her Retrocognition. Imagine if a similar case should arise in the future, and the multi-eyed demon we hire for the job lies to us. They would have absolute power over the fate of the suspect; if it profits the investigator, they may well

let an innocent take the fall.”

Now I was starting to grasp what Faye was angling for; if we had a firm guarantee that her people couldn't lie, we wouldn't just be fixing a major vulnerability in our whole legal process and preventing a whole slew of potential wrongful convictions—we would be protecting all of her people's credibility.

“That makes sense. I hadn't thought that far ahead,” I confessed.

“There are many other matters that require your attention. You cannot possibly think of every possible scenario every single time,” the mechanoid reassured me.

I turned back towards Faye, who had regained her cool. “Everyone has secrets that they don't want others to learn. If you or one of your sisters learn someone's secret and decide to spread that information or use it to harm them, I'll have to punish you. But I'm not going to let anyone cause you harm just because you've learned something personal accidentally.”

“Thank you very much,” Faye said, bowing her head deeply.

“As for your second request... *Creation*: Bracelet of Truth!”

As its name suggested, this bracelet prevented the wearer from lying as long as they had it on. When I handed it to Faye, she thanked me profusely.

However, it was worth mentioning that, while the multi-eyed demons wouldn't be able to lie, they could only explain what they saw when they used their skills. Depending on the way they explained the scene or how they understood it, we might not get the whole picture.

When I shared my concerns with Faye, she nodded and said, “The concern you're describing is well-known to my people. Part of growing up in my culture hinges on understanding the potentially deadly risk we take on when we do anything more than say plainly what we see, without speculation, knowing full well we will never be perfect and unbiased observers.”

As Faye kept on thanking me, the four of us quickly decided on some rules the multi-eyed demons should abide by when helping with future investigations.

From that point forward, Faye's people played an essential role in law and public order in the forest. Their whole suite of skills came in handy for such ends: Retrocognition for forensics, Clairvoyance for tracking, Paralysis in physical confrontations, Telepathy and Hypnotism during interrogations—the list went on and on.

As a side note, word got out that I had given the Bracelet of Truth to Faye, and some assumed it was a reward for her assistance in solving the case. Rumors spread like wildfire throughout the entire forest, suggesting that I would reward anyone who provided helpful contributions. It took considerable effort to squelch that particular bit of folklore.

Chapter 7: The Minotaurs' Farms and the Oni-Kin's Alcohol

Thankfully, even with our sudden increase in population, there was more than enough food in the forest to feed everyone. They could hunt monsters in the demon den next door, pick edible plants, mushrooms, fruit, and nuts around the forest, fish in the rivers and ponds, raise cattle, get milk from the mythical beasts, and till fields for a more consistent and reliable source of food.

On that day, Morph, the representative of the minotaurs, came to find me at my mansion with a question. "Lady Witch, what should we produce?"

First and foremost, I had him take a seat. Minotaurs were massive, and I didn't feel like straining my neck by trying to maintain eye contact the whole time.

"How about you guys just focus on growing crops?" I asked. Minotaurs prided themselves on their farming abilities, after all.

"Wheat, barley, legumes, carrots, potatoes, onions, bell peppers, eggplants, asparagus, pumpkins, cabbage, turnips, tomatoes, corn, broccoli... There are so many things you can grow! And that's not even all of them," Teto chirped.

"Miss Beretta has provided us with all sorts of seeds and saplings, and we have already started planting the essentials. We'll plant the other ones when they're in season," Morph explained.

"Then what's the problem?" I asked, slightly confused.

Morph was a man of few words; I waited patiently for him to articulate his thoughts.

"Thanks to you, we can finally live in peace. So we'd like to try out new things we've never done before," he eventually said.

"Oooh, so that's what it is." I nodded.

The minotaurs finally had a place to call home, where they could till fields to

their heart's content. They were freer than ever and wanted to experiment.

I hummed pensively. "Then what about this? *Creation!*"

Using my magic, I materialized a certain cereal plant.

"Is that...wheat?" Morph asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Nope. It's called 'rice.' It grows in paddy fields."

"It's all springy and delicious!" Teto added. "And you can make really yummy alcohol with it!"

I made most of the rice we ate with my Creation Magic, and the maids had started growing some in their free time, but not nearly enough to share with the others. Thus, only Teto and I ever ate rice. However, I would've loved for my people to eat more of it—it was a staple food from my previous life, after all. Morph seemed pretty interested.

"How do you eat it?" he asked.

"I can show you a few dishes made using rice. Ah, but it's going to take me a little while to make all of them."

"Teto will help you cook, Lady Witch!"

Morph started sputtering. "G-Grumph?! You're going to make them yourself, Lady Witch?!"

"Yeah," I shrugged. "I haven't cooked in a hot minute; I was just starting to think I needed to shake off the rust."

"Teto wants to eat curry and rice!"

I told Morph to head back home for the time being, and Teto and I put on aprons and headed to the kitchen. Well, just the two of us couldn't make all of the dishes I wanted, so I decided to enlist the help of the maids on cooking duty today. We washed a boatload of rice, dumped it in a pot filled with water, and placed it on the stove. A few minutes later, it was ready.

"First, we *have* to do onigiri. Onigiri's essential. As for the filling... Let's keep it simple and not do any. We'll just do some salt," I decided.

"Lady Witch, I got the leaves!" Teto said.

I had sent her to get some perilla leaves to use in place of nori. At first I had planned on stuffing the onigiri with pickled plums, but I'd decided against it at the last minute, thinking it might be a bit too much for those unfamiliar with Japanese food. As I shaped the onigiri with my small hands, I thought of all of the yummy fillings I could've gone with: salmon, bonito flakes, tuna braised in soy sauce... I couldn't help but feel like it was a shame to wrap them in perilla leaves rather than nori.



“Thinking about all of the potential onigiri fillings really makes me wish we had access to marine resources here,” I sighed.

“You can always make them with your Creation Magic,” Teto suggested.

“I didn’t mean just for me, but for everyone. I wish we had a legitimate, natural supply.”

I wanted to treat all of my new friends to food from my past life—blurry as my memories of it were. But the forest was a landlocked nation, so local seafood was off the table.

After we were done with the onigiri, we made a bunch of other rice-based dishes: cheese risotto, chicken and rice stir-fry, fried rice, paella, a few rice bowls—which were basically just rice topped with stuff—and last but not least, curry rice, per Teto’s request. We needed some sort of fish for the paella, but that wasn’t too much of a problem; there were crayfish and freshwater clams in the river, although not that many.

“Well, I think that’s a pretty nice cross section of rice-based dishes,” I said when we were done. “I’m going to make some dango, mochi, and rice crackers with my magic, and we should be good.”

I made a mental note to write down the recipes for all those dishes. Right when we were done, it was time for our meeting with Morph, who came back with a familiar man in tow.

“Ha ha ha! I’ve heard you made some food, Lady Witch, so I couldn’t resist tagging along to give it a try.”

“Grumph... I’m sorry, Lady Witch,” Morph mumbled.

The man who had accompanied him was none other than Gasta, the oni-kin representative.

“Come in, you two. It’s supposed to be a taste-testing session, so feel free to help yourself to anything that catches your fancy,” I said.

“Teto will let you guys try her favorite rice alcohol at the end of the meal!” Teto promised, holding up a bottle of sake.

Morph and Gasta each grabbed one of the onigiris I had made by hand and

took a bite.

“Grumph; what an interesting texture,” Morph said. “And after chewing it for a bit, it starts to taste a little...sweet?”

“These things are tiny, though! I need something more filling,” Gasta complained before opening his mouth wide and stuffing three onigiri in it at once.

“You can put all sorts of fillings in onigiri, but I decided to keep them plain this time,” I explained.

I grabbed some of the miso paste and soy sauce the maids had developed after years of research and spread some on the onigiri before roasting them over a grill. The smell must’ve aroused Morph and Gasta’s appetites, as they immediately reached for them once they were done. Morph mostly tried out the smaller dishes, while Gasta was more into the heavier ones. In particular, he seemed to really like the rice bowls we had made.

“Rice is so yummy!” Teto chirped after taking a bite of her huge plate of curry rice. Once again, the smell intrigued Morph and Gasta, who decided to try it as well.

After that, they ate some roasted and deep-fried mochi, dango, and rice crackers, whose crunchy textures they seemed to find quite pleasant.

“These things would go well with some booze,” Gasta said, holding out a rice cracker. “They’re nice and salty.”

“It’s so springy,” Morph marveled as he ate his mochi. “Are those made with rice too?”

“Yup. These are called ‘mochi.’ They’re made by steaming glutinous rice and then pounding it with a mortar and pestle. There are also variations made by soaking powdered rice in hot water and kneading it,” I explained.

There were several different types of rice flour. First, you had regular rice flour, which was made by grinding ordinary Japanese rice—that was the stuff that went into dango. There was also glutinous rice flour made by, you guessed it, pounding glutinous rice, and shiratamako, which also used glutinous rice but was made by soaking, grinding, and extracting the starch from it. Japanese rice

wasn't the only type of rice either; for instance, there was also long-grained rice like the kind sold by the merchant ships in Lawbyle, which was used to make paella, among other things.

Well, not that I told Morph and Gasta about any of this. It would've been a bit off-putting to them if I started giving them a whole gastronomy lecture midmeal.

As they ate, I noted that Gasta seemed to like salty things more—like deep-fried rice cakes and rice crackers—while Morph seemed to have more of a sweet tooth.

"I'm opening the alcohol!" Teto announced when the two men were done eating.

"Hell yeah! I've been waiting for this," Gasta cheered.

Morph seemed a bit more hesitant. "Grumph—is that really all right?"

"Rice alcohol is sooo yummy!" Teto chirped.

Gasta quickly downed his cup. "Damn, that's good! So that booze is made with rice, huh? I'll tell my ma and the others to try making some!"

Oni-kin men were pretty beefy and strong, so they made a living working as mercenaries while the women took care of the homes and the village, growing crops and making alcohol to earn some extra income. Recently, they had even started making mead using the melissae's honey.

After some deliberation, Morph finally took a sip of sake. "Grumph... It doesn't taste like ale, but not like wine either... It's clear like water, yet the taste is *strong*..." He seemed to really like it, to the point where tears had formed in his eyes. He looked almost *moved*.

When he was done drinking, he fell to the floor on his knees and bowed his head deeply.

"I thoroughly enjoyed the rice dishes you prepared for us, Lady Witch. We'll gladly start cultivating rice. Thank you very much for the suggestion," he said.

"Hell yeah!" Gasta exclaimed, clearly tipsy. "We'll grow some too, but if you ever find yourself with too much rice, bring it over, Morph! We'll turn it into

some nice booze, ha ha ha!”

Teto, who was pretty much as wasted as Gasta, chimed in, “Teto would love to try it!”

And so the minotaurs and the oni-kin started growing rice. They weren’t the only ones—the Great Elder had enjoyed the sake I’d made him try so much that the three dragonkin settlements had decided to start producing their own rice as well. They asked the mechanoids for advice, and a few years later, Teto and I finally started receiving freshly grown rice and delicious sake at our mansion.

The minotaurs named their sake “Drunken Bull,” while the oni-kin women thought it’d be funny to pass a message to their husbands who were working far afield by naming theirs “Homecoming.” They even collaborated together on a third variety that they called “Onitaurus,” combining the names of the two races.

Chapter 8: The Mysterious Villages

When we took in the refugees, most of them had wished to live exclusively among those of the same race. They cleared out part of the forest, built regular houses on flat land, and started cultivating fields. However, there was a certain settlement that wasn't exactly like the others; rather than living on their own, the melissae, arachnes, dryads, and alraunes had decided to all live together in the same village. Instead of building houses and tilling fields, they made their settlement fit their needs and characteristics. I suspected that one of the reasons why they all got along so well was that, just like the lamias, they were all run by matriarchies.

On that day, Teto and I had decided to pay them a visit.

"Aaah, the sun feels so nice."

"What are we gonna do today?"

"Should we go check on the plants in the forest?"

"Where are we going today?"

When we arrived at the entrance of the village, we saw an alraune girl sitting on a tree stump basking in the sun, with earth spirits—one of Teto's bear golems' new evolutions—fluttering around her. I gathered that the alraunes were quite friendly with the earth spirits.

"Oooh, Lady Witch and Lady Teto! Welcoome," the alraune drawled when she spotted us.

"Lady Witch!"

"Lady Teto's here too!"

"Can we have some yummy mana, pleeease?"

The earth spirits immediately came to surround us, begging me for mana. I obliged; when I was done, I went to say hi to the alraune.

"Hi there, how are you doing?"

“We came to hang out!” Teto chirped.

“The sun feels nice, and the water and mana are so yummy,” the alraune replied, leisurely basking in the sun.

Her surroundings were covered in flowers, which I surmised must’ve bloomed thanks to her mana—and I spotted countless honeybees going back and forth between the flowers.

“This village sure screams ‘fantasy world,’ huh?” I muttered to myself.

“Teto loves it here!”

The four races had settled in one of the rare clearings in the forest, meaning that the place enjoyed ample sunlight. As for the few trees that remained, they had all undergone rapid growth and structural changes thanks to the dryads’ and alraunes’ magic so that the demons could live inside them. They had added doors and windows to the hollowed out trees, creating cozy little abodes for themselves. The trees’ branches were all intertwined with each other, forming bridges between the tree houses, locked yet tighter by vines.

As we stood in the flower field, taking in the beauty of the village, the alraune seemed to remember something and turned towards us. “Lady Witch, you can take this with you, if you want.”

She grabbed the stem of one of the plants sprouting from the ground and quickly pulled it out. What came out was some sort of shiny root-looking thing that was shaped a bit like a human. The root had three holes in its “face,” which acted as its eyes and mouth, and it stared at us as it moved its little arms and legs. I couldn’t help but chuckle a bit upon seeing how cute and weird the little plant was. After staring at it for a few seconds, the cogs in my brain started turning, and I finally understood what it was.

“That’s...a mandragora, isn’t it?” I said.

“Oh, right, you did sow mandragora seeds a while ago, Lady Witch,” Teto added.

I had always thought it’d be a shame to only grow ordinary plants and herbs in the forest, so a few years ago, I made some rare seeds—including mandragoras—with my Creation Magic and sowed them.

“It came over to our village,” the alraune explained lazily. “It’s all grown-up now.”

Still dangling in midair, the mandragora puffed out its little chest, its arms on its hips as if to show off just how “grown-up” it was. Upon further inspection, I noticed that there were indeed several mandragoras burrowed into the ground. This wasn’t where I had planted the seeds, so they must’ve moved here of their own volition, although I wasn’t exactly sure why. Perhaps they liked living close to the plant demons?

“Hold on a minute—I thought mandragoras were supposed to be more...wrinkly than this. I’ve never heard of them moving on their own either. And aren’t they supposed to screech when pulled from the ground?” I asked.

“That’s only true of sad, unhealthy mandragoras,” the alraune drawled. “But these ones are all shiny and healthy.”

“They are! They look really yummy,” Teto nodded enthusiastically.

Well, she had a point; this little mandragora guy *did* look healthy. Maybe a little *too* healthy, if it could move on its own... I had planted mandragoras so I could use their extracts in potions, but looking at the little creature’s face—which reminded me of a haniwa figure—I wasn’t sure I could bring myself to do it.

“If I remember correctly, you get mandragora essence by grinding or chopping them, right?” I mused out loud.

Instantly, the little mandragora wrapped its little arms around its body as if to shield itself, shaking in terror. I felt a pang of guilt in my heart seeing it like this.

“This one has a lot of mana stored inside its body, so you just have to boil it to get the extract,” the alraune explained. “Once it doesn’t have any left, you can just replant it and it should be good to go again before long.”

I instantly pictured the little mandragora swimming in a pot of boiling water.

“And it won’t mind that?” I wondered out loud before adding, “Well, I’m going to take it with me either way.”

The mandragora seemed to have understood that I wouldn’t actually chop it

into pieces. It happily jumped onto my hand and climbed up my arm, taking a seat on my shoulder.



I hadn't expected the mandragoras to be so weirdly cute... Well, I guess it was to be expected; this *was* a fantasy world, after all—or so I reasoned with myself as Teto and I finally entered the village.

"Oh, Lady Witch! Welcome to our village," an arachne woman called out to us from a bridge in the trees.

"Thank you for always sending fabric to the mansion," I said, raising my voice a little to make sure she could hear me. "Beretta and the others made me some nice pajamas out of it!"

"They're all silky and soft," Teto added.

A smile curled on the arachne's lips. "Then we'll work hard to make even better fabric, so you can make all of your clothes out of it!" she said, petting the albino spider she was cradling in her arms before heading into her home above the boughs.

Looking up, I saw a few melissae floating above the trees. There were also a bunch of honeybees, who seemed to have built their hive in a hollow in one of the trees. I watched as the little bee monsters traveled to the alraunes' flower field, where they would gather nectar and pollen to turn into honey and beeswax.

Unlike the other villages, this village wasn't devoid of trees at all—in fact, they were thriving. The entire place was very calm and tranquil, with the only sounds coming from the rustle of the leaves in the wind, the buzzing of the bees, and the rhythmic weaving sounds of the arachnes as they turned their threads into fabric. As we strolled through the village, we suddenly heard cheerful voices ahead.

"Hello! We brought you ingredients!"

"There's meat, and fish, and veggies, and fruits! We came to exchange them!"

"Goh!"

The voices were coming from the front of the house where the village's representative—a dryad—lived. A group made up of a couple of earthnoids, earth spirits, and bear golems were standing right in front of the door. The

earthnoids handed ivy baskets full of goods to the dryad.

“Thank you,” she said. “Here, take these in exchange.”

She gave them clothes weaved from the arachnes’ fabric, as well as a few jars of honey.

“Yaaay, thank you so much!”

“Thank you!”

“Goh!”

As I watched them quite literally jumping for joy, cradling jars of honey in their arms, I couldn’t help being reminded of a certain yellow teddy bear...

“Bye-bye, have a good day!”

“Bye-byyyy!”

“Goh!”

The little group thanked the dryad for the clothes and honey and scampered away.

“Now that I think about it, we see your bear golems everywhere, don’t we?” I told Teto.

“Yep!”

I felt like no matter where I was in the forest, I *always* stumbled across an earthnoid, earth spirit, or bear golem. Doing odd jobs around the mansion, taking care of the gardens, cutting or planting trees in the forest, helping the demons hunt, looking after the mythical beasts, helping around the villages, transporting goods from one settlement to the other, playing with the kids at the school, chatting with the elderly folk, culling monsters outside of the barrier... They really had become the forest’s little helpers, always here to lend a hand to those who needed it. The earthnoids were a pretty new race, but people were already used to the earth spirits and bear golems, so they didn’t bat an eye when they appeared and welcomed them with open arms.

“How many of them are there in the first place?” I asked Teto.

“I have nooo idea!” she replied with a grin.

I knew that there were about a hundred each of earthnoids and earth spirits, but I didn't have the slightest clue about the number of bear golems roaming around the forest. The more I thought about it, the more I started thinking that the fact that we saw them *everywhere* meant they must've still been multiplying.

"Speaking of which, I have no idea where the earthnoids live," I mused.

I had a pretty good idea of where each settlement was located. The earth spirits could pretty much rest anywhere as long as they were close to nature—which was basically the entire forest—and the bear golems could live underground. But what about the earthnoids?

"Teto knows where they live!" Teto said.

"Really? Can you take me there?"

"Of course!"

We left the village and Teto took me to the earthnoids' settlement. We arrived in the part of the forest where we had planted a bunch of World Trees decades ago to serve as mana hot spots. Thanks to the World Trees' constant mana production, what was once a barren land was now a lush forest.

"They live here!" Teto said, pointing at the foot of one of the World Trees.

"You mean...*under* the tree?"

"Yes!"

There was a hole at the base of the World Tree that seemed to lead straight to the underground. I noticed that it had been reinforced with magic.

"They built their village underground, huh? So that's why I couldn't spot it from the sky," I mused with a dry smile.

"Lady Witch, it's pretty dark in there, so let's hold hands, okay?" Teto offered, holding out her hand to me.

I took it and followed her into the tunnel. While it was indeed dark at first, it didn't last for long.

"Magic plants?" I whispered. "They're so bright. It looks surreal..."

The walls and ceiling were covered with luminous moss, fluorescent mushrooms, and little glowing flowers which emitted the tiniest amount of mana and illuminated our path.

After a few seconds of walking, we emerged from the tunnel. Nothing could've prepared me for the sight that greeted me on the other side.



“Houses in the trees just wasn’t enough, huh? Just had to get your mushroom houses in too.” I muttered to myself. “We’re leaving no stone unturned with the genre tropes today.”

We had arrived in a large grotto filled with dozens of giant mushrooms, each of varying height and width; some of them were short and thick, while others were tall and skinny. Following Teto’s lead, I went to try and touch one of the mushrooms. Its exterior was as solid as plaster, just like a real house.

“These mushrooms are amazing, Lady Witch! When they’re small, they’re normal mushrooms, but when they get big they’re hard like rocks!”

“Are they some sort of magic plants?” I wondered out loud.

It seemed that the earthnoids had hollowed out the mushrooms with magic to use them as houses, complete with wooden doors and windows. The clear water of the aquifer was drawn up by the World Tree’s roots, so there was no risk of the cavern flooding. The walls were covered with luminous plants, so the place was well lit. On top of that, the temperature was just right, and the slight humidity of the air allowed plants to grow all around the cavern.

The earthnoids spotted us as we were walking around and rushed towards us.

“Ah! Lady Witch’s here!”

“Lady Teto is here too!”

“Goh goh, goooh!”

We stayed in the earthnoids’ settlement for a little longer, enjoying their hospitality. I felt a bit like the grandpa in “The Runaway Rice Ball”—a folktale from my previous life—or like Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Today ended up being a pretty fun day; not only did we get to visit the tree village, but we also got to take a peek at the earthnoids’ underground settlement.

As a side note, when we went home, I *did* put the little mandragora in a pot of boiling water and successfully retrieved its extract. When it came out, it was all skinny, but it headed back to the forest on its own stubby legs, where it would get some more nourishment and mana. The next time I saw it, it’d probably

have regained its natural, healthy glow.

Chapter 9: The Centaurs' Duties

Back when the forest was still a wasteland, we had started a reforestation project spanning across the entire region—except for the north. However, with time, grass and plants had begun to take root and spread naturally, turning it into a lush grassland with slight undulations in the terrain due to the earthquakes we had engineered.

Teto and I were riding on my staff; as we approached the area, we spotted a group of half-human, half-horse demons—centaurs—running side by side with mythical beasts.

“It went this way!” one of the centaurs told his friends.

“Roger!”

I took a quick look at the mythical beasts grazing in the grassland. I first spotted the heidruns, which were mythical goats. In Norse mythology, Heidrun was a goat that could produce mead, but the ones in this world only produced high-quality milk. Unlike regular goats, though, they had what seemed like an endless supply of the stuff.

Moving along, I noticed a few aries as well, whose golden fleece could be sheared and used for all sorts of different things. There were also unicorns. These creatures were a bit of a pain to take care of, as they only let fair maidens close enough to touch them, but their horns could purify any poison or miasma, making it worth the trouble. In the same vein, eikthyrnirs—mythical stags—had antlers that regrew once a year and provided a revitalizing tonic when consumed. They also made for a killer fertilizer; all one needed to do was crush them and sprinkle them on the ground to grow all sorts of plants.

The centaurs spent most of their time with the mythical beasts, running around the plains, accompanying them to the grassland to feed, sometimes going into the forest to feast on fresh plant shoots, and leading them to rest at the end of the day. Their connection with the mythical beasts went beyond mere caretaking; they lived and bonded with them. They also raised regular

cattle and grew crops in their settlement. As we approached, I even saw a few of them drawing harrows themselves to prepare the fields.

Teto and I hopped down from my staff in the middle of the centaurs' village and went to greet Cain, the centaurs' representative.

"Hi, how are you doing?"

"We came to check in on you guys!" Teto added.

"Lady Witch, Lady Teto!" Cain exclaimed when he saw us. "Thank you very much for your consideration. As you can see, the construction of our village is going smoothly."

Taking a look, I saw centaurs dragging carts filled with building materials, while others were in the process of constructing houses suited to their physique. All of the houses were single story only, as the centaurs had a tough time with stairs. From my perspective as a tiny eternal twelve-year-old, their houses were absolutely massive, much bigger than regular one-story homes.

Our perception of size sure is different, huh? I mused.

Still, I always enjoyed seeing how different all of the settlements were. They each had their quirks, which made for a unique experience every single time.

"Please help yourselves to some of my family's heidrun cheese and kumis," Cain offered.

It was very well-known that the way to Teto's and my hearts was through our stomachs.

"Thanks. Heidrun cheese is really good, isn't it?"

"Teto loves kumis!"

While the drink itself was technically alcoholic, it had a very low ABV, and even children could occasionally have a glass or two. For a while, the two of us just relaxed as we sipped our drinks—which tasted sweet and a bit similar to the fermented milk drinks I knew from my previous life—and snacked on some cheese.

"Is there something you guys are having trouble with?" I asked, just as I had in the other demon settlements. "We can help if you need it."

“Tell us everything!”

Cain hummed. “We’re very glad to be living in such a peaceful place. We can grow our own produce and raise cattle while our warriors go hunt in the Demon Den.”

About half of the centaur population took turns going to hunt in the Demon Den south of the forest. There was a Demon Den in the north as well, but the Mubad Empire was located right on the other side, and since we didn’t have any diplomatic ties with them, we decided to avoid venturing too far north to avoid trouble. Other races went hunting in the southern Demon Den as well, most of them staying at the hunters’ village near the border, which had really turned into a melting pot for all demonkind. In a way, that village was the most egalitarian place in the entire forest. While there was a bit of a trek between the north and the south of the forest, the centaurs had strong, powerful legs, meaning that they could traverse the entire land rather rapidly.

“Tell your warriors to be careful in the Demon Den, though. The monster population’s only gone up,” I warned Cain.

“If it gets too dangerous, don’t hesitate to run away!”

An awkward smile curled on Cain’s lips at our words. His face contorted into a bit of a grimace, as if he didn’t know whether to speak up or not. After a couple of seconds, he let out a defeated sigh and confessed, “To be honest with you, this land is a bit unfair. We’re capable of so much more, but we can’t really shine here.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

“We centaurs pride ourselves on our legs; we can travel long distances in mere minutes. But you already have griffins and pegasuses to fly to the other nations, and magic bags and transfer gates to deliver all sorts of goods from one side of the forest to the other in a split second,” Cain explained with a stiff smile, awkwardly tapping his hoof on the ground. “There’s no situation where our legs are of use to the community.”

Well, he had a point; the griffins and pegasuses were much faster than centaurs, and going through the transfer gates was even quicker. However...

“For now, I’m letting everyone use the transfer gates at will to help them settle in, but I plan on limiting them to only emergency use in the near future,” I said.

“Really?” Cain asked, surprised.

I nodded and explained my reasoning to him. I had made all of the transfer gates with my Creation Magic, which meant that if they broke, even I would have no idea how to repair them. I believed strongly that no matter how convenient a tool was, if it wasn’t sustainable, it shouldn’t be foundational to our society.

“And when that happens, we’re going to be counting on you guys a lot to travel through the forest and deliver goods.”

“The mythical beasts can’t have dozens of people riding them at once, after all!” Teto added.

The griffins and pegasuses could have two or three people riding on their backs at once, tops. Centaurs, on the other hand, could pull stagecoaches, which could seat four or five. If they used Body Strengthening, they could pull even bigger carriages with twice the passenger load. They wouldn’t be as fast as the mythical beasts, but they could help move more people and goods in a single trip.

“Besides, while all of the different demonic races interact a lot with us, you guys don’t really interact with each other a lot yet. That’ll change eventually, and when that happens, you’ll definitely get your time to shine.”

For now, the godkin were in charge of the postal service in the forest, but before long they wouldn’t be enough. I could imagine that in the future, the godkin would make use of their speed to deliver letters and small parcels, while the centaurs would be in charge of transporting bulk deliveries.

“It won’t happen overnight, but you’ll definitely be needed in the future to transport people and goods from one settlement to the other.”

Cain chewed on his words for a bit before saying, “I’m sorry, Lady Witch, Lady Teto. We didn’t think far enough down the road and bothered you with our troubles. Please forgive my impudence.”

“You don’t have to apologize. We haven’t even constructed roads between the different settlements yet. My point was simply that you don’t need to rush: I promise your time will come.”

“The cheese and kumis were so yummy; can we have some more?” Teto asked, a wide grin on her face as she handed her empty plate back to Cain.

An awkward smile formed on my lips as I mentally scolded her for the poor timing of her remark, but after some thought, perhaps it hadn’t been too out of place; after all, the centaurs’ cheese and kumis were completely different from equivalent products made with gauren milk. In a way, they had already found something unique no one else in the forest had done. Until the day came that we needed the logistical edge they had to offer, I hoped they’d be content polishing their farming skills.

Chapter 10: The Complexities of Resident Affairs

I had been spending the last few weeks going from settlement to settlement and checking on the demons, when one day the representatives of two races came to request an audience with me.

“Lady Witch, there’s something we need to talk to you about!”

One of them was a werewolf man named Howl; the other, a devilkin woman named Devalna. The two of them sat opposite Teto and me on the sofa in our reception room. Howl seemed pretty uncomfortable, perhaps since he was a bit too large for the sofa. Beside him, Devalna was sitting straight as a board, visibly nervous.

“You two came here so suddenly; is something the matter?” I asked.

Teto seemed to share my feelings. “If you have any troubles, Teto and Lady Witch will try to help!” she added.

“Lady Witch, you have let us move on to your land, and you’ve been nothing but kind to us. However, we cannot help but feel like we have too few occasions to interact with you!” Howl explained.

The werewolves’ and devilkin’s main activities were hunting and farming, and they were also helping the dragonkin and the godkin strengthen the relationships between all of the settlements. However, since they didn’t have unique skills like the other races, they were worried we would give preferential treatment to the others who had come before them.

“The lamias help you with your alchemy experiments; the centaurs raise cattle, grow crops, and look after the mythical beasts; the minotaurs and the oni-kin have started growing rice per your request; the multi-eyed demons help solve quarrels; the alraunes and the dryads take care of the forest and the medicinal herb gardens; the arachnes and the melissae can make beautiful fabric and high-quality honey... Everyone has unique things they can do!” Howl exclaimed.

Devalna nodded beside him, an anxious look on her face.

“So essentially, you guys want to be useful to us,” I summarized.

“Yes! Please give us something to do!”

I did occasionally hire individuals to work on administrative tasks or to help around in the mansion, but this wasn’t what Howl and Devalna wanted; they were hoping I could find something for all of the werewolves and devilkin to do.

“Hm, what to do, what to do...?” I mumbled.

And here I thought werewolves and devilkin were low-maintenance compared to the other races...

“What are you going to do, Lady Witch?” Teto asked me.

“I don’t really know...”

Since they didn’t have any outstanding abilities in particular, there wasn’t a job that they could do better than anyone else. Take the godkin, for example; they could fly, meaning that they could easily travel to other countries, and were very pleasant to look at, which made it more agreeable for other merchants to agree to their terms. They had become indispensable to us, and it was highly unlikely we would ever kick them out of the forest—both because they were some of the first demons who moved in, but also just from a profit standpoint—so we’d never need to replace them.

The werewolves and the devilkin, on the other hand, weren’t technically essential to us, which seemed to be the cause of their concern; they were worried we would expel them from the forest out of the blue. I, of course, had no intention to do anything of the sort, but I saw where they were coming from.

In these types of situations, most people would try to make themselves indispensable by marrying the ruler of the land they lived in. However, the idea of marrying a man while my body was that of an eternal twelve-year-old didn’t sit right with me. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.

“I suppose you won’t take ‘Keep on doing what you’ve been doing’ for an answer, will you?”

“We won’t!” Howl and Devalna replied simultaneously.

What a pain.

“I know! We should sculpt bronze statues of Lady Witch and install them in every settlement to honor her greatness!” Howl said.

“And we can use our singing skills from our days as traveling entertainers to sing her praises!” Devalna added excitedly.

“Please don’t,” I interrupted with a stern look.

Disappointed, both of them slumped their shoulders and dropped their heads. “Okay...” they conceded.

The thought of them sculpting statues of me or composing songs about my “greatness” made chills run down my back. I was positive I would faint out of sheer embarrassment if they ever did anything of the sort.

As I sat there, pondering this whole situation, a realization struck me.

“Didn’t you guys mention wanting to send your kids to school?” I inquired.

“W-We did. We talked about it during the council, and it seems that every race shares the same desire: to contribute to the upbringing of the next generation.”

“How about you teach the kids, then?”

“H-Huuuh?!” The two representatives exclaimed in shock, taken aback by the sudden proposal.

The kids already had the opportunity to learn various skills with the schools we had installed in the demon settlements. However, I believed that it would be in their best interest to have a couple of demon teachers as well.

“You guys have experience living in the outside world. How about you put that knowledge to use and teach the kids what you know?”

“Us?” Devalna repeated in shock.

“Yes, you. Of course, the kids would still have to learn the more race-specific stuff from their own relatives, but you could teach them how to read, write, and count.”

Werewolves had spent a long time living hidden among humans; not only did

they possess all of these basic skills, but they were also well-versed in human customs. Teaching this to the kids would ensure that they would be able to survive in human society on the off chance that they found themselves alone abroad. As for the devilkin, they, too, were familiar with reading, writing, and counting from traveling from town to town as itinerant entertainers. Plus they possessed a good understanding of magic.

“Besides, the kids would need to learn how to use disguise skills like Humanchange or Transformation to blend in with their surroundings and avoid getting in trouble if they’re ever going to leave the forest. You guys could teach them those things. So? What do you think? Want to work at the demon schools?”

“We humbly accept and will do the utmost within our meager abilities!” the two of them said in perfect sync, bowing their heads, drawing out an awkward smile from me.

They told me that they would talk things over with their brethren and get back to me in a couple of days.

After they left, I leaned against the back of the sofa and let out a deep sigh. “I didn’t expect those two to have such low self-esteem,” I muttered.

“They’re all amazing, though!” Teto said.

The werewolves and the devilkin often trained with Yahad and Shael, and they could be absolutely terrifying. Take Howl, for instance; in his human form, he appeared as an unremarkable young man, but the next instant, he could transform into a werewolf and deliver a swift surprise attack on his opponent. On top of that, unlike the Hagle werewolves, who relied solely on brute force, this particular werewolf tribe could move in total silence, allowing them to quickly reposition to their opponent’s blind spots and then tear apart their vital points with their sharp claws and fangs. This allowed them to hold their own even against Yahad and Shael.

Devalna was just as impressive: devilkin possessed bat-like wings that they usually kept small with the Transformation skill. However, during combat, they would unfurl these wings to their full breadth, allowing them to fly and avoid attacks, all while overwhelming their opponent with wave after wave of magic

bullets. They had a pretty limited attack repertoire, but there was only so much one could do against an aerial barrage.

Of course, the werewolves and devilkin weren't the only good fighters among the demons. For instance, the centaurs' mastery of the "mounted" charge made them excellent shock troops and allowed them to take down even large creatures with ease. Additionally, their highly muscular upper bodies let them wield heavy bows. This, coupled with the stability offered by their four legs, made them pretty devastating mobile artillery, packing both keen precision and raw power. As for the minotaurs, their impressive physique let them effortlessly carry full-body armor, tower shields, and heavy weapons like battle-axes. They were almost like living ramparts; breaking through their ranks would be no easy feat, especially considering that the mere wind pressure generated by the swing of their battle-axes had the potential to fell weaker foes.

"It feels a bit like all of the world's strongest warriors came crawling out of the woodwork and gathered here," I mused.

The low-mana environment of the outside world must've prevented the demons from using their abilities at their peak. But here, with the abundance of mana from the World Trees, every single one of them was as strong as ten regular warriors.

"Well, let's hope they won't have to actually use these skills in the future, though."

A few days later, we met with Howl and Devalna again. They and the rest of their tribes agreed to work at the school. Over time, some of the werewolves transitioned into scholars, aspiring to deepen their understanding of their subject matter. Some of the most zealous ones even started working at the library. As for the devilkin, the skills they had learned on the road prompted a few of them to create new forms of art and entertainment to share with the rest of the forest. Others went in a completely different direction, using their high magical aptitudes to become magic teachers and researchers, nurturing many generations of magicians.

Chapter 11: Liriel's Present

Some time had passed since the refugees had moved into the wasteland, and things were finally starting to calm down. One night, Teto and I fell asleep and woke up in the empty, black space of a dream oracle. Looking around, I saw two goddesses standing in the room with us: Liriel, the goddess who had made me reincarnate into this world and appointed me as her prophet, and Leriell, the Goddess of the Skies and the main reason we managed to stop the stampede in the west before it caused too much damage.

"Liriel and Leriell?" I said.

"Good work out there, Chise," Liriel told me. "Things have finally started coming back to normal, haven't they?"

She must've been watching over us this whole time.

"Thanks, Liriel. I haven't done anything special, though; everyone worked as a team to ensure the refugees would settle in properly."

I meant it; the demons' representatives each took care of their own settlement, and Beretta was in charge of the rest. Teto and I were just taking it easy and doing whatever we felt like, as always.

"Anyway, why did you summon us? Did something happen?" I asked.

"Another monster attack? Teto and Lady Witch will take care of it!" Teto assured, bending her arm and flexing her tiny biceps.

To this day, I still had no idea how Teto could be so stupidly strong with such soft, skinny arms. I playfully poked at the springy skin of her arm, causing her to squirm as if it tickled.

Liriel chuckled. "Not this time, no. Leriell wanted to thank you two."

"Sorry I didn't get around to doing it before," Leriell said sheepishly. "I'm really thankful for you stopping the stampede, and I've prepared a little present for you as a reward."

“You really didn’t need to,” I argued.

When we’d sealed the seepage point in the leylines for Lariel, she’d given us cavorite crystals and some rare magic ore, and Luriel had allowed us to take the dragonkin, godkin, and mythical beasts into the forest as a reward when we’d helped her. To be honest, I was a bit scared as to what Lariel’s “present” was.

“I’m going to give you a dungeon!” she announced.

“A...dungeon,” I echoed, unimpressed.

In the past, Beretta and I had discussed the possibility of artificially creating a dungeon by using our leyline managing device to concentrate all the mana into a single spot. Ultimately, we decided that the risk of a stampede wasn’t worth whatever we’d get out of having our own personal dungeon, and shelved the idea.

“Judging by your face, I take it you don’t want it. But the dungeon I want to give you isn’t the same as the ones that appear due to seepage points in the leylines,” Lariel said.

She proceeded to tell me that there were two types of dungeons. The first one was, as she mentioned, the kind that appeared when too much mana accumulated in one spot. These served to spread that stagnant mana by turning it into monsters and treasures. Once an adventurer defeated a monster in one of those dungeons, they’d take their magic stones and loot with them outside the dungeon, along with any treasure they’d found, returning it to circulation. And if no one visited the dungeon, it would attempt to scatter the mana on its own by forcefully ejecting the monsters from its confines, resulting in a stampede. To avoid that, people either regularly dived into the dungeons to cull the monsters and hunt for treasure, or went directly for the dungeon core to clear it once and for all.

As for the second one...

“The dungeon I want to give you is one of the old types. Back in the day, anyone with enough mana could create dungeons and customize them to their liking!”

“Oh, this really brings me back,” Luriel interjected. “Back when we were still

newborn goddesses, we'd make dungeons to practice how to manage the continent."

"There was plenty of mana back then, so we'd create dungeons for the humans to clear as a sort of test. We'd hide divine artifacts we had made in them, and whoever cleared the dungeon and took those artifacts home would be lauded as a hero by everyone else," Liriel explained to me.

"It allowed us to spot people with the temperament to become war spirits and angels after death too," Liriel added.

They must've been talking about an era even more ancient than the days of the precursors. To this day, humans still used dungeons as training grounds, but I had no idea Liriel and the others had used them as simulation tools in the past. The idea that anyone with enough mana, from ancient dragons to mythical beasts, spirits, devils, or even magicians, could create customized dungeons was truly astonishing. Apparently, some of the ruins that dotted the continent were remnants of ancient dungeons that had lost their masters.

"These types of dungeons are pretty much minibiomes that simulate the world, so there's no risk of a stampede ever occurring," Liriel told me. "If you create monsters to populate the dungeon, they'll generate enough mana to keep it standing without any micromanagement."

"Everything that I taught you when you were still in the process of regenerating the wasteland applies to the management and upkeep of a dungeon too," Liriel said.

She added that I'd be able to do a lot of different things using the mana produced by the dungeon, though it'd be limited by how much mana I poured into it, as well as how much could pump in from the surrounding area.

"Sounds like we have a lot of decisions to make," I said.

"Teto is really excited to see what you'll come up with, Lady Witch!" Teto chirped.

I already had so many ideas. For example, I could load the first layer with easy monsters and turn it into a training facility for the forest's residents. This would also help supply the demons' demand for magic stones. As for the other layers, I

could cover one in World Tree saplings to have it work as a mana production factory, and create a beach and ocean in another to have access to things like salt, seaweed, and marine products. If I made it into a tropical environment, we could even grow exotic plants like sugarcane, coffee plants, and cacao trees.

As I stood there in silence, thinking of all the things I could do with my new dungeon, an exasperated smile curled on Liriel's lips. "Chise, it's supposed to be a present for *you*, yet you're only thinking of ways it could be useful to the forest's residents, aren't you?" she said, seeing right through me.

"Uh... I'm thinking of turning a layer into something that'd be of use to Teto and me too, of course. But can I really have it?"

"Of course!" Liriel chirped. "Whatever you do with it, I know it's going to be very *you*."

She then told us that the dungeon she made for us was pretty small, with only three layers. Depending on what I did with it, I could add more down the line.

"Only three levels, huh? There's so many things I want to do, though."

"Lady Witch, Teto would like a dungeon that makes yummy food!"

Only three layers...

"Chise, it's almost time to wake up," Liriel said, an amused smile on her face as she watched me agonize over how to use my new dungeon.

"I'm looking forward to seeing what you do with it!" Liriel said, and I felt my consciousness fading.

I woke up from the dream oracle and turned towards Teto, who was looking at me. Instantly, the two of us shot up from the bed and scrambled to put our clothes on. The second that we were dressed, Beretta rushed into our room.

"Master, I have urgent news. A dungeon has appeared in the forest!"

"Yeah, we know. It's a gift from Liriel," I told her.

"We're gonna make a dungeon!" Teto chirped, and the two of us headed out to check out our new toy.

It had appeared in the central-western part of the forest, on the opposite side

of the mansion from the main World Tree. Straddling my staff with Teto riding behind me, I quickly made my way there, only to find the Great Elder circling overhead. He must've sensed its presence.

"Good morning, Great Elder!" I greeted him.

"Good morning!" Teto echoed behind me.

"Oh, Lady Witch, Lady Guardian. I suddenly sensed a very nostalgic aura, and the next thing you know, I'd found that an old dungeon has appeared in the forest!" the Great Elder said, looking down at the white stone construct under him.

Unlike all of the dungeons I had seen up until now—which were basically giant rocks with a single hole that served as entrance and exit, this one had a divine aura to it, a bit like a temple.

"It's a gift from the goddesses," Teto told him, raising her voice so he could hear her from the sky. "Lady Witch and Teto will turn it into a place where we can get lots of yummy magic stones and food!"

The Great Elder chuckled, visibly amused. "Is that so? I'm looking forward to it. If you ever need a helping hand, just let me know. I've dabbled in dungeon-making before, and I'd be happy to share some advice with you."

"You've done this before?" I asked.

"I sure have. In my younger days, I used to nest in dungeons; I'd keep my hoard there, and there'd always be a steady stream of adventurers I could preoccupy myself with."

So even the always calm and composed Great Elder used to have a bit of a mischievous side when he was younger, huh? I mused.

The world must've been a very different place back then—the Great Elder *was* almost ten thousand years old, after all.

"Well then, now that I've figured out what's the matter, I'm going to head on home," he said.

"Okay. We're going to play around with the dungeon a bit. We'll let you know if we have any questions."

“Please look forward to our dungeon!” Teto added.

The Great Elder went back to his grotto, and Teto and I stepped into the dungeon.

Chapter 12: Chise, the Rookie Dungeon Master

We arrived in a large room with white walls and a white ceiling. It was almost entirely empty, except for a pedestal on which the dungeon core was placed.

“Here’s the core,” I noted. “But how do we actually customize the dungeon?”

“Try touching it,” Teto suggested, and I did just that.

As soon as my hand came in contact with the dungeon core, it started glowing brightly.

“Ugh!”

“Lady Witch! Are you okay?” Teto asked, rushing to support my body as I lost my balance.

Touching the dungeon core had pretty much downloaded the dungeon’s entire operating manual right into my brain, and I couldn’t help the little cry of pain that escaped my lips at the sudden onslaught of information. Thankfully, the instructions were pretty easy to understand, so my headache was gone in an instant.

“I’m fine, Teto,” I reassured her, putting my hand on the dungeon core a second time.

This time, nothing happened.

“*Charge!*” I chanted. “Activate the dungeon core!”

“Oh! Something appeared!” Teto exclaimed.

I looked around and noticed that several semitransparent rectangles had appeared around us. They looked just like status screens. I realized that I could use my thoughts to telekinetically pull them closer and began reading the text written on them, starting from the top page, taking mental notes of everything I thought was important: the dungeon’s layout, the items I could summon, place, and craft in there, the materials absorbed into the dungeon, the mana balance inside, and so forth and so on.

“It’s like a game,” I commented.

“Teto doesn’t really understand what’s going on, but it’s very easy to read!”

Thinking about it, I’d always thought that the status system was also very similar to something you’d find in a game. These dungeons had been around for much longer than statuses, though—perhaps this world had been created based on these sorts of gamelike elements, and the goddesses were the ones who decided whether to implement them or not...

“Lady Witch? You’re staring into space; are you okay?” Teto asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Hm? Ah, sorry, I’m good. All righty then, let’s see what we can do with this bad boy.”

Teto and I checked out what sorts of monsters and tools we could summon into the dungeon. As we did so, my dreams of customizing the dungeon entirely to my liking slowly began to crumble.

“We have so few options...” I commented.

There were plentiful options for adjusting the layers, such as the type of monsters we could add or the environment of that layer, and each of them had its own mana cost. But I was dejected to see how thin on the ground our choices were once you got past all the top-level granularity.

“For now, we can only choose between a wasteland or a grotto for the environment. There goes my dreams of a beach layer.”

As for the monsters that would spawn on that layer, we had two options. The first was to summon “simulacra”—in other words, illusory versions of the monsters I chose to put in the dungeon. These couldn’t exist outside of dungeons, and when they died, they didn’t leave a body behind, only loot and magic stones. Not only did it cost very little mana to summon them, but it also made the operational costs of that layer much cheaper, as the fake monsters could feed on the dungeon’s mana and didn’t need any external sustenance. Another advantage was that they would listen to the dungeon master’s orders no matter the circumstances, just like machines.

Now, this method had its fair share of drawbacks as well. First of all, the

monsters would never develop. As a rule of thumb, dungeon monsters were always weaker than the ones who lived in the outside world. The latter had the opportunity to grow and gain life experience, while dungeon monsters pretty much stayed in the same environment the whole time, hindering their overall growth potential. On top of that, while the simulacra didn't need to eat, they couldn't reproduce either, meaning I'd have to add new monsters myself on a regular basis. But then again, this also meant that I could control the exact number of monsters in the dungeon, meaning we'd never have to worry about the risk of a stampede or any other monster-related catastrophe. One last disadvantage was that these monsters didn't produce mana.

"We're very limited with what we can do with monsters and living creatures in general, huh?" I mumbled.

If we didn't want to go the simulacra route, our other option was called "full summoning." Unlike the previous method, this would allow us to have actual monsters with real flesh bodies roaming around. While the method was called "summoning" monsters, it wasn't about calling forth monsters from the outside world to populate the dungeon, but creating them using mana. I didn't know the specifics, but since monsters were born when there was a surplus of mana in one spot, I supposed it made sense that you could create monsters by dumping a lot of mana into a discrete form.

"Hmmm, it's really complicated! Do you understand what it means, Lady Witch?" Teto asked me.

I nodded. "For the most part. But it looks like I'll have to give it a few tries to really get the hang of it."

Going for real monsters obviously didn't have the same drawbacks. However, there were other considerations to take into account—namely the fact that these monsters would be harder to handle, and the summoning costs way higher. And while I'd have to spend less mana to feed the monsters, I'd have to provide them with real food, or they'd die of starvation. As a side note, it seemed to be possible to evolve simulacra into real monsters by spending more mana later down the line.

"For now, I'm going to seal off the dungeon. I need some time to gather more

information before letting people in,” I decided.

“Roger! Lady Witch, Teto’s hungry!”

We had skipped breakfast to go check out the dungeon, so we were both quite hungry by now.

“Wanna have breakfast here?” I suggested.

“Yes! And then we can start playing with the dungeon!”

I used my portable magic communication device to tell Beretta that Teto and I wouldn’t be needing breakfast. It wasn’t uncommon for us to eat out or prepare our own meals, so Beretta was already used to receiving these sorts of messages.

“What would you like to eat?” I asked.

Teto hummed pensively. “The pastries we used to eat a lot of before! The ones filled with all sorts of stuff!”

“Stuffed breads and sandwiches, you mean? It’s been a while since I last made some of those, huh? *Creation!*”

I set up the table and chairs we used during our days as adventurers and created all sorts of buns and pastries using my magic—rolls filled with red bean paste or jam, melon bread, doughnuts, danishes, curry buns, yakisoba rolls, pork cutlet sandwiches, ham and cheese sandwiches, meat and potato croquette sandwiches, hamburgers, et cetera, et cetera. All of them came individually wrapped in plastic packaging, as if I had just bought them at the convenience store.

If Beretta was here, she’d offer to bake fresh buns for us, and they would undoubtedly be better than these. But right now I didn’t want some nice, homemade sandwiches and pastries; I was craving the cheap stuff I remembered eating in my previous life.

“I love the food the mechanoids make for us, but sometimes you just want to have some junk food, huh?” I mused out loud.

“Teto wants the curry buns and yakisoba rolls!” Teto chirped, eagerly ripping off the packaging of her selected buns and digging straight in.

“I think I’ll have these ones,” I said, picking up a ham and cheese sandwich and a nice, saucy croquette sandwich.

It was a lot of bread, though, so my throat started feeling dry. I created a couple of drinks in plastic bottles to accompany our meal.

“It’s been so long since we last had these,” Teto said. “They’re really good!”

“I wish we could create a dungeon layer with a hotter climate to grow the spices we’d need to make curry.” I sighed, eyeing Teto’s curry bread.

Holding my sandwich in one hand, I resumed reading the dungeon’s information screens.

“Have you figured something out, Lady Witch?” Teto asked me.

“I was checking the example layers to calculate how much it’d cost to create and maintain one,” I explained.

It seemed that the dungeon’s maintenance costs encompassed any repair expenses that might arise.

First of all, I decided to delete the dungeon’s randomly generated layers without entering the customization mode. I wondered if the layers in the dungeons that appeared due to stagnant mana were generated randomly too. Perhaps they took elements from the sample layers and the dungeon database and just dumped them in a layer. The environment might have been predetermined based on the dungeon’s location as well.

“Looks like I can’t just make a dungeon and reset it for free if I don’t like it, huh?”

Not only would I have to use a lot of mana to create the layers, but I’d need to spend the same amount to delete them. This was inconvenient, but I could live with it. But the main issue was that I wouldn’t be able to delete a layer if there were living creatures in it. This meant that I’d need to implement a way to teleport any person or monster out of a layer before I could delete it.

Holding my sandwich in one hand, I started messing with the example layer. I might have had the dungeon’s instruction manual transplanted into my brain when I touched the dungeon core, but all that did was teach me how to handle

it, a bit like learning the controls in a game. But there were still lots of things I didn't know.

If only there was a wiki for dungeon making, I lamented, reaching for my drink, my eyes still glued to the screen.

"Ah."

I hadn't grasped the bottle tight enough. It slipped from my grip and fell to the floor, its contents spilling everywhere.

"Oops," I said.

"The floor is all dirty now."

I had decided to have some soda today for the first time in a while. I usually drank only tea and fresh fruit juice prepared by Beretta and the others, but today I felt like having something different.

"Here, Lady Witch," Teto said, handing me a towel.

"Thanks, Teto." I took the towel and started wiping the soda off the table. But when I went to clean the floor, I saw the liquid get absorbed by the dungeon.

"We haven't made the layers yet, but at the end of the day, it's still a dungeon, huh?" I mused.

Dungeons absorbed everything that you dumped in them, from dead bodies to equipment. If you dropped something in a dungeon, chances were you'd never see it again. They did this to maintain the environment, using these materials to supplement what was lacking and discarding the rest.

Wondering where the soda had disappeared, I shifted my attention back to the information screens only to see that a pop-up window had appeared on one of them.

"Huh? What's this?"

"Is something wrong, Lady Witch?" Teto asked me, looking up from the many buns she was holding.

I touched the dungeon core again to bring that screen closer to me. It seemed like the message was some sort of notification.

The element “Carbonated Water” has been introduced to the dungeon. Installations using this material have been unlocked.

Looking at the elements I could put inside the dungeon, I noticed that the “Carbonated Fountain” installation had been added to the “Springs and Fountains” category.

Chapter 13: Material Absorption and New Installations

Taking a closer look at the installations screen, I noticed that I had simply unlocked the *right* to create a carbonated fountain; if I wanted to actually build it, I'd still need to gather the necessary resources and expend the required mana.

"It says here that I need a hundred thousand liters of carbonated water and 3,000,000 MP to create it."

It definitely wasn't cheap, but once the fountain was built, it'd give us access to an unlimited supply of carbonated water.

"Lady Witch, something is moving on the screen," Teto pointed out.

The screen had grayed out when I tried to install the fountain, and a pop-up stating that I didn't have enough materials had appeared. Under that, a button was flickering.

"Material Exchange," I read. "It looks like I can turn the mana I've charged into the dungeon core into materials, and vice versa."

For example, I would need to spend 30 MP to get one liter of carbonated water. It'd be stored in the dungeon's subspace, and I could use it as a material for any installations that required it.

"30 MP for a liter, huh? Let's see... *Creation*: carbonated water!" I chanted, materializing a liter. "Looks to cost about the same as my Creation Magic."

The water I had created didn't have any sugar or anything added to it and didn't come in a container, unlike my soda from earlier. Taking a look at my remaining mana pool, it seemed to have cost me around 30 MP, the same as what the dungeon's exchange system charged.

"So it'd cost me 3,000,000 MP to create the materials and another 3,000,000 to install the fountain," I muttered as I watched the puddle of carbonated water

get absorbed by the dungeon.

“With your mana pool, you can easily do it!” Teto said.

The dungeon core could hold up to 30,000,000 MP, which was quite impressive. Teto was right; with my mana pool, it’d take me no time to gather the required mana to create the carbonated water fountain. However, I decided to shelve the idea for the time being: there were still a few things I wanted to verify first.

“This turning the materials into mana function seems pretty nifty too,” I commented.

This was something I couldn’t do with my Creation Magic.

So as it turned out, dungeons could either turn mana into all sorts of different things or disassemble outside materials and use them to create installations and other assets. I had heard tales of stampedes having occurred due to people treating the dungeons like literal dumpsters, throwing everything they didn’t want in them. Before, I was puzzled as to why littering in a dungeon would lead to a stampede, but now I understood. The discarded items were broken down into mana, building up over time. And when there was too much of it, the dungeon would generate large quantities of monsters to disperse it, resulting in a stampede. At least, that was my working theory, going by what little I understood now about dungeon logistics.

Taking another look at the materials-to-mana exchange screen, it seemed that the efficiency of converting materials into mana was worse than creating materials directly. Additionally, a significant amount of mana was consumed when removing installations.

“Creation and destruction, huh?” I mused. “Since it’s less efficient to turn the materials back into mana, I can’t just create and destroy things recklessly. The goddesses said they used these dungeons to practice managing the world, and I can see why; it really forces you to be cautious.”

They must’ve also used their own creation powers to create all sorts of items that the dungeons couldn’t generate themselves.

“Lady Witch, what are you going to do now?” Teto asked me.

“I still need to test out more things. *Creation*: iron ingot!”

I dropped the ingot on the floor and watched the dungeon absorb it. Just like my soda earlier, it unlocked new installations for the dungeon: iron weapons and iron ore veins.

“These require materials and mana as well.”

All I needed was to gather the required materials and pay the mana cost once—plus the daily upkeep—and I could have access to inexhaustible iron veins. This made me realize something.

“Wouldn’t that mean I’d be expanding the world, in a way?” I muttered.

“What do you mean, Lady Witch?” Teto asked, blinking in confusion.

“Well, when I create things and monsters with my Creation Magic and the dungeon’s creation function, it makes the total mass of the world increase, right?”

“Is there a problem with that?” Her head tilted to the side as if she didn’t see the problem. And maybe she was right; maybe there *was* no problem with the mass of the world increasing. But...

“What is mana in the first place? It can be converted into actual tangible matter, cause natural phenomena, be consumed by living beings, and even just vanish into thin air.”

Mana was the foundation of this world. Stars, humans, plants, animals, monsters... All living beings produced mana, yet they also needed to consume it to survive. Just what in the world was it? In nature, it acted like a gas, yet it also had soluble properties, as it could be mixed in water. It could travel through metals and be stored in gemstones, a bit like how heat transfer worked, but it could also coagulate into a solid form inside monsters and turn into mana stones. Unfortunately, I hadn’t studied physics or anything of the sort in my past life, so I couldn’t really form any hypotheses as to what mana really was, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized how strange it was.

“Uh... Teto doesn’t know either! All Teto knows is that Lady Witch’s mana is really yummy!”

“See, that’s weird too. Why do different beings’ mana taste different?” I asked.

Moral of the story: mana was weird. I wasn’t the kind of person who could ponder over the same thing for hours, so I shrugged off my questions and went back to experimenting with dropping random things in the dungeon to see what would happen: metals, crystals, sand, sandstone, rocks, precious gems, laterite, leaf mold... Anything that crossed my mind, I created with my magic and made the dungeon absorb it.

I even tried dropping magic metals like mythril, adamantium, and orichalcum, as well as magic crystals and cavorite to see what would happen; it unlocked ore vein installations for all of them. However, these cost a boatload of mana, way over the 30,000,000 MP the dungeon core could store.

I tried dropping seeds and even fully grown plants, the leftovers of our breakfast, monster carcasses I had stored in my magic bag... Just like everything else, the dungeon absorbed them, and not only did I unlock new installations, but new environments as well: I now had the option of creating grassland and forest layers.

However, there were exceptions to everything. In this case, the exception was World Tree materials. I tried dropping seeds and branches into the dungeon, but they didn’t unlock any special installations. I did, however, have the option of planting the World Tree saplings I had dropped into the dungeon. They weren’t treated as renewable objects like the other installations; they would grow like normal trees inside the dungeon.

Furthermore, it also seemed that the materials that I didn’t have any use for could be broken down and repurposed into other materials. For instance, the monsters’ bodies could be separated into blood, flesh, and bones. The dungeon also absorbed the monsters’ genetic information, meaning that I could now summon monsters of the same type.

“I wonder what happens when a dungeon absorbs a human’s dead body. Do they turn into material as well?” I asked no one in particular.

I had tried dropping a dead skeleton-type monster, and it had turned it into materials, so I assumed it’d do the same to a human body...though it wasn’t a

particularly pleasant thought.

Teto quickly grew tired of watching me drop random things in the dungeon. To curb her boredom, I used the dungeon's commands to conjure a large boulder into the room so she could practice her sword techniques. Ever since she had tried replicating Arsus's attack during the stampede, she had become even stronger than before; her sword cut through the rock like butter.

"Haaa! Nope, it still didn't work."

"So even you can't damage this room, huh?"

With the sheer force of her attacks, there should've been some scratches on the floor and walls, but there wasn't a single one to be found. It seemed that this room was indestructible.

As I continued to explore the dungeon controls, I landed on a new page.

"Dungeon Seed?" I read. "It costs 300,000,000 MP... That's absurdly high."

So there were even items to grow other dungeons, huh? I was so taken aback by the number of zeroes that I thought I had read it wrong, but nope; it really was that expensive.

"300,000,000 MP..." I repeated. "Well, it's not like I have that kind of mana lying around, nor do I plan on building another dungeon, so I guess I can just ignore it."

Perhaps displaying items that were way too high for anyone to buy with their mana pool was a way to guide dungeon masters to the ultimate goal of dungeon creation. But then again, before the catastrophe of two thousand years ago, the world was much more abundant with mana; maybe 300,000,000 MP wasn't that much back then. Among the heroes who cleared the goddesses' dungeons, some might have bought a dungeon seed and grown dungeons of their own, just like the Great Elder.

Chapter 14: The Truth behind the Strange Fruits

I spent the next few days repeating my little experiments and ended up learning a lot about dungeon making. Normally, I'd ask Beretta and the others to assist me with my experiments, as it'd allow me to gather data much faster. But I didn't plan on making dungeon-making anything more than a hobby, and I wanted to take my time with it, so for the time being, it was just Teto and me.

After about a week of repeating the same routine, I felt like I had learned all I could. But when it came to actually building the dungeon, I had absolutely no idea what to start with.

"There are too many things we could do with it; I'm a bit lost."

"Teto thinks you should make a dungeon where we can get yummy food and do fun things!" Teto suggested.

I nodded pensively. "This was the initial plan. Maybe I should stick to it and focus on creating a utilitarian layer for now."

Using the mana stored in the dungeon core, I tried to plan the layout of the layer, but I once again found myself overwhelmed by the possibilities. Even after deciding I wanted it to be a practical layer, there were still too many options.

"Yeah, no, I still have no idea what I want to do with it," I confessed.

"You should go ask Mister Great Elder for advice!" Teto suggested.

"Good idea. Let's go."

We took the transfer gate that I had installed at the dungeon's entrance and teleported back to the mansion, where I sent a message to the Great Elder to ask for his help.

Minutes later, he landed behind the mansion.

"I rushed over when I heard you two wanted to ask me for advice about the dungeon," he said. "So? How are things going?"

“You didn’t have to come right away, you know?” I said with an awkward smile. I hadn’t expected him to come quite so soon.

“To be honest with you, I was actually looking forward to hearing from you,” he said, chuckling. His tail was swaying slowly, confirming his good mood.

“Beretta, can you make us some tea?”

“Yes, Master.”

I had her and the mechanoids install a table and chairs for us in preparation for what I could only imagine would be a long conversation. In the meantime, Teto and I made small talk with the Great Elder. He seemed particularly amused.

“Lady Witch, I see you have created yet another peculiar thing,” he commented, looking at one of the trees behind the mansion.

It was one of the trees I had created during my experiments with World Trees and sakura trees. This particular one had been born after I grafted fruit tree branches onto a World Tree sapling. Despite being a World Tree, its mana production and growth rate were the same as those of a normal tree, but the fruits it bore had the same properties as the strange fruits I ate to grow my mana pool.

“Want one? They’re good,” I offered.

“Teto can pick it for you!”

She dashed to the tree and plucked off a few fruits from the branches.

The Great Elder chuckled awkwardly at her enthusiasm. “I knew that you used your Creation Magic to make fruits imbued with mana, but I didn’t know you wanted to artificially replicate them,” he told me.

“I wasn’t really planning on it; it just sort of happened while I was experimenting with stuff in my tower.”

Just as I didn’t know where the Great Elder flew off to whenever he left the wasteland, he had no idea what I was doing in my lab

“Do you know what these fruits are called?” he asked me.

“I thought they were strange fruits. They’re not?”

I didn’t really know a lot about these fruits other than how to grow them.

“Many legends and myths surround them, but they are generally referred to as the ‘fruits of eternal youth,’” the Great Elder told me.

Apparently, these trees were said to only bear fruit in lands rich with mana, and even then, it wasn’t uncommon for them to go hundreds of years without producing any fruit at all. Eating a single one could extend one’s lifespan by a few years, making them highly sought after.

“Myths and tales about these fruits have been passed down for generations, claiming that they could lengthen people’s lifespans and grant them immense quantities of mana and power.”

“I see... I guess it makes sense; the bigger one’s mana pool is, the slower they age.”

I had taken inspiration from a status-boosting item from a certain RPG to create my first strange fruit. As it turned out, it seemed to be closer to stuff like fruits from the tree of life in the Old Testament, the apples from Avalon, Eris’s Golden Apple, or the Peaches of Immortality from Chinese mythology.

“But neither the fruits I made with my Creation Magic nor the ones from the trees gave me those ‘immense quantities of mana’ you mentioned. I’ve only gotten a little bit from each fruit,” I pointed out.

“After tasting the ones Lady Guardian just brought me, I can tell that they’re not quite the same as the fruits of eternal youth from ancient times. While they did grant me some mana, it seems that the trees are still immature,” the Great Elder said.

“I see.”

They might not be the real deal yet, but to think I’ve been eating such rare and valuable fruits every day since I reincarnated... I thought in shock as Teto stuffed her face with the fruits beside me.

“Master, Lady Teto, Great Elder. The tea is ready,” Beretta announced.

“Thanks, Beretta. I really appreciate it. I need something to calm myself down

a bit; tea will be perfect.”

I still needed to digest the news about the true nature of my strange fruits.

“It’s snack time!” Teto chirped, reaching for the sweets on the table despite just having eaten a bunch of fruits.

The maids poured some tea into a large barrel for the Great Elder.

“Do you think I should cut down that tree?” I asked.

“Why would you do that? It would take decades for these trees to turn into the real thing. Besides, this place is particularly plentiful in mana; a couple of trees might even spring up on their own. You don’t have to stop eating the fruit,” the Great Elder said, smiling as if to reassure me that I hadn’t done anything wrong.

Perhaps one day I’d need to develop the more potent version of the fruit, but we’d cross that bridge when we came to it.

“Well then, Lady Witch, Lady Guardian. Let’s put an end to the complicated discussions and focus on that dungeon of yours.”

“Good idea. Thank you for agreeing to help us, by the way.”

“Please tell us how to make a yummy dungeon!” Teto chimed in eagerly, causing the Great Elder to burst into laughter.

“I’ll tell you everything I know,” he assured us.

I decided to push the matter of the strange fruits to a corner of my brain and focus on the task at hand. I’d probably keep on eating them, even now that I knew what they really were. For now, what mattered was making progress with the dungeon.

Chapter 15: The Ancient Dragon's Lecture

And so our little garden tea-party-slash-dungeon-making-lecture began.

"First of all, what type of dungeon do you want to build, Lady Witch, Lady Guardian?" the Great Elder asked, looking at me with expectant eyes.

"Uh..." I smiled awkwardly as I pondered what I should ask him about.

"Teto has a question!" Teto exclaimed next to me, raising her hand.

"A question from Lady Guardian! What is it?"

"What kind of dungeon did *you* build, Mister Great Elder?"

I thought that was a very good question; perhaps knowing what the thought process behind that dungeon had been would help me come up with questions.

Good job, Teto.

"As I told you before, I built a dungeon to use as my lair. Back then, humans would often try to attack me, you see. I grew tired of it and created the most labyrinthine maze I could manage to repel them," he explained.

A labyrinth with a dragon at the end, huh? This was probably the first thing that came to most adventurers' minds when they heard the word "dungeon."

"Yeah, that's not really the direction we were thinking of going," I said.

"I can imagine. What about a resource dungeon? You could harvest all sorts of things that you can't grow in the forest. You could also make it into a training dungeon to help the people of this land grow more powerful, or turn it into a giant mana production facility."

The "resource dungeon" he mentioned definitely seemed the closest to what I had in mind.

"Let's say I want to make a resource dungeon. How should I go about designing it?" I asked.

The Great Elder threw out his chest as if he had been waiting for this

question. “First of all, I imagine you’re aware that you won’t be able to endlessly extract resources from an installation after placing it inside the dungeon.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Teto said, tilting her head to one side in confusion.

“The dungeon requires me to pay operating costs, remember?” I told her.

Not only would I need to spend the required materials and mana to build an installation, but I’d also have to spend a certain quantity of mana daily to sustain it.

“Let’s say you have built an iron vein, and it’s now fully depleted. If you can’t muster the mana to sustain it, it’ll just remain empty indefinitely. And even if you eventually find the mana to keep it going, it won’t regenerate its resources in a single day; it’ll be a much longer process,” the Great Elder explained.

“So what you’re trying to say is that I’ll have to produce enough mana to cover those maintenance costs,” I summarized.

The Great Elder nodded, looking satisfied by my answer. “Precisely. Most people commonly use one of three methods to do so: bringing in mana from outside, filling the dungeon with monsters, or re-creating natural environments within the dungeon itself.”

“Uh-huh. In our case, the third option might be the best.”

“All that matters is that you balance the mana production and consumption of your dungeon. For example, one could make the first layer into a biotope reproducing the natural environment of their choice and use the mana created by that layer to power defense mechanisms on the second layer.”

“But how do you make a, uh, biotope?” Teto asked.

The Great Elder crossed his forelimbs, a pensive look on his face. “For this, too, you have several options. You could populate a layer exclusively with plants, but you could also maintain a breeding population of animals, or even monsters. In my case, I had my servants and believers live in the dungeon with me and used the mana they generated to sustain it.”

A dungeon that had all of the resources required for people to live in it could be considered a biotope itself, couldn't it? Either way, I didn't plan on having anyone—humans or monsters—living in the dungeon. I had already rebuilt the forest's ecosystem from scratch; I didn't feel like doing the same thing all over again.

"Monsters, huh? I couldn't just go with simulacra if the goal is to create mana. But summoning real monsters is dangerous. What if they escape from the dungeon?"

Thanks to Liriel's great barrier and Teto's alarm system of bear golems, no monster dared enter the forest, despite it being surrounded by a Demon Den. But if I started breeding monsters inside the dungeon, it could pose a significant risk if they were to break free. I wanted to avoid putting us in this position.

"You don't need to overthink this, Lady Witch," the Great Elder said. "You have access to World Trees. All you have to do is plant one inside the dungeon, and it should make for a more than suitable mana source."

I was left speechless. He was right; I could just grow World Tree saplings inside the dungeon and it'd solve all of my mana production issues. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it before.

"Then all we have to do is decide what kind of environment we want to recreate, huh? I've already turned this place into a forest, so I don't really feel like doing the same thing again."

"Teto would like a dungeon that makes yummy food!" Teto chirped.

I nodded and looked up at the Great Elder. "That's Teto's request. As for me, I'd like to find a way to get a natural supply of salt."

All in all, what we wanted was some way to fill in the forest's natural productive gaps as a landlocked biome. Therefore, I believed that a tropical environment would be best suited to our needs. I tried to explain my train of thought to the Great Elder to the best of my ability.

"So you'd like to have an ocean in the dungeon, hm? You'll need to introduce marine life to populate it. I can go grab some fish for you, if you'd like," he offered.

The more we talked about the dungeon, the clearer my vision of what I wanted became. I was grateful that the Great Elder seemed so eager to help.

Now that my plans for the dungeon were mostly crystallized, I decided to ask the Great Elder what other types of dungeons he'd witnessed in his time. I was pretty sure the dungeons that occasionally spawned on the continent were just a random mix of environments and installations from the main dungeon-making database—those didn't count. I was curious to know what other dungeon masters had come up with.

"Hm, let me see..."

First, he told us about maze dungeons. These had a plethora of traps and monsters strategically placed throughout, all with the aim of repelling intruders. Some dungeon masters chose to populate theirs strictly with simulacra to maintain better control over their numbers, while others would breed real monsters to bolster their forces. If you summoned real monsters in grasslands or forest layers and provided them with food, they'd naturally reproduce. It'd obviously take longer to populate the layer than if you went with simulacra, and you'd have to repeat the whole process all over again every time your monsters got killed in action—either by intruders or by other monsters—but the advantage was that they could generate mana themselves, unlike their fake counterparts.

"The biggest benefit of this type of dungeon is that you can coax your monsters to fight among each other to speed up their evolution."

"That's so cool!" Teto chirped, her eyes sparkling as she stuffed herself with cookies.

"Isn't it just? The more monsters evolve, the smarter they get. It's actually this process that gave birth to talking monsters like dire wolves and red dragons," he explained. "Personally, I would sometimes summon the souls of the strongest individuals who died in my dungeon, turn them into liches or war spirits, and make them work for me. I've also summoned spirits and devils to manage the different layers of my dungeon."

"You mean you can assign someone else to run your dungeon?" I asked, making a mental note of it. This might prove useful for later.

I was, however, very surprised to learn that the Great Elder used to breed monsters in his dungeon and that he had summoned devils to assist him in managing it. When I asked for more details, he explained that he'd bound all of the spirits and devils he'd summoned to contracts. He would then give them a corporal form so that they could interact with the real world and look after the dungeon for him. The Great Elder was an ancient dragon, so even when the spirits and devils found loopholes in their contracts and leveraged them against him, he could easily retaliate.

Some humans, hoping to emulate the Great Elder, resorted to the same method, not fully grasping the level of risk involved. Most were outmaneuvered into exploitative contracts or killed before they could bind what they had summoned. The Great Elder surmised that the forbidden practice of housing devils within one's body used by devil worshippers might have originated from devils trying to manipulate contract terms to their advantage by hiding or twisting certain details.

"I've also heard of miasma dungeons. The dungeon masters would fill entire layers with miasma and dump skeletons and corpses in them. If everything went well, the corpses would turn into undead or ghosts. I can't say I'm particularly fond of this type of thing, though."

"I don't think anyone is..." I replied.

To create a miasma dungeon, one would fill the layers with monsters—real monsters, since simulacra wouldn't cut it—and have them reproduce and feed exclusively on each other, which would generate extremely concentrated miasma. Now, miasma was a type of mana, so just like normal mana, if there was too much of it in one spot, it'd give birth to monsters. The dungeon masters would use that to their advantage to birth mutant monsters that couldn't be summoned through normal means. On top of that, miasma was toxic to humans, so the entire place was basically a giant trap. This type of dungeon could also be created by turning the layers into dirty or polluted environments, a bit like the abandoned mine we had cleared for Lariel years ago. I definitely wanted to steer clear of this type of dungeon.

"Let's go back to the topic of your dungeon," the Great Elder said. "As I said, if you use World Trees, you shouldn't have any issues powering it up. Those

things generate so much mana it's unfair," he grumbled under his breath. "However, you could also try to populate a layer with monsters. If you manage to maintain a balanced food chain, it should generate enough mana as well. You could start with weak herbivorous monsters; as long as you provide them with enough food, they'll start breeding in no time. Then, when their population starts to become a concern, you can throw in a few carnivorous monsters to feed on the weaker ones, et cetera, et cetera. Monsters release a large quantity of mana when they die, after all."

"I see. So I'd basically be relying on that, plus the natural mana generated by the plants and the monsters. But I'm scared that letting so many monsters breed could incite a stampede."

"It's all about equilibrium. You'll need to encourage the stronger monsters to cull the weak from time to time. Now, the stronger the monsters are, the harder they'll be to control. But if you summon only one real monster to act as the leader of the pack and have the rest be simulacra, they'll follow the leader's orders."

And if I gave the stronger monsters the order to cull the numbers for me, they'd start to naturally do it themselves. Using real monsters was risky, as their propagation could lead to a stampede. But if I had the small fry as real monsters and the stronger ones as mostly simulacra, plus one real monster to act as the leader of the pack, I wouldn't need to worry about them reproducing. Besides, the real monster could feed on the weaker monsters, so I wouldn't need to provide it with a source of food either.

"That's a great idea. I never would have arrived at that on my own," I confessed.

The simulacra could also help me regulate the number of sea creatures I planned on introducing into the dungeon so that they wouldn't disturb the ecological balance. Overall, having monsters that listened to my every command seemed pretty useful.

In the middle of our conversation, I suddenly thought of something I had been curious about.

"Oh, by the way, is there a reason why there are so few options when you

first start working on a dungeon?” I asked.

“When a dungeon appears, it absorbs materials from the area it spawned in. The installations and environments available at the start are based on the information it gathers from its surroundings plus the ambient mana. For example, it might sense the mana signature of certain monsters in the area or perceive the changes the land has undergone. The most prominent features are what gets chosen as the starting options,” the Great Elder explained.

“I see.”

The forest had only become an actual *forest* a few decades ago. Before that, the entire land had been barren without a trace of life for hundreds of years. This explained why “wasteland” had been one of the dungeon’s available biomes at the start.

“As for everything else, you’ll get the hang of it with time. The biggest hurdle for most dungeon masters is actually to gather the materials to feed the dungeon, but with your Creation Magic, you don’t need to worry about that.”

“True. I’ve already started experimenting with different materials.”

“We’ve dropped a bunch of things in the dungeon and unlocked lots of things we can make!” Teto added.

This prompted the Great Elder to chuckle. “I remember struggling with that back when I first started experimenting with dungeon-making. If I wanted a particular installation, I’d have to go look for the materials myself,” he reminisced, a faraway look on his face.

After that, we had some more tea while the Great Elder covered some of the finer details of the dungeon-making arts. By the end of our little tea party, I had a much clearer picture of my intentions.

“Well then—Lady Witch, Lady Guardian, you two look like you want to go back to dungeon building, so I’ll leave you to it. It’s been quite the amusing experience.”

The Great Elder set down the barrel he had been drinking his tea from, spread his wings, and headed back to the dragonkin village where he had taken up residence a little while ago.

Now I could finally get to work in earnest.

Chapter 16: The Tropical Island Dungeon

The next day, Teto and I found ourselves back in the dungeon.

“All righty, let’s get started. We’re going to follow the Great Elder’s advice and try to turn this dungeon into a biotope of sorts.”

“We’ll make it into a tropical island and grow lots of yummy food!” Teto said enthusiastically.

I pressed the “layer editing” button on the dungeon’s menu screen, and a hologram of the currently empty layer appeared in the air.

Time to get started. First of all, I changed its size to the largest possible. Then I created an island in the middle using stone and sand, which I had unlocked by dropping some into the dungeon earlier that week.

“I’m thinking of going with seventy percent water and thirty percent land for this one,” I said.

“But Lady Wiiiitch, the more land there is, the more fruit trees we can grow!” Teto whined.

“True, but I want to populate the water with sea creatures and have them reproduce as much as possible, so we’re going to need lots of water.”

“Hmmm, okay. Fish is yummy too,” Teto conceded.

I planned on making this layer a hybrid between a biotope and a resource layer, with a few plants and trees. I’d definitely need a World Tree to produce mana and power everything up, but I was also going to plant other things, like mangoes, bananas, cacao trees, palm trees, spices, and sugarcane. There were a few medicinal herbs that could only grow in warm environments, so I’d throw some of those in the mix as well.

I moved onto the “ocean” part of my layer—which didn’t have any water in it yet—and made some parts really deep, well over a hundred meters. I also added some rocky reefs all around the place to encourage the proliferation of

edible and medicinal seaweed.

“Okay, so we have a fountain in the safe zone, and I’m also going to put a river around here. Now, let’s put the World Tree right at the center of the island, and... Okay, I think this isn’t too bad.”

I planted the World Tree sapling I had dropped into the dungeon in the middle of the island and linked its roots to the fountain in the layer’s safe zone. Playing around with the settings, I saw that each installation could be tailored in one of two ways. You could either make it so that the dungeon would automatically replenish them when they ran out, or leave them alone. The former was mostly used for things like medicinal herb patches and ore mines, as well as traps that got activated or broken, while the latter was used for randomized items—treasure chests, for instance—anything one might wish to nurture, such as my World Tree, or to empty an installation in order to replace it later.

I changed the configuration of the World Tree to the second option. Hopefully, it would grow inside the dungeon.

“Lady Witch, what are you going to do with this sandy area?” Teto asked, pointing at a corner of the hologram.

“This place has the best exposure to the sun, so I’m thinking of putting some salt production facilities there,” I explained.

I wasn’t sure if the forest’s residents would bother with those, since we could easily buy salt from other nations, but I decided to put them there anyway. That way, even if we had to stop trading with the outside world for one reason or another, we’d still have a sustainable source of salt.

“Lady Witch, you should add more pretty flowers! It’ll make the place nice and colorful!” Teto said.

“You know what? I’m just going to turn the entire area into a miniresort.”

As per Teto’s suggestion, I added more greenery and flowers in the empty spaces on the hologram and even put a little wooden hut on the beach to serve as a rest area. It really looked like a resort one might find in a tropical paradise—although I couldn’t really see myself spending a lot of time there, since I

couldn't swim. I supposed I could read books on the beach or fish on the pier, but there wasn't much I could get up to otherwise.

I added some last-minute touches, and with those, we were finally done planning our island layer.

"Lady Witch, it's almost finished already!" Teto chirped.

"I know, right? Let me just take a quick look at the dungeon's finances... We seem to be doing pretty good for now."

I had spent the past few days charging mana into the dungeon core, so I should have enough to create the layer. As for the daily operational costs, it seemed that the mana from the World Tree and the plants would suffice to cover them.

"All right, I'm doing it. Dungeon core! Layer creation!"

The dungeon started rumbling and the door disappeared, replaced by a staircase that led up to what I assumed was the layer I had just created.

"Oh, the door is gone!" Teto pointed out.

"Our room probably went down one level."

The dungeon core room used to be on the first floor, but it seemed that the new layer had appeared above it, so it was now on what was considered the second floor of the dungeon.

I took Teto with me to check out the new beach layer. When we arrived at the top of the stairs, we were greeted by the very bright fake sun and the World Tree sapling I had planted in the middle of the island.

"Lady Wiiiitch, it's so hot," Teto whined.

"It is. I mean, I suppose it makes sense for a tropical island, but I wasn't ready for it."

I used a quick spell to tone down the heat and the intensity of the sun's rays, then started exploring the new layer. There was another staircase near the one we had just climbed up; I assumed it led to the dungeon's entrance. The place was covered with plants—just as I had imagined when designing the layer—and I plucked a few fruits to give them a taste. Going even farther, we reached the

edge of the island. A large expanse of sandy terrain stretched out one level below us, gradually sloping downward.

“We still have to fill the whole place with seawater, huh?” I noted.

“Teto’s looking forward to it!”

Teto excitedly hopped down to the sandy beach, and I followed her. I produced a transfer gate from my magic bag and set it down on the sand.

“Ready, Teto?”

“Yes, Lady Witch!”

“All right, I’m activating the gate!”

The second I did, water started flowing through the door with impressive force.

“Whoa! That’s way faster than I was expecting!” I exclaimed in surprise.

“Aaah, there’s a bunch of things in the water!”

She was right: there were all sorts of microorganisms and marine creatures being carried along by the rushing current, along with some torn pieces of seaweed and a lot of sand, as well as the creatures that lurked in it.

“Dungeon core! Absorb the seawater and use it to fill the ocean!”

The massive sandy expanse gradually filled with seawater, and the creatures that had flowed into the dungeon began spreading out. I also created feeding grounds and habitats for all of the creatures. The water was rising so quickly, it soon reached our location.

“This whole thing was a bit sloppier than I had hoped for, but we’ve finally secured ourselves some marine life,” I said.

“It was a good idea to ask the Great Elder for help,” Teto added.

After some thorough investigation, I realized that while creating an ocean inside a layer wasn’t overly taxing in terms of mana, it demanded an immense quantity of seawater. Not only that, but creating an entire ocean’s ecosystem from scratch would take absolute ages. So instead of making the water with my Creation Magic, I opted to draw directly from the ocean, allowing its natural

inhabitants—microorganisms and fish alike—to accompany the flow. The Great Elder kindly went to install a transfer gate deep in a tropical ocean, drastically reducing the quantity of mana I'd have to spend while seamlessly importing an entire preexisting ecosystem to our dungeon.

"Ah! Lady Witch, there are monsters in the water," Teto noted.

We had moved back to the beach to watch the ocean gradually fill up and make sure everything was going according to plan.

"Take care of them, please."

"Roger!" Teto said, drawing her sword and effortlessly killing the monsters that came to attack us.

"Things went without a hitch," I commented, making a mental list of what we had done so far.

Bringing in the seawater? Check.

Changing the settings of the ocean so that waves would form randomly within a preset range? Check.

Synchronizing the tides with those of the real-world oceans? Check.

Summoning simulacra to guard and patrol the area? Check.

Ordering them to occasionally cull the marine life and kill any monster that got inside? Check.

"We're more or less done with the crucial bits," I said. "Let's keep the transfer gate inside the water for now and see what happens."

"Roger!"

It seemed that water had stopped flowing in, meaning that the equilibrium between the water levels inside the dungeon and those of the ocean outside had been reached. Creatures could still pass through the transfer gate, though; perhaps the ones that hadn't entered during the initial inflow might accidentally find their way in.

A few monsters passing through the gate was inevitable, but it wasn't that much of an issue. The transfer gate wasn't that large, meaning only small-to

medium-sized monsters could flow in, and the simulacra had been programmed to exterminate dangerous creatures.

Weeks passed, and just as I had hoped for, my little ocean layer became an invaluable asset to the folks of the forest. Unfortunately, my salt production facility idea was a bust. It simply required way too much manpower for something that we could easily procure through trade. The sugarcane and spices, on the other hand, were a huge hit. Tropical fish and seafood began gracing the forest folks' tables, but the bounty from the dungeon's ocean didn't end there: around ten years after we created the layer, people began finding pearls down there. Fifty years later, they discovered red coral slowly growing along the seabed as well.

Chapter 17: Secret Protectors of the Witch of Creation's Forest

Raphilia the Elf's Side

The Witch of Creation's Forest was surrounded by the goddesses' barrier and a large Demon Den, which Teto's bear golems constantly patrolled to forbid access to any unwelcome guests.

On this particular day, a group was wading through the thick, deadly forest enfolding the Demon Den.

"Have we still not reached the immortal witch's forest yet?!"

"Search faster! We need to get there before anyone else discovers it!"

The two men who were barking orders were surrounded by a group of subordinates tasked to protect them from the Demon Den's many dangers. One of the men was the former guildmaster of an adventurer's guild in the Kingdom of Krista, which had been entirely destroyed during the stampede. The other hailed from the Duchy of Droog—the nation that caused the stampede—and was a former priest of the Church of the Five Goddesses.

They had been unable to protect their people from the undead army and had left their respective kingdoms with their most valuable belongings, as well as the adventurers and clergymen who had been the closest to them. Upon learning that they had abandoned people in need, the adventurer's guild and the Church of the Five Goddesses stripped them of their titles.

The two men, who had found themselves in similar positions, decided to collaborate with each other in order to reach the Witch of Creation's Forest before anyone else. The former guildmaster hoped to open a branch of the adventurer's guild in the forest and use his position and influence to get his hands on rare mythical beast loot and World Tree materials. As for the priest, he planned on declaring the forest as a holy site, claiming that its miraculous

transformation from a barren wasteland to a lush and thriving forest was the work of the goddesses, and making the forest his new parish. He had heard of the godkin and the mysterious Black Saintess who had defeated an entire undead army. If he managed to win such powerful individuals to his side, he'd regain his honor and rank in the church—no, he'd ascend to even greater heights.

“How much money will I make selling mythical beast materials? Perhaps I shouldn't limit myself to the materials—I could sell the beasts themselves to powerful nobles all around the continent. I know quite a few people who'd pay out the nose for a rare pet, or to have one of these beasts stuffed to display in their homes,” the former guildmaster said, his mindset no different from a poacher's.

“Heh heh heh,” the priest chuckled to himself. “If I sanctify this place, pilgrims will come flocking, and I'll reap the riches they leave behind. My first order of business as the head priest will be to burn this forest to cinders, or else no one will be able to cross the border.”

He obviously couldn't care less about the forest itself; his goal was to squeeze it dry, and who cared if it turned back into a wasteland?

And so the two men and their guards cut a feeble path through the forest, clinging to their dreams of greatness. They didn't know that someone hiding deep in the woods was keeping a close eye on them.

“Grr...”

“Shhh, calm down. Shael and the others are almost here. Let's stay vigilant for now,” the elven adventurer Raphilia told the fenrirs beside her, who looked seconds away from pouncing on the men.

The men hadn't noticed her; they yammered on and on about their schemes to strip the forest bare of its riches. Raphilia kept up her regime of silent surveillance until, finally, her wind spirits sensed that backup had arrived.

“You! What are you doing in our forest?” Shael asked the men, flying above them, the other godkin bringing up the rear.

The two men immediately fell to their knees, posturing as supplicants in need

of mercy.

“Oooh, a godkin! Please, show us your compassion! Save us!”

“Our homelands have been destroyed. We want to take them back, but we cannot repel the invaders! Please, O great godkin, envoys of the goddesses, take us to the Black Saintess and grant us your strength!” the priest begged, going on and on about how *hard* they fought for their nations, but that their efforts had been in vain.

If that man wasn't a priest, he could've had a nice shot at an acting career. Then again, he'd make a passable con artist too, Raphilia thought from the bushes.

She decided she had waited enough and finally came out of her hiding spot, along with the fenrirs who had kept watch with her.

“Shael, don't let their pitiful overtures mislead you. These guys had no intention of 'fighting for their homeland'; they want to parasitize Chise's forest,” she warned.

“Hmph. I suspected as much. Unfortunately, the witch is really busy, and so are we. We don't have time to poke our noses into other nations' affairs so... Shoo, shoo,” Shael said, waving her hand dismissively.

Chise had spent the past few weeks going from settlement to settlement to make sure that the refugees were settling in nicely. When she thought she could finally take a breather, the goddesses gifted her a dungeon, and she was currently busy trying to figure it out. Besides, she had no moral obligation to help these people.

“W-We have come to open an adventurer's guild!” The former guildmaster tried his luck next. “This place is still underdeveloped, so you might struggle when traveling to other nations. But if you join our guild, you'll get a card that'll act as identification everywhere on the continent. It'll be in your best interest, I promise!”

“He has a point, but you shouldn't put such an important job in the hands of a guy who got fired from his previous job,” Raphilia scoffed. “Besides, that guy's just angling for a second shot at a guildmaster's position. Think about it: if the

adventurer's guild was really thinking of opening a branch in the forest, they'd send a Grand Master or someone from the guild's headquarters."

"Sh-Shut it! I refuse to stand here and be ridiculed by some *elfish hayseed!*" the former guildmaster yelled, his face red in anger.

The adventurers he'd brought in tow all drew their swords at once and leveled them at Raphilia. Drawing her bow, she conjured a huge volley of wind arrows and loosed them at the mob, easily disarming them.

"Just for your information, I'm actually an A-rank adventurer. Dealing with a former guildmaster who couldn't even protect the people of his city won't pose much of a challenge for me," she said.

"An A-rank elven archer... You're...a member of the Swords of Daybreak..." the former guildmaster said under his breath, falling to his knees in shock. He himself was a retired adventurer, but he had only ever made it up to C-rank and only rose to the rank of guildmaster after several years working as a staff member.

"Th-Then what would you think of letting me establish a Church of the Five Goddesses in your land?" the priest tried next, seeing that both his attempt at eliciting the two women's pity and his companion's proposal had been unsuccessful. "We shall propagate the Church's teachings and eliminate the vile demons who have weaseled their way into this land to honor the goddesses!"

However, his attempt proved just as fruitless as his companion's.

"Did you just say to our faces that you plan on 'eliminating' our brethren?! To 'honor the goddesses'?! Nonsense! I'm the one in charge of this land's Church! Are you picking a fight with me?" Shael exclaimed, her halo and wings shining a lot brighter than usual.

It was a beautiful sight. However, Shael's radiance was so overwhelming that it left both men struggling to stay upright at all.

"Shael, compose yourself. These petty creatures are not worth your ire," a masculine voice echoed in Shael's brain.

But the godkin couldn't calm her anger. "I know that!" she said. "But the goddesses' divine presence already permeates this land thanks to the witch and

the Great Elder's efforts. We don't need these weaklings!"

Seeing red, Shael brought down her spear. A ray of light sprang from the tip, burning the ground at the men's feet to a crisp.

Chise was Liriel's prophet, and the forest already had a legitimate Church of the Five Goddesses that Shael looked after. Not only that, but Lurriel's envoy—the owner of the voice in Shael's head—had even granted her his powers. As for the other tribes living in the forest, some worshipped the goddesses, while others were animists or followers of the dragons. The funny thing was, some had even started worshipping Chise herself for saving their lives. She hadn't anticipated this turn of events and was pretty mortified to be treated like a goddess, but no matter her efforts, the people refused to be discouraged; she had resigned herself to her fate. Even Teto would call herself a "Lady Witch worshipper" once in a while as she clung to her.

All of this was to say that the forest folks were allowed to pray to whoever they wanted and express their beliefs freely. All this man had to offer was his own bigotry. Raphilia couldn't blame Shael for being furious—she felt much the same.

"You have two options: you can either leave and never come back, or become fertilizer for the forest. Which will you choose?" Raphilia threatened, sounding mostly like she just wanted to get on with her day.

"Ugh! Suit yourself! You savages will forever be outcasts without a guild hall or a church! You'll regret it, let me tell you!" the priest yelled before turning on his heel and fleeing the forest with his comrade and their guards.

In the event that they got lost on their way back, Teto's bear golems would catch them and throw them out, so they at least wouldn't meet their demise in the Demon Den.

"I can't believe these guys! Treating us like barbarians and threatening to kill our neighbors! I was about to grind them into monster chow!" Shael exclaimed, landing on the forest's ground.

The fenrirs who had been accompanying Raphilia immediately rushed over, and Shael started petting them in an attempt to calm her nerves.

“Yeah, yeah, good job holding back, Shael. How about we go home and have a snack?” Raphilia offered.

“I want some apple pie,” Shael muttered.

Apple pie was one of Raphilia’s specialties. She had learned the recipe from Lena, her former adventuring companion from the Swords of Daybreak. She smiled wryly, and the two of them headed back to the little house attached to the church where they lived together.

“Shael, Raphilia, we’re coming in.”

“We brought a new statue for the church!”

Right as Shael and Raphilia were about to dig into the freshly baked apple pie, Chise and Teto dropped by. A beautiful statue of Leriël, the Goddess of the Skies, floated beside them, held aloft by Chise’s magic.

“We came to replace Leriël’s statue and announce to the goddesses that we’re done building the dungeon’s first layer. Can we?” Chise asked Shael.

“We brought you guys some fruit from the dungeon!” Teto added.

There were statues of all five goddesses in the church; however, Leriël and Loriël’s were clearly less intricate than the others. Apparently Chise could talk to the goddesses, and every time she met a new goddess, she made a statue for her based on her appearance in the dream oracles she received. The goddesses had even gifted her a dungeon. Grandiose tales of the Witch of Creation never ended, and Raphilia was more exasperated than impressed by them at this point.

After Chise replaced the ancient statue of Leriël with the one she had just made, she and Teto joined Raphilia and Shael for teatime. The four of them happily munched on warm apple pie and the fresh fruits Chise and Teto had brought back from the dungeon.

Chapter 18: Presents from the Witch of Creation

On that day, I was having a meeting with Selene and Gyunton through our magic communication devices to update each other on our respective current situations.

“Overall, things have calmed down a lot here,” I concluded.

“Teto and Lady Witch can finally take it easy!” Teto added.

This elicited a smile from Selene. “Good work out there, mom, big sis Teto.”

Gyunton, on the other hand, seemed slightly exasperated. “I can’t believe you’ve chosen to leave all of the forest’s decision-making to a council,” he muttered.

The first few meetings of the council had been a bit awkward, with the representatives of the different races not really knowing what they were doing, but things had gotten much better now. They would soon be able to have meetings without needing Teto or me around. We mostly attended to act as the spokespersons of the elderly folks and the orphaned human children, but within a few years some of the kids would be old enough to take on that role.

I shrugged. “The situation is what it is. But, overall, the refugees are settling in nicely.”

“That’s great, mom,” Selene said with a chuckle. “I hope my husband and I can come visit you soon now that things have calmed down.”

Gyunton nodded. “The refugees’ safety is all that matters.”

The atmosphere was a lot less tense now; all three of us visibly relaxed. I couldn’t help but notice that Gyunton was looking quite tired.

“Lord Gyunton, are you all right?” Selene asked him. She must’ve noticed his fatigue as well.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m just a bit winded. This whole situation with the stampede and the refugees, plus the regular communications with you two,

have taken a bit of a toll on me,” he said. “But, as you two said, things are a lot calmer now, so I’ll finally get some well-deserved rest,” he added with a weak smile.

“Take care of yourself,” I said. “Oh, I know: the next time we send someone to trade with Gald, we’ll make sure to send a little something for you as well. We’ve been relying on you a lot, so consider it a thank-you present.”

“We’re growing lots of fruits in our new dungeon!” Teto chimed in. “We’ll send you some so you can eat them and regain your strength!”

“Thank you, that’s very nice. But, um, did I just hear you mention having a *dungeon*?” Gyunton asked, a wary smile curling on his lips.

I pondered what to send him. *Maybe some yams we grew in the Demon Den?* He seemed pretty tired, and those seriously packed a nutritional punch. Some fruit could be nice too...

“Mom, big sis Teto, I worked hard too. Will you get me a present as well?” Selene’s pouty voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Of course. I was thinking of sending you some beauty products, maybe?”

“Lady Witch makes all sorts of creams and stuff with the lamias, and everyone loves them!” Teto added.

I was sure Selene would like our beauty products as well. Besides, I planned on adding them to our exports, and I loved the idea that I might get to hear her opinion beforehand.

“The immortal hero of the continent, deep in the weeds discussing beauty projects like an ordinary girl—what a sight,” Gyunton commented, looking at us fondly.

“I don’t consider myself a hero or anything,” I replied, slightly annoyed. “I just had some free time and the power to help these people, so I thought, ‘Why not do it?’” I paused and took a sip of tea. “I don’t want people to start thinking I’m going to save everyone who asks for help. I’d never be able to save them all, and it’d be a pain.”

Of course, I *wanted* to help people. But realistically, there were limits to what

I could do, even with my large mana pool. Not only did I not have the resources to help *every single person in the world*, but I didn't even want to in the first place: I planned on living according to my own whims, without anything tying me down.

When I explained my reasoning to Selene and Gyunton, they seemed to understand.

"We still have people coming to the Liebel Margravate and demanding to meet with you, mom," Selene told me.

"I can imagine. Sorry," I winced.

"It's not your fault. After all, I'm the one who offered to act as an intermediary between the forest and the rest of the world."

"We have some too; although not as many as I would've thought," Gyunton interjected.

Now that was surprising; I thought that people from all around the continent would be rushing to Selene and Gyunton to request an audience with me.

"Really? What about you, Selene? You said people come to ask you to take them to me, but are there many of them?"

She shook her head. "No. A lot less than I anticipated."

"But why? I thought people would try to aggressively make connections with us after all that happened."

Not only had we defeated an entire undead army plus a giant bone monster, but we had also spent an entire year in Ischea to help relocate refugees. Since then, I had been using my Creation Magic in front of people pretty unabashedly, and I knew for a fact rumors about my powers had spread far and wide. Coupled with the huge scandal I got involved in while I was in Lawbyle and the public revelation of my immortality, this should've made people come in throngs to Gald and Liebel to meet with us. But somehow it hadn't.

"They're probably hesitant to try to bridge the gap," Gyunton said.

Selene nodded. "From an outsider's point of view, you're pretty intimidating, mom. You have these amazing powers, a giant dragon as an ally, and demons

obeying your every command. In some people's eyes, I imagine you're not too different from the demon kings of fairy tales," she told me, smiling awkwardly.

"And there was the whole debacle in Lawbyle too," Gyunton interjected. "A king has been dethroned because of your carelessness, and we all know that's any monarch's nightmare."

He definitely wasn't sugarcoating his words as much as Selene. Still, both of their points made sense: other rulers were probably afraid that associating with me might bring about their own downfall.

That's not very nice, I thought. Well, at least I get some peace and quiet, so I guess it's not that bad.

"But Lady Witch isn't scary at all," Teto pouted. "She's strong and kind and cute!"

"Stop it, Teto, that's embarrassing," I mumbled.

"Coming back to the people demanding to meet you, my family and I have been turning down anyone that seems to have ulterior motives or intentions to manipulate or control you," Selene informed me.

Apparently, some people had been trying to offer me all sorts of different things to curry my favor: money, peerages, engagement offers, land, slaves, goods...you name it, they'd probably tried it. But listening to Selene list all of them, nothing really stood out as worth considering.

"We haven't been turning down those who genuinely need help, though," Gyunton said. "But so far, we've managed to help them using the rare resources we bought from you, as well as by offering favors to our other connections so they'd give us a hand."

For now, it seemed that there hadn't been any case that couldn't have been resolved without our intervention. Selene and Gyunton had been using World Tree leaves and medicine made from unicorn horns to heal the sick or cursed, and for other matters, they had been relying on their diplomatic skills and connections.

"You two have been doing so much for us while we were busy with the refugees..." I noted, slightly moved.

I was incredibly thankful for their help screening our petitioners. However, some particularly obstinate individuals still tried to seek us out, even after being turned down. They'd hire mercenaries or commission adventurers and send them directly to the forest. As you can probably imagine, though, none of them had made it past Teto's bear golem alarm system.

"We're doing everything we can to ensure no one will bother you, but be careful, okay, mom?" Selene told me.

"We can deal with most of them through diplomacy, but there are fools everywhere," Gyunton added. "Besides, people are forgetful creatures. Soon enough, a lot of them won't remember why they were hesitant to approach you in the first place, and we won't be able to stop them all."

I felt a warmth spread in my chest seeing Gyunton so worried about us.

"Ah, I sounded like a nagging grandpa again, didn't I? Age has a way of making one overly meddlesome," he chuckled.

"Thank you for being so concerned about our well-being, Lord Gyunton. I'll tell everyone in the forest to be careful."

"If you're too tired, you should go get some rest," Teto added.

"While I still want to be involved in diplomatic matters, my body isn't what it used to be. I should probably consider retiring soon," Gyunton said.

We exchanged a couple more pleasantries before cutting the call with Selene and Gyunton. After that, we went to prepare gifts for them.

Just as I had decided earlier, we sent them yams, fruits, and beauty products. I also threw in a few barrels of the minotaurs' and the oni-kin's sake, and some heidrun cheese made by the centaurs. Gyunton told us that he and his family had thoroughly enjoyed the yams and the fruits, and that he had shared the sake with his assistant Rollwacca. The two of them always had a couple of glasses at night. In a letter, he told me that he was surprised by the sake's mellow flavor and the richness of the heidrun cheese, and thanked me for making his nights more enjoyable with these delightful treats. In the postscript, he told me that his wife and the other women in his family had loved the lamias' beauty products, and that he would appreciate it if I could send them

some more.

Teto and I smiled as we read his letter before moving on to the one from Selene. Just like Gyunton, she thanked us for the presents and told us how much she loved them. She also asked when would be a good time for her to visit with her family.

Happy to hear she had enjoyed our gifts, I began drafting a response.

Chapter 19: Selene's Family's Visit

I was in the mansion's office, looking over the documents Beretta had compiled for me. Technically I was still the head honcho around the forest, so certain things required my seal of approval. This would change soon; I fully intended on going back to traveling the world with Teto, so I'd have to find someone to foist my responsibilities upon. Maybe Beretta?

But for the time being, it was still my job. And so I sat there, pressing the forest's stamp onto each document—*stamp, stamp, stamp*.

"My chest is as flat as this piece of paper. How tragic," I muttered.

I really need to find a way to make myself look older, I thought as I looked over the next document. I was using the Speed-Reading and Parallel Thinking skills I had unlocked by creating skill orbs with my magic, so my reading speed was much faster than a normal human's.

"All done for today. If I remember correctly, Selene and her family are supposed to come this morning."

I always dealt with the paperwork first thing after breakfast, which meant that I usually had the rest of the day to do as I pleased. But today was different: Selene and her grandkids were coming to stay with us for a couple of days.

Anxious for them to get here, I stood up and went to put away the documents I had just signed when I heard a commotion coming from the hallway. The second I turned towards the door, it opened with a slam, and Teto burst into the room.

"Lady Witch! Selene is here! She came with the demons who went to deliver goods to Liebel earlier."

"Calm down, Teto. You scared me, barging in the room so suddenly," I gently chided her, putting the last of the documents away before heading outside to greet Selene.

"This way, Lady Witch!" Teto said, taking me behind the mansion, where a

few griffins and pegasuses started landing one after the other.

“Thank you for having us today, mom, big sis Teto,” Selene said, dismounting from the griffin who had brought her here.

“It’s a pleasure seeing you, Miss Chise, Miss Teto,” Vaise—Selene’s husband—greeted us next. He was a well-built man with a decently large mana pool, which made him look younger than he really was.

The rest of Selene’s entourage dismounted from the mythical beasts one after the other, and her grandchildren came to greet us.

“Long time no see, great-grandmother. I am Wilburd, Margrave Liebel’s eldest son,” a cute, clever-looking teenage boy said.

“And I am Caitlin, the eldest daughter,” said the graceful young girl beside him.

“Hi, Wilburd, Caitlin, it’s been a while. You two sure have grown a lot, huh?”

“Selene always tells us about you two!” Teto piped up. “You’ve been working hard recently, haven’t you?”

Before the stampede, we had visited the Liebel margravate a few times to strengthen the relationship between our respective regions. I’d met Selene’s grandchildren for the first time on one of those visits. But ever since the refugees had moved into the forest, I had been way too busy to go see them. Thankfully, Selene still wrote to me regularly, often sending along photos of her family with them. This way, I was able to stay apace with how they were doing, despite my busy schedule.

After Wilburd and Caitlin’s polite introductions, their little sister raised her hand in the air.

“Hi! I’m Eleneriel! I’m fwee!”

I crouched down to the little girl’s level. “Hi, I’m Chise the witch. Can I call you Elene?”

“Uh-huh!”

Unlike her siblings, she was too young to have received any form of aristocratic education; I couldn’t help but smile at her innocence and unfiltered

enthusiasm.

“Let’s move to the drawing room, shall we?” I offered.

I made sure to give the griffins and the pegasuses a few generous pets to thank them for their hard work and took Selene and her family to the mansion.

While we were walking, I turned around and asked her what she wanted to do today.

“Since we’ve just arrived, we were thinking of spending the day inside and maybe going for a family picnic tomorrow,” Vaise replied in Selene’s stead, who smiled brightly.

From what she’d told me, their little stay in the forest was meant to be a bit of a test for their son—the current margrave—to see how well he could hold the fort in their absence. And hey, they got to spend some time with their grandkids as a freebie.

“Noted. What about you, kids? What would you like to do?” I asked the children.

“I’d like to practice my sword-fighting technique with Grandpa and Miss Teto!” Wilburd replied enthusiastically.

“Um... I’ve heard that the people here make beautiful fabric, and I was wondering if I could see it,” Caitlin said, much more subdued than her brother.

“The flying horsie was shooo cool! Elene wanna go see the other animals, pwease!”

Selene must’ve told the kids about the mythical beasts and the bear golems; Elene seemed to be looking forward to meeting them. The little girl told me that she spent the entire ride petting the pegasus, and I found myself beaming all over again.

“Okay! Follow Teto to the garden,” Teto said to Wilburd, taking him and Vaise with her outside.

“This way, Lady Caitlin,” Beretta told the young girl. “I will bring you some of the fabric we have stored in the mansion.”

She escorted Caitlin and Selene’s servants to a separate room. The

mechanoids would probably have a field day dressing Caitlin up in all sorts of cute clothes and showing off the arachnes' beautiful textiles.

"All righty then, let's go see the animals, Elene."

"Kay!"

Selene, Elene, and I made our way to the edge of the forest, right next to the mansion. As soon as we crossed the threshold, a group of bear golems came rushing at us. Teto had told them that Selene would be coming, and they had been excitedly awaiting her visit.

"Goh!"

"Goooh!"

"Goh goh!"

"Are those your bear fwiends, gwandma?"

"Yes, that's right. They're my precious friends," Selene replied with a fond smile.

We headed a little deeper into the forest. Elene, who was holding hands with two of the bear golems, let out excited little cries every time she saw something new.

"Gwandma, look at the big twee!" she exclaimed, craning her head to get a better look at the largest of the World Trees. But she bent forward too much and ended up losing her balance, landing on her bottom with a little thud.

The bear golems quickly helped her up, and we resumed our walk, Elene still as excited as before.

Thanks to the care we had put into growing the forest over the years, a wide range of plants and forage had developed in the forest, from wild fruit trees and bushes to edible plants and mushrooms. In a way, the forest was a bit similar to a satoyama—a biodiverse environment formed and maintained through human influence. It was also very easy to walk in, as the constant movement of the bear golems and the mythical beasts had created clear paths through the trees.

After a bit, some of the smaller mythical beasts started showing up. Maybe they had sensed my mana signature from afar.

“Wow! Look, gwandma! There’s kitty cats, and puppies, and squiwwels, and mousies, and bunnies!” Elene chirped.

“Be very gentle when you pet them, okay?” I told the little girl, who nodded excitedly.

“Kay!” she babbled, reaching out her hands to the mythical beasts closest to her and gently petting them.

Mythical beasts were smart, so they knew Elene was just a child and didn’t mean to harm them. Some let her pet them, while others ran away and observed her from afar. The little girl didn’t seem to mind too much, too engrossed in stroking the fluffy critters around her, a big smile on her face.

Looking up at the sky, I noticed that the sun had already passed its peak, meaning that it was already past noon.

“It’s lunchtime already, so how about we go have some yummy food, Elene?” I suggested to the little girl.

“Kay! Bye-bye!” She waved goodbye to the mythical beasts, and the three of us returned to the mansion. The bear golems had to carry Elene back; the little girl had used up all of her energy running around.

“She reminds me of you when you were little,” I told Selene. “You were just as cute and full of curiosity as she is.”

“Jeez, mom, you’re embarrassing me. How many years ago was that?” she complained, a blush settling on her cheeks. I couldn’t help but chuckle slightly at her reaction.

“I wonder how she’ll grow up,” I said.

“I just hope that she’ll be happy and healthy. But the more I hear what her mother says about her, the more worried I grow that aristocracy might be a bit too stifling for her,” Selene replied, a faraway look on her face as she remembered her own struggles.

When Selene learned that she was the lost princess of Ischea, her life had made a total one-eighty; she’d had to leave us and had been thrust headfirst into nobility.

“Well, I don’t know exactly what the future has in store for her; all we can do is watch over her and hope for the best.”

Selene glanced at the little girl’s sleeping face and said softly, “You’re right, mom.”

As we approached the mansion, the sound of wooden swords clashing echoed from the garden. Teto turned around and waved at us.

“Ah, Lady Witch, Selene, you’re back!” she exclaimed.

This and the din of sword practice woke Elene. We all moved to the dining room, where we enjoyed some lunch, and I asked the kids if they’d had a good time.

“I watched Miss Teto and grandfather’s mock duel, it was amazing! I’m going to work hard to reach their level one day, goddesses willing,” Wilburd replied excitedly.

I suspected the surge of inspiration would do him good.

“I was so impressed by the arachnes’ and the spider monsters’ fabrics!” Caitlin said next. “I also got to see some beautiful thread in a color I have never seen before!”

She seemed totally enraptured by the arachnes’ fabric and the beautiful sky-colored thread we stockpiled. I couldn’t blame her: the arachnes were masters of cloth weaving, and their fabric was gorgeous. It sold like hotcakes even outside the forest. As for the thread, it must’ve been dyed using the flowers grown by the alraunes and the dryads.

As for little Elene...

“There was a big, biiig twee!” she babbled, spreading her arms wide to emphasize her point. It was adorable. “And I made lots of cute animal fwiends!”

Everyone in the room smiled at her, nodding occasionally as she talked about all of the things she had seen.

Selene and her family stayed in the forest for a week before heading back to Ischea.

After that, the kids would occasionally come to spend a few days with us here

and there. When Elene was five, she learned how to ride on the fenrirs and would spend hours cruising around the forest on their backs. By the time she was ten, she knew how to use Body Strengthening, and her favorite means of getting about in the woods was leaping from tree to tree.

“I wonder who she took after,” Selene muttered one day.

“She got her talent for Body Strengthening from you and Vaise for sure,” I replied.

She definitely was her grandparents’ child.

Selene might’ve been a saintess, but she was, first and foremost, a Body Hardening—the superior version of Body Strengthening—expert, having learned how to protect herself from Teto in her youth. As for her husband Vaise, he’d had to learn how to fight to defend his territory and was highly proficient in Body Hardening as well.

As Elene grew older, she decided that being a noble lady simply wasn’t for her and left Liebel to become an adventurer.

“Hi, great-grandmother witch!”

Even then, she still came to visit us regularly. Whenever she was in Darryl, the demons would let her hop onto the back of a mythical beast and take her to the mansion to stay with us for a bit.

Chapter 20: Recovering Knowledge and Culture from the Ruins of a Fallen Nation

Now that the first layer of our dungeon was mostly done, I decided that it was time we opened it up to the forest's residents. It'd still take a while for the ecosystem we had introduced to stabilize and for the World Tree to grow, but the fruit trees and other plants were doing great. Anyone who had some time to spare gathered together and started picking fruit and processing salt and sugar.

I already had plans for the second layer: I wanted to make a forest biome of it and turn the entire place into a training ground of sorts. But I decided to wait a bit before adding another layer. The dungeon produced more mana than it consumed, so I let it build up inside the core for the time being, releasing any excess outside the dungeon when it was full.

For now, though, the dungeon wasn't my priority.

"Lady Witch, we can almost see it!"

"Yeah, we're getting close to the former capital."

Teto and I were currently on our way to the fallen Kingdom of Krista.

"It's been almost two years since the stampede, huh? This place sure isn't looking good."

The stampede had unleashed thousands of monsters into the region. Now, after two years, they had dispersed, each finding a new place to establish their nests, leaving only destruction and ruin in their wake.

"It's really overgrown too," Teto commented.

With no one there to curb their growth, plants had started sprouting from between the stone slabs forming the highway to the capital. What had once been a well-maintained road had become uneven and rough.

"Left unobstructed, nature can effortlessly erase human culture and

civilization—especially if it gets a boost from the ambient mana. It’s fascinating,” I noted.

As we took in the fallen kingdom, we finally reached the capital. The towering walls encircling the city had crumbled in places, and most structures lay in ruins, their roofs and walls either collapsed or partially destroyed. The royal palace must’ve once been an impressive sight with its white stone walls, but its grandeur had faded since.

“Lady Witch, there are monsters in the ruins! Should we kill them?”

I shrugged. “That’s not why we’re here; just leave them be.”

Some birdlike monsters were pecking at the overgrown fruit trees, while a clowder of catlike monsters who seemed to have made their home in one of the collapsed houses were teaching their children how to hunt mice. Clear water flowed down what I could only assume used to be the town’s drainage channel, which was now surrounded by greenery. I spotted a few slimes near the water channel, absorbing whatever they could find into their bodies, and wolflike monsters chasing wild rabbits down the main street.

While most of the monsters seemed relatively harmless, their threat level intensified as we neared the city center. However, as we approached the palace, we were met with the sight of a creature larger than an ox and with the body of a lion sleeping peacefully in front of the castle, its serpentlike tail coiled nearby—a king chimera.

The royal palace had been built on a mana hot spot but, now that there weren’t any humans left, the strongest monster had claimed it as its turf.

“I’ve heard that the royal family and the nobles who managed to escape are desperate to take back their kingdom but...there’s no way they will with that thing camped out here,” I said.

Most of them had run away with a good chunk of their fortune. I had heard that they planned on paying adventurers to come to retake the fallen capital, but not only was the city in ruins, it was overrun with monsters. Chasing them all away would only cause even more damage, and it’d take them decades to rebuild. Independently of that, there were also adventurers who’d organized expeditions all the way to the royal capital once they’d heard the tales of the

fortunes left to molder in the city's broken shell, hoping to claim those abandoned treasures for themselves. But with the king chimera blocking the palace entrance, the only way to get to the valuables inside was to defeat it.

"Lady Witch, you don't want to go look for treasures?" Teto asked me.

"Hm? Not really. Not because of the king chimera—we could take it easily—but we didn't come here for riches."

The royal palace wasn't the only place that had valuables left behind; the noble estates, shops, and even the commoners' houses must've still had some cash stashed inside. I could go and loot all of these places, but I'd feel bad for the adventurers to come; they most likely would put their lives on the line to make it to the fallen capital, and I didn't want all of their efforts to have been in vain. No, I had come here for something else. They were still treasures, just of a different kind: cultural artifacts.

"Hmm... Looks like that building over there might be the library I'm looking for."

"Whoa, it's huge!" Teto exclaimed.

We made our way to the library—which was located a ways off from the palace and the king chimera—and immediately got attacked by the monsters who had made it their home. Teto and I made quick work of them with a couple of *Wind Cutter* spells and a few sword slashes. We shoved the bodies into my magic bag and entered the library, whose door had been left open.

"The books aren't looking too good. No surprises there; they've been collecting dust for two years, after all."

Using *Psychokinesis*, I gathered all of the parchment books near the entrance to check their condition. Unsurprisingly, most of them had been completely eaten by bugs or discolored from the sun. I couldn't help but let out a disappointed sigh as I progressed further into the building. Most of these books were probably sold in other nations as well, but I couldn't stand the idea of a good book going to waste.

"Oooh, the books in the back aren't damaged at all," Teto noted.

"Just as I thought; the more valuable books have been enchanted with some

sort of conservation spell.”

All of the books that could be considered valuable to the nation—research books, academic studies, history books, vital records, technical books, reference materials, banned books, et cetera—were stored in a separate room inaccessible to the regular public. Monster attacks were rampant in this world, so all of the important books were either copied and stored in multiple locations or enchanted to ensure their condition wouldn’t deteriorate too quickly. This library also stored books from our precursors. These hadn’t been translated into the modern language as of yet, but the language ability Liriel had granted me when I was reincarnated into this world allowed me to read any text, even those written in dead tongues.

“This should be all of the library’s books,” I said once I had shoved them all into my magic bag. “Let’s move on to the next location.”

“Roger!”

The two of us split up and went from building to building to retrieve all of the books that we could find. There were picture books for children; ancient manuscripts, history books, and scholarly treatises sought after by collectors; plays, collections of musical pieces, and caricature pamphlets; fashionable novels and limited edition publications; grimoires and research notes from all sorts of magic schools; banned books, usually hidden away...

Some books were considered more valuable than others, but each person had a different definition of what a “valuable” book was. In a way, I’d say that there were at least as many valuable books as there were people in this world. As I explored house after house, I found a fair few pieces in great condition. In most cases, they were pretty much worthless, but the fact that they had been enchanted with conservation spells showed that they held great importance to their owners. I made sure to retrieve them all.

All was fine and dandy until Teto called me as she checked one of the taller shelves.

“Lady Wiiiitch, there are picture books and novels here.”

“Huh? Picture books up *there*?”

Books meant for children were usually stored on the lowest shelves so that they could have easy access. *Maybe they ran out of space and had to stow these ones out of reach*, I surmised as I went to take a glance at the books in her hands.

Boy, was I wrong.

“Oooh! The lady in the book is naked!” Teto exclaimed when she opened one of the picture books.

“T-Teto?! What are you looking at?!” I asked in a panic.

She looked at me with big, innocent eyes. “Hm? It’s just a weird picture book,” she told me.

“Don’t look at it!”

That’s right: the “picture books and novels” Teto had found were collections of erotic prints. She hadn’t realized exactly what she was looking at yet, so I quickly took them away from her. I opened a few to see exactly what we were dealing with and...they were pretty graphic.

“These are kinda obscene,” I muttered in horror. “There are even photo books... These were probably taken using some sort of magical camera and printed out. Oh dear, is that a portrait of a high-class prostitute?!”

While I was utterly shocked by the content of these, it had been well over half a century since I had last seen any sort of erotic book, and my curiosity forced me to take a closer look.

“Lady Witch, your face is all red!” Teto said, sounding a tinge worried. “Are you okay?”

I quickly cleared my throat to regain my composure. “I’m fine,” I told her before muttering to myself, “I suppose that, in a way, these *are* cultural artifacts, and there’s no hierarchy within culture, so...let’s take them home.”

I shoved all of the books into my magic bag and swiftly moved on.



As we retrieved the last of the books, I stumbled across something interesting.

“Are those...travel journals?” I asked no one in particular.

A bunch of books were tied together. From the looks of them, they seemed to be a mix of personal travel logs, adventurers’ diaries, and guidebooks bought in various nations. The owner of these books must’ve loved traveling.

I began leafing through the books and reading the names of a few chapters. “‘The Great Temple of the Church of the Five Goddesses,’ ‘The Silver Mountains at the Edge of the Mubad Empire,’ ‘How to Navigate Ancient Ruins,’ ‘The Dungeon City,’ ‘Local Specialties,’ ‘Scenes of Each Nation’s Capital City’...”

“Teto would love to go to all of these places!” Teto commented, looking over my shoulder.

“It’d be fun, wouldn’t it?”

“You don’t have anything holding you back, Lady Witch. We could even go now!” she suggested.

It *was* a tempting offer, but I shook my head.

“No way. Beretta would be worried sick. Let’s just go home for today.”

I was still the highest authority in the forest—for the time being at least—and there were still things I needed to do before being able to leave on another long trip. I put the travel diaries into my magic bag, and the two of us left the fallen Kingdom of Krista.

I did try to visit the capital of the Duchy of Droog at a later date, but...

“Whoa... Look at that miasma. There’s so much resentment here. The entire place has turned into an undead city.”

“It’s really creepy!” Teto added.

The miasma covering the former capital was so thick that it didn’t even let the faintest glimmer of sunlight pass through. The resentment of the people sacrificed here, coupled with the grudges of the people who had lost their homes and their lives during the stampede, had birthed this miasma and

hollowed the city out for good. Black skeletons had taken residence in the dilapidated houses and patrolled the dark streets, killing any living creature that dared to set a foot past the gates. The miasma was so dense that it even permeated the earth itself, causing any tree and shrub that grew to be twisted and deformed.

“I feel bad leaving all of those books behind, but I’m *not* going in there,” I declared. “I’m giving up for today.”

“Let’s go home and have a snack,” Teto suggested.

Perhaps, one day, the Church would organize a purification ritual to rid this land of all of the miasma, or perhaps we’d have to wait until it purified itself. Who knew how long it’d take before humans could enter this place? Ten years? A hundred years? If I still remembered after all that time, I’d come back and retrieve the books using *Psychokinesis*, but for now, it was more trouble than it was worth.

In the years that followed, I made several trips to the nations that had been destroyed during the stampede to see how things were going. In some places, the mana had caused the monsters to be much more aggressive, while in others, ruins that hadn’t been there before had appeared—planar driftwood, I assumed. A few dungeons even popped up. However, I merely noted the locations of these new additions and left them untouched. Adventurers in search of treasures would find their way to them eventually. And, well, if we saw that they went untouched for too long, Teto and I might help ourselves one day.

Chapter 21: The Death of Loved Ones and the Birth of New Lives

Time passed in the blink of an eye, and before I realized it, ten years had come and gone since I had introduced the council system to the forest. At first, the representatives of each race were at a bit at a loss when it came to making decisions, but they had gotten used to discussing things with each other since.

Teto and I had done a lot these past ten years. We'd visited the demons in their settlements to ensure they were doing okay, carried out all sorts of experiments in my tower, cooked with Beretta, read the books we had salvaged from the cities that fell during the stampede, entertained Selene's grandkids when they came over to play, and sometimes went on outings beyond the forest. All in all, we pretty much spent our days as we pleased.

But ten years was a long time, and certain things were unavoidable. One day, three years after the stampede, Beretta came to me with a letter.

"A letter addressed to me? Now that's rare," I mused.

Most letters that were sent to the Forest never actually reached my hands, as they were all screened by either Selene and her family or Beretta and the other mechanoids. I found it curious that that particular letter had found its way to me, especially considering the seal was still intact. But when I checked the sender, I saw that it had been sent by one of my acquaintances, which explained why neither Selene nor Beretta had opened it.

"A letter from Tony, huh? I wonder what news he has for me," I mused aloud, my curiosity piqued.

Tony was Arsus's disciple. I had met him during the stampede, but I wouldn't say that the two of us were particularly close, so I found it odd that he would send a letter to me.

I broke the seal and started reading the content of the letter. When I was done, I looked at the ceiling, and a long sigh escaped my lips.

“Lady Witch? What does the letter say?” Teto asked me.

“Arsus... Arsus passed away.”

During the final battle of the stampede, Arsus had used all of his mana to attempt to defeat the bone titan, which didn’t leave him with enough to keep using Body Strengthening. His mana eventually recovered, but his body never really bounced back from the fatigue from the battle. Knowing he couldn’t keep going like this, he retired from adventuring and entrusted his party, the Swords of Daybreak, and his holy weapon, the Sword of Dawn, to Tony. The sword had let him fight against the ravages of time for as long as he had, but now that he didn’t have it anymore, his body quickly deteriorated. Three years later, he passed away peacefully.

The following year, Selene informed me that her father—the former king of Ischea, Alberd—had passed away as well.

“My condolences, Selene,” I told her through the magical communication device.

“Thank you, mom. At least he was smiling, even in his last moments.”

The former king’s health had been steadily declining, so Selene and her family knew what to expect. They had enough time to tell him one last goodbye, and he got to spend his last moments surrounded by his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren before passing away. The royal family organized a grand funeral service for him, and he was buried in the royal tomb where his wife—Selene’s mother, Queen Elize—rested.

This wasn’t the last of the bad news: last year, Gyunton had passed away. I had sent him plenty of potions made using World Tree leaves, as well as nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables, but unfortunately it hadn’t been enough. At least it seemed that, just like Selene’s father, he had passed peacefully, surrounded by his loved ones.

Most of the elderly folks we had taken into the forest had died as well. Their settlement didn’t stay empty for long, though, as the kids from the boardinghouse—who were now all grown-up—needed somewhere to live and raise their own children.

“Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised. I’ve lived in this world for a long time already,” I muttered.

I was already well over eighty years old—pushing ninety, really. It was only natural that the people I had met in my youth would gradually pass away.

“Lady Witch, Lady Teto, do you have a moment?” Yahad said, coming in.

“Is something the matter, Yahad? You look troubled.”

“What’s wrong?” Teto asked next to me. “You should eat something yummy if you’re down!”

Yahad took in a deep breath as if to resolve himself before saying slowly, “The elder of our tribe passed away today.”

This came as a shock to both Teto and me. However, I’d known that this day was coming, so I was able to keep my calm as I told him, “My condolences, Yahad.”

The elder of the dragonkin’s health had been gradually deteriorating for the past year. Whenever I visited their settlement, I always made sure to use Healing Magic on him and give him healing potions, but it had little effect. Healing Magic facilitated the body’s self-healing abilities, and potions amplified the effect of medicine and alleviated the symptoms of one’s illness. But while they could ease the complications that came with old age, they couldn’t cure them altogether, and they did nothing to repair the fraying telomeres that set a firm upper limit on mere mortal lives.

“He was 321 years old,” Yahad said. “The lamias and your attendants came to examine him yesterday, but nothing could be done. He died of old age.”

The dragonkin’s elder had been a pillar of support for his brethren, even after their migration to the forest. We had been relying on him and the other elders a lot; they were the ones who had made the forest into what it was today.

“He will be missed,” I said.

“He was a really nice man. He’d always give yummy food to Teto,” Teto added.

“I’m sure he would have been happy and honored to hear that you thought so

highly of him,” Yahad said, bowing his head to us.

Dragonkin were robust, and their lifespan rivaled that of even elves. But death came for everyone. I had done my utmost to help him heal, but even my magic couldn't halt the inevitable, nor could I extend anyone's lifespan or make potions that could make one young again. If I tried really, *really* hard, I might be able to keep someone alive for a couple of days at best, but that was the extent of my abilities.

The dragonkin elder's death wasn't the first that'd occurred in the forest, but I was much closer to him than I was to the others. It left a pit in my stomach.

“How were his last moments?” I asked softly.

“Was he in pain? Did he suffer?” Teto added.

“He looked at peace when Lady Lorie took him away. He said that he could entrust the future of the godkin race to the rest of us without worry.”

Ever since they'd moved into the forest, the dragonkin had been able to start having children again without worrying about whether they had enough space or food like they had when they'd lived on the floating island. They also finally got to experience the joy of seeing the mythical beasts move about freely through the forest and the sky.

“Our elder held the utmost gratitude to you two.”

Yahad had just lost someone dear to him. As an immortal being, I didn't really know what to say without sounding obnoxious, so I decided to keep it simple. “I'm glad to hear that he passed away peacefully. We'll attend his funeral, if that's all right with you.”

“We gotta tell him goodbye properly!”

Once again, he bowed his head to us deeply.

The next day, Teto, Beretta, and I headed to the dragonkin settlement. The elder was peacefully resting in a coffin, surrounded by other dragonkin and the godkin who knew him from their time together on the floating island. The Great Elder was there too, standing a bit to the side along with the mythical beasts, Teto's earthnoids, golems, and earth spirits, and the representatives of the

other tribes. During his life, the dragonkin's elder had watched over them all, and now it was time for them to give back.

"Lady Witch, Lady Teto, do you want to say goodbye to him?" the dragonkin leader asked us.

"Yes."

The two of us approached the casket and looked down at the elder's serene face.

"Thank you for everything," I said softly. "I hope you will find happiness in your next life as well, and that we'll meet again."

"Next time, Teto will be the one giving you yummy food!"

Beside me, Beretta silently bowed her head to him.

When everyone was done paying their respects, the dragonkin closed the casket, and the Great Elder cremated the body using his fire breath. The flames enveloped the casket, and the next second, only a pile of ash was left behind. I could hear some people sobbing in the crowd. I offered the elder silent prayers until all of the flames were extinguished.

After that, we waited for the ashes to cool before the godkin went to retrieve the elder's magic stones from the pile. It was a custom among the demons to cremate the dead and distribute the magic stones to their relatives so that they could inherit their will and power.

When the funeral was over, the dragonkin organized a little banquet to dispel the sorrowful atmosphere. Teto, Beretta, and I joined in, digging into the various dishes prepared by the dragonkin to our heart's content. A lot of the dragonkin and godkin had brought their children along.

"Mommy, this is sho yummy!" I heard a little girl squeal. She was smiling brightly and had food all over her face.

"Be careful, you are making a mess," her mother—a mechanoid—chided her, gently wiping the child's mouth and hands. Mechanoids never showed a lot of emotion, so her face was pretty neutral, but her gaze as she looked at her daughter was warm and full of love.

“Otay, mommy!” the little girl babbled.

She had been born from the union of a mechanoid and a godkin man. She had inherited her father’s beauty, but not his wings or halo, and her race stated “Mechanoid.”

The mother seemed to have noticed that we were looking at them, and she gave us a polite bow.

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

“It has been a while, hasn’t it? You look happy. I’m glad,” I said.

I had assigned her to work at the godkin settlement so that she could live with her husband, and she was taking care of her daughter alongside her duties. There were quite a few mechanoids who had gotten married to men of other races in the past ten years. Some of their children had already reached their early teens, and we had hired them to work at the mansion. This made them the third generation of maids.

“She will serve you at the mansion in my stead when she comes of age,” the mechanoid said.

“Let’s not force her into anything, okay? We should let her decide for herself what she wants to do when she grows up,” I replied.

The little girl was staring at us with wide, puzzled eyes. I couldn’t help but notice just how expressive she was. When the attendant dolls evolved into mechanoids, they gained a soul and feelings. However, their nature as former machines limited their facial expressions. But this little girl was as expressive as any other child her age. I was really looking forward to seeing how the new generation of mechanoids would grow up.

This little mechanoid girl wasn’t the only child present, of course, and I couldn’t help but be amazed seeing all of the little dragonkin and godkin children running around. Every single one of them was shining with youth and life.

“Elder... I’m sure a bright future awaits these children,” I muttered.

I was still sad to have lost someone I had grown so close to. But seeing how

full of life the children were gave me hope for the future.

Chapter 22: The Simplest Yet Hardest Request

One night, as Teto and I went to sleep, we once again found ourselves in the dream oracle space.

“I wonder what Liriel wants to tell us today.”

“Are we gonna have tea with the goddesses again?” Teto asked excitedly.

In the past ten years, Liriel had summoned us to the dream oracle space a few times, and we would spend the night telling her about all of the things we had done recently. But I couldn’t help feeling that *something* was lacking, so one day, I used my Creation Magic inside of the dream oracle to create some food for us to snack on as we chatted. At first, I had mostly gone for fancy cakes and black tea, but Liriel and the others had started asking to try food from my previous life, so I graciously obliged. I had made them try everything, from traditional Japanese food to family restaurant dishes and junk food, as well as all sorts of sweets like penny candies and various confectioneries.

If any of their believers saw the goddesses noshing their way through the dollar menu and drinking Coke, they’d probably faint in sheer horror.

I supposed that what happened in dream oracle space stayed in dream oracle space... Hopefully.

“Liriel isn’t here yet,” I remarked. “Should I prepare refreshments while we wait for her?”

“What are you going to make today?” Teto asked me.

“Hm... I’m feeling like traditional Japanese snacks.”

Using my Creation Magic, I made dorayaki, daifuku, manju, castellas, yokan, karinto, rice crackers, et cetera, et cetera. As I was preparing green tea to pair with the snacks, Liriel entered the dream oracle space, followed by a young girl floating a few inches clear of the ground. I had never seen her before.

“Hi, Liriel,” I greeted my friend.

“Hello, Liriel! Lady Witch made lots of snacks for us to share!” Teto chirped.

“I can see that,” Liriel replied with a smile. “I’m sorry for calling you both here so suddenly today. I wanted to introduce you to someone.”

She gently pushed the young girl with her forward, and she glided over to us. Her shoulder-length hair was as white as snow, and a halo shone brightly above her head. She had wings, just like Liriel and the other goddesses.



“Loriel, I assume,” I said.

“The last goddess!” Teto exclaimed.

That’s right: the young girl with Liriel was none other than Loriel, the Goddess of the Underworld and the only one we had never met before, as she had been asleep for over two thousand years. Liriel had told us that she had recently—well, since the end of the stampede—woken from her long slumber and could stay awake for short periods of time, so we had been expecting to meet her sooner or later.

“Hmm... Nice to meet you,” the goddess mumbled sleepily, opening her lilac eyes and staring at us blearily.

Just like me, her appearance seemed to be that of a twelve-year-old.

“I’ve been receiving a lot of nice prayers recently, so I like you,” she told me plainly.

“Uh... Prayers?” I was about to ask her to explain what she meant when she suddenly fell to the ground. “Huh?! Are you okay?”

“Tired,” she muttered.

Teto and I panicked when we saw her collapse to the ground, but Liriel simply let out a sigh.

“I shouldn’t have let you come; it was too early.”

“No. It’s not fair that only you and the others get to eat yummy food. I want some too,” Loriel protested.

“Um, surely the floor isn’t that comfortable. Let me make you a bed.
Creation!”

I created a fluffy bed, and Teto and I gently picked Loriel up and slowly lowered her onto it. A blissed-out expression appeared on her face when her body made contact with the soft mattress.

“This bed feels nice. Can I take it home with me?” she asked.

“Loriel, for goodness’ sake, *please* behave in a way befitting of a goddess,” Liriel sighed, looking embarrassed by her youngest sister’s antics.

Loriel paid her no mind as she used telekinesis to pull a dorayaki into chewing range.

“Yummy,” she commented.

She still looked like she was on the verge of falling asleep, but the corners of her mouth had curled upward slightly as she dug into her snack.

She was so cute that simply looking at her made some of the fatigue leave my body.

Teto, Liriel, and I started munching on our own snacks as we sipped on some green tea. The three of us were sitting at a table, but Loriel was still lounging on the bed.

She seems like quite the lazybones, huh?

“So did you only summon us here to introduce us to Loriel?” I asked Liriel.

She shook her head. “Not quite. Loriel said that she had a request for the two of you.”

Another request from a goddess, huh? I had already taken care of all of the other sisters’ requests, so I wasn’t going to turn Loriel down, but I was slightly worried. The stampede Liriel had asked us to stop had been such a huge-scale disaster that I couldn’t help dreading what Loriel would throw at us. I braced myself for the worst as I waited for her to speak.

“The wheel of life and death has been spinning, even while I was asleep,” she started lethargically.

I nodded. “Liriel and the others told us, yes.”

“It must’ve been really hard on you!” Teto added.

“I was sleeping, so I didn’t really feel anything. I’ve just kind of let my powers do their thing automatically, and the next time I bothered to check, two thousand years had already passed.”

People generated mana, which the world needed to function properly. This was why, despite being asleep, Loriel had to keep the wheel of life spinning for all these years, or else the deceased souls wouldn’t have had a chance to reincarnate.

“But there are still many souls lost in space-time because of the catastrophe two thousand years ago,” Lorie continued.

“Some of them joined the stampede, didn’t they?” I asked, which earned me a nod from Lorie.

“And this is what has allowed me to wake,” she said, her expression grave. “But I’m still quite weak, so it took me another decade ’n’ change to finally gather the strength to come to meet you. There are still many lost souls wandering space-time as we speak. I want to help them.”

Her tone was serious, but I really had a hard time taking her seriously when she had crumbs all around her mouth and a death grip on a castella.

“So what would you like us to do?” I asked.

I was bracing myself for some crazy request—saving lost souls sounded like something pretty significant, after all—but Lorie’s answer caught me completely off guard.

“Can you organize a festival on the day of the winter solstice?”

“Huh? A festival? How will that help?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“The lost souls want to go back to their world, but they don’t know the way. So if you hold a festival on the darkest day of the year, they’ll be able to see the lights of the festival, and it’ll guide them home,” Lorie explained.

“That sounds really fun!” Teto chirped.

She seemed very enthusiastic about the idea, but I had no idea how to organize such an important festival.

Will I need to perform some sort of ritual? And, if so, what kind?

“You’ll have to be a beacon light for the lost souls,” Lorie told me as if she had been reading my thoughts. “Drink to your heart’s content and have a good time. The flashier, the better. This will attract the souls’ attention, and they’ll come flocking over. Then, you’ll have to purify them. That’s all you have to do.”

This seemed pretty doable overall. But I was still confused about one detail: people organized festivals all around the world, didn’t they? Why couldn’t the lost souls follow the lights of those festivals?

“The catastrophe of two thousand years ago has caused the walls between our world and space-time to weaken, but only in this particular region,” Liriel supplied. “So the festivals organized in other parts of the world aren’t very efficient at guiding the souls back home.”

Liriel nodded as if to confirm Liriel’s explanation, the castella she had been holding gone and replaced by a daifuku.

“I see. A festival on the day of the winter solstice, huh? Seems like a good day for it,” I mused.

The only festival we celebrated in the forest was hanami; we’d all gather under the cherry blossom tree and drink and eat to celebrate spring. Each race had its own, smaller festivals, but hanami was the only one that everyone participated in. Holding one more festival this year seemed like a nice way of getting everyone together.

“I’m looking forward to seeing what you do with it. Oh, and it’d be nice if you could hold it every year,” Liriel said casually, as if she hadn’t just dropped a huge bomb out of nowhere.

“*Every year?*” I repeated. “It’s going to be way more work than I thought.”

“But it’s gonna be fun!” Teto exclaimed.

Well, I *did* wish for more occasions to gather everyone in the forest and celebrate together, so I supposed it was fine. But it seemed I’d have to rely on the forest’s folks a lot more than I thought if I wanted to make this a yearly thing.

Chapter 23: Preparing for the Winter Solstice Festival

That morning, a knock at the door woke me up.

“Pardon my intrusion,” Beretta’s voice echoed from the other side before the door creaked open. “Good morning, Master.”

“Good morning, Beretta,” I said.

I slipped from Teto’s arms and got up.

This woke Teto as well, and she mumbled a sleepy, “Morning,” as she sat up, rubbing the sleep away from her face.

After a few seconds of silence, her eyes suddenly shot wide open, and she exclaimed, “Lady Witch! The festival!”

“What festival are you talking about, Lady Teto?” Beretta asked.

“We had a dream oracle from Liriel and Lorie. Lorie asked that we organize a festival on the day of the winter solstice,” I explained as I got dressed for the day.

“You have received yet another dream oracle from the goddesses? Well, I suppose I should not be so surprised. That is our master for you,” Beretta commented. “Understood. The other maids and I will devote all of our energy to preparing for the festival.”

There were only two months until the winter solstice, so we had no time to waste.

“Up until now, the only festival we’ve celebrated has been the hanami festival. I will contact the settlements’ representatives and ask them to help us organize everything,” Beretta continued.

There were many things that went into organizing a festival. We’d need to change the settings on the transfer gates so that everyone could use them on

that special day, find a way to convey the meaning of the festival to the forest's people, decide on a location, decorate the venue, choose and prepare all sorts of festive dishes, organize some sort of entertainment... Judging by Beretta's words, it seemed that she was planning on doing everything by herself with the help of the other maids.

"Um... Loriel entrusted this mission to me specifically, so I'll help," I offered. I'd feel bad sitting around and doing nothing while Beretta and the others slaved away.

"Teto too!"

But Beretta softly shook her head. "I believe it would be better if you kept on acting as the forest's ruler for now and did not bother yourself with such matters."

"What a shame... Can you at least let us taste test the dishes for the festival?" Teto tried bargaining.

"Understood. I will leave the taste-testing duties to you, then, Master, Lady Teto," Beretta said.

I wasn't sure if our taste testing the dishes would contribute much to the festival, but it was better than nothing, I supposed.

"Speaking of which, do you have any requests regarding the type of dishes we'll serve at the festival?" Beretta asked me next.

I pondered over the question for a few seconds. "Could you please make a few dishes using kabocha squash then?" I asked.

"Kabocha squash?" Beretta repeated, blinking in surprise. "May I ask why?"

"Vestiges from my past life, I suppose."

In my past life, it was a custom to eat kabocha squash on the day of the winter solstice. Not only was it said to repel evil spirits due to the yellowish-orange color of its flesh, but it was also a way of praying for good health for the following year, as it was highly nutritious. Besides, while kabocha squashes weren't *quite* pumpkins, they made me think of jack-o'-lanterns, which were also considered to repel evil in my past world. Considering the aim of the

festival Lorie had asked me to organize was to guide the lost souls and purify them, eating squash seemed quite fitting to me.

“I do not know of such a tradition, but there might be similar customs in other parts of the world,” Beretta said. “So this is why you always request to eat kabocha squash during winter, Master.”

“Teto loves Lady Witch’s kabocha squash cream stew and simmered kabocha!” Teto chirped.

Beretta had been with us for decades now, but it seemed that she had always found my periodic taste for kabocha odd. She looked almost relieved to have learned the reason behind my annual request.

Deciding on the festival’s menu was pretty much all that Beretta would allow us to do, as she planned on having the other maids organize the festival and gather the council members to discuss all of the details. Still, I felt a bit awkward not doing anything—especially since I still wasn’t sure what exactly we should do during the festival—so...

“...we came to ask you for advice,” I concluded after telling the Great Elder about the dream oracle.

“Please help us, Mister Great Elder!” Teto added.

“Hm... A festival on the day of the winter solstice, you say? That’s an old one,” he said.

“An old one?”

“You mean that people used to celebrate the winter solstice too before?” Teto asked.

“Indeed,” he replied with a smile. “Back in the day, people would pray for the sun’s rebirth, as it’s the day where night falls the fastest. Then, it evolved into praying for the deceased’s rebirth. Well, as you can see, the implications and customs have evolved a lot over time.”

“Is it really okay to change the meaning of a festival like that, though?” Teto asked, tilting her head to one side.

She probably hadn’t understood that the changes the Great Elder was talking

about must've happened over centuries, if not thousands of years.

"Since the dawn of time, humans have changed the meaning of their holy days to suit the needs of the age. For instance, certain customs used to be exclusive to the noble class, but they have become accessible to the masses over time. Yet, at the heart of it all, their intentions remain the same: for their prayers to reach the divine."

I nodded pensively at his words. "So we'd need to dedicate the festival to Liriel—since the forest is in her domain—and Lorie, huh? Ah, but if we're praying for the sun's rebirth, I guess we have to include Liriel too..."

"But it'd be really mean to leave out the other two," Teto argued.

"We could pray to Liriel and Lorie for the cold of winter to ease and for spring to arrive, maybe?" I suggested.

The Great Elder guffawed. "Just do whatever is convenient for you, Lady Witch. The goddesses won't hold it against you if you don't pray to them."

He seemed pretty amused at my admittedly quite ambitious idea of praying to all five goddesses at once during the festival. I could see his point; if we did that, the festival would evolve from one where we try leading the souls lost in space-time home to a celebration of the goddesses, which wasn't really what I was after.

"Then what do you think we should do?" I asked. "Lorie said we have to be a 'beacon light' for the lost souls."

"A bonfire and torches should suffice. If you manage to keep them burning all night long, the lost souls should find their way home," the Great Elder told me.

"That's a great idea. I'll tell Beretta later."

In my past life, there was a festival called Obon where people lit fires to guide the souls of the deceased back home and send them back off to the afterlife after the festival.

So we'd be organizing a festival around the same time as Christmas but that incorporates elements from Halloween and the Obon festival, huh? I chuckled to myself.

Thanks to the Great Elder's advice, I had a better vision of what this festival should be.

"Thanks, Great Elder. Hope you'll enjoy the festival."

"Lady Witch and Teto aren't really sure of what to do yet, but it'll be fun!"

"I'm sure I will. I'd offer you my help to organize everything, but I'm afraid my size might make things a bit difficult. Either way, I'm looking forward to it, and if you need my help with anything, do not hesitate to ask."

We said goodbye to the Great Elder, left his lair, and made our way back to the mansion to tell Beretta about our new ideas for the festival.

Chapter 24: The Last Performance of the Festival

“I have gathered you all here today to discuss the festival Lady Lorie has requested of Master,” Beretta declared, starting the council meeting.

The representatives of all of the settlements were present. Teto and I were sitting beside Beretta to hear what ideas they had all come up with. I had no intention of interfering in the meeting whatsoever; I knew that they would all prioritize my opinion if I were to state it, which was pretty much the opposite of what I wanted.

“Before we start, I have an announcement to make,” Beretta said. “Up until now, I have been acting as the representative of the mechanoids and the humans, but from today onward, we have a new human representative who will be joining us at our meetings.”

“I-I’m looking forward to working with you all,” a human man in his late twenties stuttered as he stood up to greet the other representatives.

“I am sure that some of you already know him, but his name is Lucas,” Beretta made the introductions. “Ever since he moved into the forest, he has diligently managed domestic affairs at Master’s mansion. He has recently been elected mayor of the human settlement.”

Now that the kids who used to live in the boardinghouse were all grown up and could stand on their own feet, they had created a human settlement in the forest, and Lucas had become their representative.

The other members of the council each spared Lucas a calculating glance.

“With this out of the way, we may now move on to today’s main topic: the festival,” Beretta said.

My only two requests had been to have lots of light sources at the festival to guide the souls back to our world—per the Great Elder’s advice—and for some of the dishes to include kabocha squash. Winter was a busy season for all of the settlements, so the festival would most likely be some sort of celebratory

banquet with a couple of simple entertainments thrown in. I expected the whole thing to be pretty small-scale, but it seemed that all of the representatives had come up with many ideas for activities.

“That’s a lot,” I commented as I perused the list.

“It is! Are we doing everything?” Teto asked.

We had received all sorts of proposals, from dance performances and strength contests, as suggested by the men, to choral singing, plays, and acrobatic shows. As the leader of the forest, I had decided on the festival’s general framework, but I wanted to give the forest folks free rein to decide on the entertainment. Everything sounded fun, and I could tell that the representatives were pumped up to be working on a festival literally handed down from on high and wanted to show off what they did best so we’d notice them.

“Narrowing it down to only a few activities is going to be quite difficult,” Beretta commented. She and the other representatives had already whittled down the list by removing everything that seemed impossible to organize and were in the process of picking the best options.

For the food, we decided to have a variety of different dishes available; kabocha dishes would be the central feature, and each settlement would also be bringing their own specialties to vary up the menu. The council now needed to narrow it down to only the most feasible dishes, as well as to make a list of the ingredients needed and to either gather them in the Forest or buy them outside.

“Let me summarize the current plan, everyone. In the morning, we will have a mass wedding for all of the couples who wish to participate. As for the settlements with no couple ready to take that step, there will be other smaller activities organized. Then, in the afternoon, we will be holding a martial arts tournament in the main venue. Is that all right with everyone?” Beretta asked.

In the end, they had decided to narrow the entertainment list down to only the activities that could have the most participants. Lucas had proposed the mass wedding ceremony in the morning; the tournament had been a joint proposal from several demon representatives.

With the festival starting to take shape, the representatives started relaxing and chitchatting with each other.

“A mass wedding, huh? It’ll need to be grand and lavish,” Devalna—the representative of the devilkin—said.

“You’re currently seeing a man, aren’t you? Are you going to get married to him at the festival?” the representative of the arachnes inquired.

“Maybe. We had already heard about Lucas’s idea before the council, and the village girls have been begging me to get married at the festival since then.”

“You should! The dresses will be made using our fabric after all.”

“We’ll be making the bouquets, then,” the alraune beside them offered.

Smaller activities had also been approved to serve as interludes during the mass wedding, as long as they fit into the budget. Each settlement would prepare its own entertainment, and I had no doubt that they would all be a lot of fun.

“That wedding ceremony’s no good,” Gasta—the oni-kin representative—muttered. I already knew that he was a bit of a troublemaker; after all, he had been one of the demons who were against the idea of a council back when I first came up with the idea.

The atmosphere grew tense as he turned towards Lucas, a menacing look on his face. “Hey, you!” he barked. “Don’t you have a better idea for a wedding ceremony? My daughter will get married at the festival!”

When the words left his mouth, the tension in the air instantly dissipated.

“Calm down, Gasta,” Howl—the werewolves’ representative—interjected. “Besides, you agreed to the human mayor’s idea, didn’t you?”

“Huh? Well, yeah, I don’t think it’s a bad idea at all. But that wedding proposal is way too plain! It’ll be my youngest daughter’s special day! I need it to be extra special!” Gasta argued. “Wait... But if I oppose the idea, then my baby won’t get married just yet!”

“As a fellow woman, let me tell you that if you do that, your daughter will refuse to talk to you for weeks,” one of the women said, quickly shutting

Gasta's idea down.

Gasta finally seemed to have noticed the shift in the atmosphere of the room.

"What's wrong, guys? Did I say something weird?" he asked, puzzled.

"Grumph... You used to be against the idea of a council altogether at first. When the human mayor stated his idea, we all thought you'd oppose it, since he's weaker than us. But you seem to have accepted him," Morph—the minotaurs' representative—explained.

Gasta scowled. "I haven't *accepted* that gangly human boy. I just didn't have any reason to oppose his idea."

He paused and all of a sudden started releasing his mana into the air.

"Speaking of which, new kid, if you ever try to betray Lady Witch, I'll beat you to a pulp—you and anyone else who tries to cross her!" he told Lucas menacingly.

To my surprise, Lucas didn't look away; he gritted his teeth and held Gasta's gaze without flinching. After a few seconds, Gasta suppressed his mana.

"Well, I guess you're fine. Y'know, I'm not good at this whole thinking thing, so once I've decided something, I'll stick to it no matter what," Gasta said, looking away and scratching his cheek, seemingly embarrassed by his outburst.

The other representatives all had small smiles on their faces.

"'I'll beat you to a pulp,' huh? Such words aren't befitting of a member of the council," Cain—the representative of the centaurs—interjected. "If you deem another member unqualified, you should bring your concerns to us, and we'll discuss it among all of us. And the same goes for everyone here."

The others all nodded in agreement.

There was still a huge wall between humans and demons, but I was happy to see them all trying to bridge their differences and work together.

"Now that we have established that none of you have any issues with the new member of the council, let us resume the meeting. Gasta, you would like for us to add more to the wedding ceremony, is that it?" Beretta said.

“Yeah! I’m leaving the details to the human mayor, though. He’s better at thinking than I am.”

“Hey, *you’re* the one who wants a larger ceremony. Don’t just foist it all onto the human mayor; try coming up with ideas yourself,” one of the representatives chided Gasta, drawing chuckles from the others.

Seeing how dependable they all were, I felt a huge weight come off my shoulders. I now had the assurance that the forest would be in good hands once I resumed my travels. At the same time, though, I felt a bit of a pang in my chest upon realizing that they didn’t *need* me anymore.

“Well then, it has been decided by majority vote that you, Master, will be performing an offering dance to the goddesses during the festival,” Beretta announced.

“Oooh, congrats, Lady Witch!” Teto chirped.

“Huh? Hold on a minute! Why do I have to be the one performing the dance?!” I exclaimed.

What even was an offering dance in the first place?!

Upon seeing my confusion, Beretta summarized the council members’ reasoning to me.

“We believe that, as Lady Liriel’s prophet, you are the most apt to carry this task, Master. Not only would you be purifying the lost souls, you would also be providing entertainment to the forest’s residents.”

“But why does it have to be a *dance*?” I grumbled. “Couldn’t we just all pray in silence in front of a bonfire or something? I’d use a purification spell at that moment and it’d have the same effect.”

I could even pray onstage if they insisted, but there was no way I’d dance in front of all of the forest’s residents—especially since I didn’t have the slightest idea what an offering dance was supposed to look like.

However, to my surprise, Teto vehemently opposed my idea. “No! Lady Witch, you’re one of the people of the forest too. You need to have fun at the festival like everyone else!”

“Teto...”

Up until now, I had been mostly watching over the forest’s residents from afar, so Teto wanted me to actually experience the festival as an active participant rather than just an observer. In a way, she was right; sure, dancing in front of others was embarrassing, but if I didn’t do it, I wouldn’t be able to experience the sense of unity that came with belonging to a community.

“The main purpose of the festival is to put the lost souls to rest. If you perform the offering dance using your Kakkhara of Reincarnation as a prop, all while casting a purification spell, we believe it would be more efficient than simply offering prayers,” Beretta added.

“Fine, fine, I’ll do it,” I conceded. “Good grief, between Teto pulling at my heartstrings and your impeccable logic, I don’t stand a chance. But I’ll only do it once, okay? From next year onward, someone else will have to dance with my staff.”

“Yay!” Teto cheered, wrapping her arms around me.

“Understood, Master,” Beretta said, bowing politely. However, I could see that her lips had curled upward slightly.

The forest was pretty much entirely managed by the residents themselves at this point. However, they still idolized me and felt like they needed me. And so I decided that I would perform the dance to live up to their expectations.

“In line with this, there is something else that we would like to request of you, Master.”

“Um, what is it?” I asked, bracing myself for the worst.

Teto—who was still clinging to me—raised her head and looked at Beretta with curiosity.

“We believe that it would be difficult for all of the forest’s residents to gather at the main festival venue at the same time for all sorts of reasons. So, we plan on organizing smaller-scale festivals in every single settlement.”

Apparently, my offering dance and the martial arts tournament would be held in the main venue. The smaller festivals would each have their own bonfire and

the residents would bring food and eat together, just like a regular village festival.

“Could you please install magical communication devices in all of the smaller venues so that the people who can’t come to the main venue can still see what is happening there?”

“Oh, like a live broadcast? For the entirety of the forest to watch...”

The thought of even more people watching me dance made my eyes glaze over. However, Teto, Beretta, and all of the council members were looking at me with such expectation-filled eyes that I simply couldn’t refuse.

I still had the magic communication device I had made to communicate with Selene and Gyunton—until he passed away, that was—but I would need to come up with a superior version before the festival. One of these devices already cost me over 1,000,000 MP to make, so I’d need a whole lot of mana to make several of them—especially a more advanced version, plus mana crystals fully charged to power the devices so that they wouldn’t suddenly turn off in the middle of my dance or a fight.

“You will need to practice the dance for the festival as well, and attend fitting sessions for the outfit you will be wearing during the performance,” Beretta said.

“Um... Shouldn’t I help with organizing the festival? I don’t mind helping...”

Beretta shook her head. “The offering dance is much more important, so I believe it would be best if you focused solely on preparing for that. Besides, there is nothing else that you need to bother yourself with when it comes to the preparations of the festival itself.”

Beretta’s tone left no room for discussion, and I meekly agreed to focus my efforts on the offering dance.

Chapter 25: The Witch Practices the Dance

A few days after the council, I got whisked away by an army of maids to get fitted for my costume for the offering dance I would be performing.

“What about this outfit? Wouldn’t it fit Master better?”

“That outfit is a church uniform. I don’t believe it is suitable for dancing.”

“Then what about this one? It is ceremonial attire from Master’s previous life.”

Since my body didn’t grow, the maids already had my measurements; they had prepared all sorts of outfits and made me try them on one after the other while commenting on them, along with Teto, who was watching the fitting.

“Lady Witch, that outfit is so cute!” she commented.

“It seems that Lady Teto likes this one,” one of the maids noted. “Next up...”

I was put into another outfit, had to wait for the maids and Teto to comment on it, then changed into yet another one, and another one... I felt like a dress-up doll, and I could see the light slowly disappearing from my eyes as I watched myself in the mirror. When I finally got released from the endless cycle of trying on outfits, I made my way to the couch and let my entire body flop down while the maids continued to talk about the design of the costume.

“You did great, Lady Witch,” Teto told me.

“Teto, I’m tired,” I mumbled.

I really was. I knew that Beretta and the other maids wanted nothing more than to put me in different outfits every day. I had never been that concerned about what I was wearing ever since I got reincarnated into this world, so I had been really grateful the first time they offered to dress me up. But I had been so tired at the end of it that I never wanted to go through it again. And this dress-up session had been just as exhausting as the last.

“It’s okay, Lady Witch, you did great,” Teto said, patting me on the head as I

hugged her waist, my head resting on her thighs.

“Let me lie on you for a bit longer,” I mumbled.



“Master, we have decided on a design for your costume,” one of the maids said after a bit. “Could you please tell us how you feel about it?”

Raising my head from Teto’s lap, I looked at the sketch the mechanoid was holding in her hands.

“This...”

The outfit was clearly inspired by clergymen’s white robes, hood and all. Unlike regular robes, though, the sleeves were separated from the rest of the garment, leaving the wearer’s upper arms bare. They were also long and flowy, a bit like the sleeves on a chihaya—a ceremonial haori worn by Shinto priestesses. A long stole hung from the shoulders, completing the look. I could easily picture the fabric undulating lightly as I danced.

“Um... I mean, it’s pretty nice, I guess.”

To be honest, I thought it looked a tad too much like a cosplay outfit for my liking, but I was pretty excited to see the sleeves and the train of the dress moving as I danced.

The maid holding the sketch nodded vigorously. “We will get started on the outfit at once.”

“Thanks.”

“Teto is looking forward to it!”

I followed the group of maids with my eyes until they left the room and, when the door slammed shut, let out a soft sigh.

“Next up is the dance, huh?”

“Shael and the others said they would help!” Teto said.

I basically had to come up with choreography from scratch for the offering dance. Since I had never done anything of the sort before, I had asked Shael and a few devilkin girls to help me. The former used to do dance performances on the floating island, while the latter had spent years wandering the roads, earning a living through song and dance.

“If you want your staff to stand out, you should incorporate some moves

where you use it like a spear,” Shael suggested, grabbing the fake kakkhara we used for practice before swinging it around, and thrusting it in the air. The metal rings clanged against each other in a cacophonous symphony.

“Absolutely not! Lady Witch shouldn’t be dancing in such a vigorous manner. No, she should be using her hips more! Her hips!” Devalna said. She started moving her fingertips, wrists, and arms gracefully, showcasing a seductive dance with inviting hip movements and subtle leg displays. It was a bit too suggestive for me, and I felt myself growing embarrassed just looking at her.

“Are you stupid or what?! There’s no way Chise is going to perform such a sh-shameless dance! You’re not even using the kakkhara!” Shael exclaimed indignantly.

“And how is Lady Witch supposed to showcase her adult charms with a barbaric dance like the one you performed?” Devalna retorted. “A more mature piece would be much more appropriate.”

The two of them were glaring daggers at each other.

“I won’t be performing either of your dances,” I said plainly.

“Huh? But why?!” they exclaimed at the same time.

Beside me, Teto brought a finger to her chin and let out a hum. “Both of your dances were very nice, but they’re not very ‘Lady Witch,’” she commented.

Shael and Devalna looked disappointed that Teto—the person who had been with me for the longest—rejected their ideas. But their performances had given me some inspiration.

“I’d like to go for a much calmer feel,” I explained. “But I might incorporate the spear-swinging of your dance, Shael, and also the footwork from Devalna’s.”

I asked Shael to hand me the fake kakkhara and performed a little improvised dance. The moves weren’t particularly grand or fluid, but rather deliberate and slow.

Holding the kakkhara diagonally with both hands, I made the metal rings jangle using only slight wrist movements. After that, I took a step to the right,

then another to the left before tracing a semicircle with the staff slowly enough that the rings wouldn't clang against each other. I halted the kakkhara at eye level and gave it another little shake, allowing the rings to sound gently. I grabbed the staff in my right hand, then in my left, using slow and deliberate movements to make the rings clink together. Teto and the others were watching my every move with intense concentration.

I had taken inspiration from Japanese kagura dance—a type of Shinto ritual dance—and was using the kakkhara like suzu bells. I started feeling some pain in some of my less-used muscles, as I had to constantly shift my weight and keep the kakkhara raised at eye level. I didn't know how long I'd have to dance on the day of the festival, but I probably wouldn't be able to perform for very long without using Body Strengthening. On top of that, I'd need to be constantly casting purification spells as I danced. All in all, this performance would end up costing me quite a lot of mana.

“Phew. I think something like this should—huh?!”

After dancing like this for around ten minutes, I came to a stop and almost tripped over myself when I looked at Teto and the others. Teto had a grin on her face—as always—and was clapping, while Shael was staring at me with astonishment. Beside her, Devalna had tears streaming down her face as she clapped along with Teto.

“I've never seen anything like this before...” Shael breathed in shock.

“It wad d-divine!” Devalna exclaimed, her voice thick with tears and mucus. “Lady Witch, id wad sho shplendid, I felt like I wad aboud to be cleansed myself!”

I was a bit put off by her sudden outburst.

“Uh... I'm not sure why you're crying exactly...”

“Lady Witch, it was amazing! It was so slow and pretty, and you looked really cool!” Teto chirped, as positive as always.

I waited for Shael and Devalna to calm down and asked, “So? What did you think about the dance?”

“It was great. It was very you—mysterious and tranquil,” Shael commented.

“I agree!” Devalna nodded. “We just have to refine the movements a bit more, and it’ll showcase your divinity even further!”

“‘Mysterious’... ‘Tranquil’... ‘Divinity’...” I muttered.

I also liked how slow and calm my dance was, but surely there was no need to use all of these grand words.

After that, I planned on only asking Teto to help me practice, but all she would do was stare at me with a smile and didn’t really offer any constructive criticism, so I turned back to Shael and Devalna. Shael helped me train my wrist movements and my posture, while Devalna taught me how to improve my footwork and the overall choreography of the piece. On the day of the festival, I would most likely have to perform this dance several times to purify all of the lost souls, so it needed to be perfect.

Chapter 26: The Witch's Medals

The entire forest was abuzz with preparations for the winter solstice festival. You could see people setting up the venue, experimenting with dishes, hunting for meat to use in said dishes, practicing dance performances, trying on outfits, flying to other towns to stock up on alcohol, holding preliminary selections for the martial arts tournament... Everyone was busy.

"Is there anything we can do to help you guys?" I asked the people who were building a stage.

"Teto wants to help too!"

"We're all right, Lady Witch, thank you!" one of them replied to me with a smile. "Please take it easy!"

"Fine," I sighed.

"Too bad," Teto pouted.

We watched them build the stage from afar for a bit longer before moving to another spot, thinking that *surely* there must be at least one person who'd agreed to let us help. But...

"We're looking forward to your purification dance!"

"Will you watch our performance as well?"

"Lady Witch, Lady Teto, please give this dish a try!"

In the end, the only thing that we were allowed to do was taste test the dishes they had prepared.

The two of us wandered around the forest looking for people to help until we reached a stage made of stone at the foot of the biggest World Tree. This would serve as the festival's main venue.

"Oh, Lady Witch, Lady Guardian," the Great Elder, who had been sitting idly next to the stage, greeted us. "Judging by your expressions, I take it you're also having a hard time mingling with the others."

“You too, Great Elder? No one will let us help,” I said with a sigh.

“Teto and Lady Witch wanted to help prepare for the festival too!” Teto pouted.

The Great Elder chuckled at our apparent dissatisfaction.

“With our powers, the preparations would be over in a matter of seconds, after all. I see why they don’t want our help. Let’s call it the downside of being too strong,” he said.

He had a point: if we used our magic to prepare for the festival, the others wouldn’t have anything left to do.

“I see where you’re coming from, but still. At least I have the offering dance to train for, and I made a bunch of magic communication devices, but Teto...”

“Teto has nothing to do other than taste test the food!” she said with a pout.

“You two could think of a reward for the winner of the martial arts tournament,” the Great Elder suggested.

“A reward?” Teto echoed, tilting her head to the side cutely.

The Great Elder nodded. “Anyone would be delighted to receive something that has been handpicked by the two of you.”

“A reward, huh? Having some sort of prize would indeed motivate the people participating in the tournament even more,” I noted. “But what should we offer as a reward?”

“For Teto, spending time with Lady Witch is the best reward ever!” Teto exclaimed happily.

“I absolutely *won’t* be offering my company as a prize,” I quickly said.

A reward for the martial arts tournament, huh? Lorie wanted us to hold a festival on the day of the winter solstice every year from now on. For that reason, we’d want to have a prize that we could offer every year, no matter the circumstances. The first thing that came to my mind was money, which we could obtain through trade, but unfortunately, there were still very few places where currency was used in the forest. Prize money might not have been the most suitable option as of right now.

“Then how about you personally congratulate the winner? I’m sure they’d be really happy!” Teto suggested.

“But what if I’m not in the forest at the time of the festival? No, that wouldn’t work. Besides, would being praised by me really be that satisfying of a reward?”

I fully intended on resuming my travels in the future, so I didn’t want to offer a prize that couldn’t be given out in my absence.

As Teto and I racked our brains, trying to come up with an idea under the Great Elder’s amused gaze, I finally thought of something.

“What about medals?” I muttered.

“Medals, Lady Witch?” Teto asked curiously.

“I’m thinking that we could give out medals made of precious metals to the winners. For now, they wouldn’t really serve any purpose, but when the monetary system becomes more widespread in the forest, they could exchange them for gold coins. All we’d need to do is to set a conversion rate.”

Besides, the medals themselves would be pretty valuable, so if the winners of the tournaments decided to leave the forest one day, they could exchange them for some good money in the outside world as well. In a way, they would be a bit like a local currency.

“I see,” the Great Elder said with a nod. “By presenting these medals as Lady Witch’s seal of approval, you’d be fueling the participants’ competitive spirit. What a great idea. As expected of you, Lady Witch.”

“I...hadn’t thought that far, to be honest. Anyway, let me try making a couple of medals to show you exactly what I mean. *Creation!*”

I took inspiration from the Olympic medals from my previous world and created three types of medals: an orichalcum one, an adamantium one, and a mythrill one. For now, they were all blank, but the luster of the rare metals was quite nice to look at.

“Whoa, they’re so pretty! They look delicious!” Teto commented.

“You say that about everything, don’t you?” I said.

Teto took the three medals in her hands and started inspecting them.

“Lady Witch, the face and the back of the medals are both smooth,” she noted.

“Yeah... I’m happy with the materials of the medals, but I have no idea what to go with for the design,” I confessed.

“Teto will try to come up with something!”

She took the orichalcum medal and started manipulating it using Earth Magic. After a bit, the medal began to take on texture, and soon an intricate design appeared on its surface.

“Here! It’s a Lady Witch medal!” Teto announced proudly.

“I mean, it looks nice, but having my side profile on a medal is a bit embarrassing,” I said. “Also, I’d like for the back and the front not to have the same design, so it’s easier to figure out which side is which. It’d be great if we incorporated design elements of something exclusive to the forest.”

“Then Teto will try another one!” she said, grabbing another one of the medals, but I quickly stopped her.

“Hold on, Teto! Let’s practice on iron medals, okay? *Creation!*”

I produced a bunch of iron medals and Teto started engraving them with her magic. After some deliberation, we ended up with three different medals: the “witch orichalcum medal,” which featured a drawing of my face in profile, the “World Tree mythrill medal,” and lastly, the “Ancient Verdigris Dragon adamantium medal.” The last one had a hole punched in the middle to make it lighter, as adamantium was a much heavier metal than the other two.

On the back side of the first two medals, we had decided to go with an engraving of Liriel’s face, and for the third medal, we had drawn two angel wings around the hole.

I did try to sneakily change the design of the medal with my face on it, but Beretta and the others caught me red-handed. In the end, we held a majority vote, and they all wanted to keep my face on the medal, so I had no choice but to comply.

I thought I was the leader here... I lamented.

Anyway, I gave the three sample medals to Beretta, and she and the rest of the council agreed to offer them as prizes to the three highest-ranked participants of the martial arts tournament. The contestants were even more pumped up than before, and the ones who hadn't entered or had been eliminated during the preliminary selections bitterly swore that they would train harder for next year.

We also deemed that only giving out medals to the top three would be a bit disappointing, so we decided to award medals made of magisteel to anyone who made it through the qualifying round. These had chibi-style bear golems raising a fist in a victorious pose engraved on them.

As a side note, there was a certain race that participated in the tournament year after year and collected a ton of magisteel medals. They would then give them to their children, who'd pass them down to their own children, and at some point, they had enough of them that they started using them to make scale mail armor out of them by passing chains through the holes in the medals. They were only big enough to cover a man's chest, but they became this race's most treasured possessions on top of acting as proof of their strength.

Much, much later down the line, anyone who was seen wearing this armor in the forest was met with looks of respect from the other residents.

Chapter 27: Afternoon at the Festival—the Martial Arts Tournament

Since I wasn't allowed to help prepare for the festival, I worked diligently on my offering dance. When I wasn't practicing, I went from settlement to settlement to install the new magic communication devices I had created so that the people who couldn't make it to the main venue could still see what was going on.

In the blink of an eye, the day of the festival was upon us. In every settlement, people were putting out the kabocha squash dishes they had prepared, and the entire forest was bustling from early morning. At the main venue, the representatives of each race, as well as their families and close friends, were gathered to watch the collective wedding ceremony.

"Congratulations. May you two live happily for many years to come."

"Congratulations!"

"Thank you, Lady Witch, Lady Teto."

Many couples of all different races were standing on the stone stage that had been built for the occasion, and Teto and I congratulated them. Of course, this was broadcast live to the other settlements as well.

Yahad was standing among the couples waiting to get married as well, a woman of his tribe beside him. His palpable nervousness drew the attention of all onlookers. This year had been a very sad one to the dragonkin, with the passing of their elder. But Yahad's wedding, as the new clan leader, helped to shake off that sorrow.

"Ah! Lady Witch, Lady Teto! I'm getting married today too!"

"Congratulations, Naia. May you and your partner live happily ever after," I said.

"Congratulations, Naia! You're very pretty today!" Teto added.

Naia, the little devilkin girl we had met at the refugee camp, had become all grown-up and was getting married to a human man. I felt as if the past ten years had gone by in the blink of an eye, but I was deeply moved to see that all of the children had grown to become independent adults.

I congratulated all of the couples that had gotten married in the different settlements while everyone started digging into the food laid out on the tables. On top of the pumpkin dishes and local specialties, there was also some sort of meat dish that had been made using a huge bird monster the Great Elder had hunted the previous day. Every spare moment was filled with song and dance, broadcast in turn to all of the settlements.

Sure, the entertainment and the equipment weren't quite the same as in my past life, but at the end of the day, winter celebrations were pretty similar everywhere, huh? We ate good food, laughed at funny performances, and replenished our spirits for the remaining winter months ahead.

Soon the collective wedding ceremony came to an end, and it was time to move to the main event of the afternoon: the martial arts tournament.

"This is Eina, serving as announcer from the martial arts arena," one of the maids said through a magic communication device, her voice amplified by the megaphone set up above the arena. "Miss Beretta, can you hear me from the main grounds?"

"Beretta here. We can hear you. You may begin explaining the rules of the event."

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will now begin this year's martial arts tournament—the ultimate chance for anyone to prove that they are strong enough to protect Lady Witch! Here, in this arena, stand the brave warriors who have emerged triumphant from the qualifiers. The question looms: who among them will claim the coveted final seat of the Big Four?"

"Uh, the 'Big Four'? I don't remember having created anything with that name..." I commented.

"The residents came up with it," Beretta explained to me. "The tournament aims to determine the fourth strongest among the inhabitants after Lady Teto, Master Great Elder, and myself—though I do not believe I am worthy of that

title.”

“The four strongest, huh?” I muttered.

It was a common trope in the media from my previous life for an archvillain to have four generals. Selene had told me before that some folks outside the forest thought of me as some sort of demon king like the ones from children’s tales; I supposed having my own four generals was oddly fitting.

A tournament to decide on the last member of the Big Four, huh? I thought, allowing myself to ponder for a moment that it seemed like a real backhanded sort of honor to be recognized as the weakest strong guy in your whole community. It couldn’t be that big a boost to one’s ego to find out that yeah, you were tough, but there were three other people within a day’s travel who could still take you.

“Teto wishes she could’ve participated in the tournament too. It looks like so much fun!” Teto pouted next to me.

“We have to keep watch to make sure no one gets hurt,” I said.

“The participants will be matched up for one-on-one battles; losers will be eliminated from the competition. All fighters are required to equip magic items that will transfer all harm from HP to MP. If they faint, surrender, are forced out of bounds, or if the jury deems that they cannot fight anymore, they will be eliminated. That said—everyone, *let’s get ready to rummmble!*”

Two men—a werewolf and a centaur—were standing in the arena. As soon as Eina declared the start of the first round, they each let out a battle cry and leaped into action. I had created a few magic items that worked a bit like drones to ensure that we’d always be able to see the best angle on the fight wherever we had a screen up. The audience cheered for the contestants with all of their might.

“I’ll show Lady Witch that I’m strong enough to protect this land even after she resumes her travels!” the werewolf roared, using his claws like a sword to slash at his opponent.

“No, / will! I won’t be a burden to Lady Witch!” the centaur retorted as he swung his spear.

I was so taken aback by what they had said that I instantly whipped my head around to look at Teto and Beretta, my jaw on the floor. But the two of them simply smiled at me without saying a word.

The matches unfolded one after the other in rapid succession. The dragonkin, oni-kin, and minotaurs showed off their immense strength, while the godkin and devilkin preferred to use their wings to unleash magic attacks from above, and the arachnes and the dryads used their string and vines to ensnare their opponents. Still, I couldn't help but notice that all of them were talking about *me* as they fought.

"I'll prove that I'm not just a weakling who needs to rely on Lady Witch!"

"I refuse to make Lady Witch sad! I'll kill the weak part of myself so that I won't get in her way!"

"We won't force Lady Witch to stay here to look after us! We need to learn to fight on our own!"

"She has shown us the way, now it is up to us to carve the path ahead! We need to stop relying on her! She wants her freedom, so we'll give it to her! Stop taking advantage of her kindness!"

I was so shocked by how intensely they were fighting and by the words coming out of their mouths that it took me a couple of minutes to notice the shadow looming behind me. Turning around, I realized that it was the Great Elder.

"Great Elder, that's..." I started, but was too astonished to find the words.

"It is proof of their love for you, Lady Witch. For over ten years now, you've given your everything to ensure that they would find peace and happiness in the forest. And these people..." The Great Elder paused for a couple of seconds before continuing. "They also wish for your happiness. You have taken us into your land, even though you had every reason not to, and you have given us more than we could ever ask for. However, we have all noticed the melancholy expression that occasionally crosses your face."

I softly touched my own face with the tip of my fingers.

Me, melancholy?

I supposed I must've been doing it unconsciously. I stayed silent for a few seconds, trying to root out the cause of my gloomy mien.

"I think that...deep down, I long for another journey," I confessed. "To travel to unknown lands, to witness sights unseen. I want to put all of the things that I've learned here into practice."

When I first started traveling the world with Teto, it was so that I could find a place to call home. And I succeeded—I had the forest, and all of its colorful residents whom I had sworn to protect. But after having spent so many years in the same place, reading insatiably, I had learned many things; I itched to apply them. I wanted to tread the earth with my own feet, discover new sights with my own eyes, test myself against all its challenges with my own two hands.

"It's ironic, isn't it? I spent so many years traveling in search of a place to call home, and now I want to leave again. It only took a few decades to make me turn back on my whole purpose in life."

I was pretty much done refurbishing the former Wasteland of Nothingness. I had spent so long here, yet it felt like I still hadn't discovered everything it had to give. And despite that, I still found myself yearning to leave it behind. I couldn't stop a self-deprecating chuckle from escaping my lips at the irony of it all.

"You're still young. It's only natural that you'd feel wanderlust," the Great Elder reassured me.

"Great Elder, I know I might not look the part, but I'm actually ninety, you know? I'm already an old lady," I pointed out, causing the dragon to burst into laughter.

"I have been in this world for ten thousand years and longer still. Compared to me, you're still very much a youngster—maybe even a mere babe. You've still got a long way to go."

My eyes still riveted on the tournament, I chuckled softly at the Great Elder's words.

"As your friend, I shall protect this land in your absence," he told me next. "There's hardly anyone who'd dare attempt to invade the territory of an

ancient dragon, even if it *does* house the greatest treasure in the world,” he said, punctuating his sentence with a chuckle.

“Master Great Elder will deter any external threat from attacking this land. As for the internal and external affairs, the other maids and I will take care of everything. You may rest assured, Master,” Beretta told me.

I had already prepared to resume my travels by founding the council and fostering its autonomy. It wasn’t like I *hated* this place; all I wanted was to leave for short periods at a time—maybe a month or two—try something I never could at home, and come back. And it seemed that the forest folks wanted nothing more than for me to follow my dreams.

I focused my attention back on the tournament. The lamias tended to the contestants with potions and healing spells between matches; before long, it was time for the final bout.

A thunderous roar echoed from the arena as a griffin—who had been chosen to represent the mythical beasts—fought with Raphilia.

“I’ll show you what A-rank adventurers are made of! Don’t underestimate me!” she yelled. “Chise, I know you’re listening! I’ve seen the faces you make sometimes. You look just like me before I left my village. If you want to travel the world, go! I’ll protect the forest while you’re away. So go ahead and run amok around the world like you used to.”

I once again found myself chuckling at Raphilia’s remark.

“Huh? Wait! Hold on! You’re supposed to let me win! Aaah!”

Griffins were strong—much more so than wyverns, just to grab an example from a comparable niche. Raphilia might have been A-rank, but she could never defeat such a powerful mythical beast all by herself. She was sent flying out of bounds, and the griffin roared as it was proclaimed champion of the entire tournament, to a round of furious applause.

I fully trusted that the griffin would protect the forest along with Beretta and the Great Elder while I was away. Meanwhile, I would travel the world, looking for new knowledge and technology to bring back to the forest folks and the mythical beasts.

“Teto wants to go travel with you, Lady Witch!”

“It’d be fun, wouldn’t it?”

The Witch of Creation’s Forest was my home, and I had already spent more than enough time resting there in between my travels. The others were right; it might well have been time for me to leave again. Before that, though, I still had a few things to do—first among them awarding the griffin its prize. And so that’s what I did, draping a belt with the orichalcum medal dangling from it around its neck. It seemed very happy about its shiny new trinket. Raphilia, who had ended up second, and Shael, who had come in third, glared at the griffin, frustration plain on their faces.

And just like that, the first martial arts tournament of the forest came to an end and the sun started setting.

I might have made up my mind to resume my travels, but there was still one last thing for me to do: perform the closing ceremony of the festival.

Chapter 28: Night at the Festival—the Offering Dance

“Master, let us get you ready for your performance.”

“You’re going to be all clean, Lady Witch!” Teto chirped.

“Just do the bare minimum, all right?” I said awkwardly.

The stone arena hosting the martial arts tournament had been transformed into something resembling a kagura-den—the stage on which sacred dances were performed in Shinto shrines—and bonfires had been lit all around the forest with the coming of sunset.

Right before evening fell, Beretta and the others whisked me away to the bath, where they scrubbed my body from head to toe. Then they applied some light makeup on my face and helped me change into my offering dance outfit.

“Performing in front of everyone really is embarrassing...” I muttered.

I drew the hood of my costume over my eyes and softly pulled on the fluttering sleeves. The hem of the robe reached all the way down to my ankles; if I bent even slightly, it’d touch the ground.

I need to be careful not to step on it while walking...or worse, during my performance.

“Lady Witch, you’re so cute and pretty!” Teto exclaimed. “Teto wants to give you a big hug, but Teto doesn’t want your clothes to get all wrinkled, so she’ll wait until your dance is over!”

“Thanks, Teto.”

“Master, it is almost time.”

Teto and Beretta led me through the transfer gate that took me to the main festival venue.

“It’s Lady Witch! How beautiful...”

“She looks just like a saintess.”

“Oh, I’m so thankful, so thankful!”

Murmurs of awe echoed through the crowd as I made my way to the stage. Waiting for me in the middle of the path was Shael, my Kakkhara of Reincarnation in hand.

“Thanks, Shael,” I said as she handed it off.

“I’m looking forward to your offering dance. You better knock their socks off, Witch,” she replied with an impish smile, and I smirked in return.

I resumed my walk towards the stage, moving slowly so that the rings on my staff wouldn’t jangle. This only served to heighten the anticipation and excitement of the crowd as they waited with bated breath for my performance to begin.

Torches blazed at all four corners of the stage; I took up my starting position in the very center. I started dancing. With a little shake of my wrist, I made the rings of my kakkhara sound, all while pouring mana into the staff and releasing waves of Purification Magic, my robes fluttering in the wind with each step. The purification spell spread through the entire forest; one after another, lost souls started appearing in the night sky, dotting the dark expanse like shimmering stars.

How much mana am I going to need to purify all of them?

My Kakkhara of Reincarnation amplified Light Magic fifteenfold, so I could release wave after wave of Purification Magic for very little mana. However, all it did was dissipate the mana surrounding the souls into the air, while the souls themselves stayed in place. They swayed with each shake of my staff as the mana particles fell like powder snow, melting away into the air and the earth.

“It’s a miracle,” someone in the crowd muttered.

The sight of mana scattering into the air must’ve reminded them of the time when I defeated the giant bone monster during the stampede ten years ago. I, on the other hand, had no time to think about any of that, my attention fully absorbed in my performance. Now that the sun had completely set, the lost souls were at their most active. Their swaying to and fro in the night sky

must've been their way of participating in the festival. Soon some of them started ascending to the sky, most likely having had their fill of the festivities.

May you find your way to Loriel, reenter the wheel of reincarnation, and be happy in your next life, I prayed silently as I watched the souls disappear into the night.

I danced for hours, swinging my kakkhara around and continuously letting out waves of Purification Magic until my mana ran out completely. However, by the time I was done, there were still countless souls swaying in the night sky.

"Did these not get purified?" I panted. I had been dancing for so long that my breathing was erratic and my entire body was dripping with sweat.

I came down from the stage, and Teto and Beretta came to find me.

"Lady Witch, congrats on your dance!" Teto exclaimed. "Teto thinks you shouldn't worry about these people," she said, gesturing towards the remaining souls in the sky. "They'll probably go home on their own at some point."

"It was common knowledge to the precursors that the mana envelope surrounding a soul contains said soul's memories, knowledge, and personality. It is said that every soul casts off that envelope before moving on to their next life," Beretta explained to me.

People's memories, knowledge, and personality were all managed by the brain. However, in my previous life, there were reported cases of people inheriting some of the donor's memories after receiving a heart transplant. And in this world, where magic was part of everyday life, one could experience interactions with lingering spirits. Therefore, it wasn't that surprising that one's memories would be stored in their mana as well as in their brain.

After that, the three of us enjoyed the rest of the festival, keeping an eye on the remaining lost souls and watching them rise to the sky one after the other.

This winter solstice festival would later be passed down to the residents of the forest. In later years, people got hung up on the way the lost souls resembled stars, and the festival became known as the Stargazing Festival. Centuries later, it was still celebrated every year by the forest folks.

Chapter 29: Growing Land

When my purifying dance was over, the children and newlyweds headed back home. Everyone else kept the party going, adding wood to the bonfires and merrily drinking the night away. It was already quite late, so most of the showy stuff was over, but some souls still found their way to the festival belatedly, drawn by the light of the fires and the chatter.

By the time the sun rose, most remaining souls had ascended, and the ones who had arrived late would most likely be purified by nature's self-cleansing process sooner or later.

"Phew, it's finally over," I said, holding out a hand to shield my eyes from the rising sun.

"It is!" Teto confirmed.

After my performance, I had changed into warm clothes and spent the entire night huddled with Teto, the two of us wrapped in a blanket, watching the bonfires and the remaining souls swaying in the night sky.

A wave of relief washed over me now that everything was over, and I found myself yawning from exhaustion.

"Master, Lady Teto, you have spent the entire night outside. Your bodies must have cooled down considerably. I already called for a bath for you, so you may return home and warm yourselves up," Beretta told us.

"We will. Thanks, Beretta."

"Let's go!"

I had used almost all of my mana during the offering dance, which had left me unable to cast Body Strengthening or anything to protect myself from the cold; I had spent the entire night sticking to Teto just to stay warm. I noticed that I had only recovered around thirty percent of my MP, while I'd usually have recovered most if not all of it by the morning.

Sleeping really is the best way to recover mana, huh?

As I soaked in the bath with Teto, I suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion crash over me.

“Lady Witch, are you sleepy?”

“I’m...fine. I’m fine,” I mumbled, rubbing my eyes.

I changed into my pajamas and slipped under the covers with Teto. The second my head hit the pillow, I was out of commission.

When I came to, I found myself in an oh-so-familiar black space.

“A dream oracle,” I noted.

Teto was standing next to me; Liriel and Loriel were already there, the former sitting at a table and the latter on a bed. Loriel seemed a little bit more lively than the first time I met her, but she still looked sleepy.

“Chise, Teto, good work on the festival. Your dance was lovely,” Liriel told me.

“The lost souls have found their way home,” Loriel said. “I have regained a bit more of my power.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Speaking of which, I have a question: from next year onward, I probably won’t be there to do the purifying dance. Would it be all right if I had someone else purify the lost souls?”

After hearing what Beretta, Shael, Raphilia, and the others had to say, I had decided to resume my leisurely travels. I would most likely leave the forest at the end of winter. Sure, I’d still have my trusty transfer gates to teleport me back whenever I wished, but I’d feel a bit weird popping back in to perform the dance before leaving again. No, someone who actually lived in the forest all year round should have the honor.

“So you’re finally resuming your travels?” Liriel said, looking slightly exasperated. “For the past decades, I’ve kept hinting at you to leave the forest and continue exploring the world, but you never noticed.”

“S-Sorry.”

“As for the purification dance, if several people do it at the same time, it

should be all right. It won't be as effective as when you did it, but it'll be fine. Nature will help purify the souls too, so make sure that forest of yours stays clean and pure," Liriel said.

Several people, huh? I thought. *So it'd be more like a ritual rather than a simple performance.* Either way, I was glad to know I wouldn't be needing to head back to the Forest every winter to do the dance myself.

"Chise, Teto, did you notice the mana that fell from the lost souls? It was all absorbed by the earth; now it's helping to stimulate the leylines," Liriel told me.

"Um, and what does that entail exactly? Does that mean we should prepare for monsters to appear? A dungeon? Some sort of magic disaster?"

I knew all too well that nothing good came from mana stagnating in the leylines, so I was wary of the potential consequences.

Seeing the anxiety on my face, Liriel quickly shook her head. "Nothing of the sort, no. You have your leyline managing devices to help the mana circulate, so everything should be fine. It'll just make the forest grow."

"Make it grow?" Teto repeated. "Are the trees going to get bigger? That sounds great!"

"Not quite. Well, the plants *will* grow as a result, but what I meant is that the earth itself will grow."

"The earth itself..."

What did that even mean? The scale of it all seemed way too large for me to understand, but, thankfully, Liriel provided some clarification. "Big sister Liri is the Earth Mother. Not only does she watch over crops and harvests, but she's also the Goddess of the Earth itself, so she can make it grow."

"By 'grow,' do you mean things like land upheaval and tectonic shifts?" I asked, still unsure of what exactly we were talking about.

"Nope. I mean it literally: the land itself will grow."

Ever since its creation, this world had been suffused with mana. The gods used this mana to expand the earth itself, create the leylines and the waters, and so on, causing the planet itself to be twice as big as it used to be when it

was first created.

“For the past two thousand years, we had to put the growth of the planet on hold due to the lack of mana,” Liriel explained. “However, between my powers and the sudden increase in the forest’s mana density, we’re seeing a net gain again.”

“How much will it grow?” I asked.

“About one percent of the surface area of the forest plus the Demon Den around it.”

“That’s...it?”

The forest wasn’t tiny by any means—it was the size of a small country—but an increase of one percent in land didn’t seem like much. But then I realized something.

“Liriel, will it only grow once? Or will it grow every year after the soul-purifying ritual?” I asked.

“Every year,” she replied with a slight averting of her gaze. “Well, not forever, of course. At some point, most lost souls will have found their way home, and purifying them won’t produce that much mana at once.”

“But it should grow about one percent every year for the next hundred years or so,” Liriel supplied.

This meant that, in the long run, the forest would be several times as large as it currently was, making it the size of a medium country. However, I couldn’t help but wonder just how much mana the lost souls released to cause such a change.

“But we have a bunch of World Trees in the forest, and we often release mana into the air to artificially increase its density. Does that not help the land grow?” I asked.

Teto tilted her head to the side at my words, staring at me with uncomprehending eyes as if I were speaking gibberish.

“If done right, releasing mana like the kind that enfolds lost souls can revitalize anything; people, objects, houses, and even the earth itself. People

tend to call these phenomena ‘blessings’ and ‘protections’ from the gods. But if it isn’t released properly, it can give birth to curses.”

We had shifted onto a bit of a heavy topic, but I *mostly* got what Liriel was saying.

“I see. So the ‘blessings’ from the lost souls are being directed to the earth—which also happens to be Liriel’s domain—and that’s what is causing the land to grow,” I summarized.

“Exactly. You can plant all the World Trees you want, but the mana they produce won’t ever have a similar effect. They lack the directionality that dead souls’ mana takes on when purified. Mana only turns into blessings if it is being directed somewhere. Ah, but if spirits start haunting or possessing your World Trees, they’ll be able to grant you their blessings as well.”

I nodded. It seemed I still had a lot to learn about mana.

“That was some worldly wisdom for you. You’re going to give me a little something in return, right?” Liriel asked.

Liriel’s head snapped towards her sister. “Liriel!” she exclaimed, shocked by the other goddess’s brazenness.

But I wasn’t offended; a smile curled on my lips as I raised a hand in front of me. “Sure thing. What about this? *Creation*: assortment of traditional Japanese sweets!”

“Ah, Teto wants some too!”

A mountain of traditional Japanese confectioneries appeared on the table. Teto reached a hand into the pile, grabbed one of the sweet snacks, and sunk her teeth into it. A look of panic formed on Liriel’s face as she watched Teto steal *her* sweets, so she quickly grabbed one and shoved it into her mouth.

With this many snacks, Liriel would be satisfied for the rest of the dream oracle. If a normal, flesh-and-blood human were to eat this many sweets at once, they’d indubitably gain a ton of weight, but, well, Liriel was a goddess, so she was probably fine. Her cheeks bulging with food, she flashed me a smile and a thumbs-up, as if to say that she was happy with her reward. Meanwhile, Liriel looked fed up with her sister’s antics.

“You sure are cunning, Lorie,” she said with a sigh. “Oh well. It’s almost time for Chise and Teto to wake up, so let’s call it a night. I’m looking forward to seeing where your travels take you next, Chise.”

“Me too. Well, we still have to prepare and say goodbye to everyone before we leave.”

“Lady Witch and Teto are going to do lots of sightseeing!”

With those words, I felt my consciousness fade away. When I woke up, I was told that I had been asleep for an entire day, and my stomach wasted no time in letting me know it was painfully empty.

Chapter 30: Parting Gift

With the festival behind us and a fresh departure awaiting me in the spring, I spent the remainder of the winter saying goodbye to my friends and acquaintances. If Gyunton was still alive, I would've gone to see him, but as he had recently passed away, I simply sent a perfunctory message to the Hammil Duchy in Gald to let them know I would be resuming my travels. Then I popped by the Liebel margravate to tell Selene.

"I see. I have to admit, I'm a bit sad I won't be able to visit you as easily anymore, but I hope you enjoy yourself out there, mom," she said, softly stroking the protection ring I had given her.

Teto and I smiled at her. "The kids can still come to the forest to play whenever they feel like it."

"Everyone loves Elene!" Teto added.

Selene's grandkids used to come to the forest a lot when they were younger. The older two had pretty much stopped visiting us, but Elene still occasionally came, asking the mythical beasts to give her a ride whenever the demons went to trade in Liebel. Everyone in the forest knew her, so even when I was busy, she'd hang out with the other residents or the mythical beasts.

"Besides, we still have our transfer gates. We can go home whenever we feel like it, so if you ever find yourself in trouble, give me a call and we'll rush right back," I assured her.

"You can always count on us!" Teto added.

Selene chuckled. "You're right. Besides, I might be sad, but I'm also really excited to hear all of the tales of your adventures," she said, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"That's a bit embarrassing," I mumbled.

She must've heard about all of the things we had been up to back when we used to be more active as adventurers. I couldn't help feeling a little awkward

hearing about the quests I had taken on fifty years ago.

“Being A-rank is a bit of a pain when all I want to do is enjoy my travels,” I pointed out.

“Teto really doesn’t like having to talk to all these important people!” Teto pouted next to me.

Being an A-rank adventurer came with its perks, but also its pitfalls. Every time someone learned about our rank, they’d start treating us differently. Suddenly they’d start giving us special treatment, which made it difficult to truly immerse myself in the local culture, despite my strong desire to experience each place authentically. To this day, my best experiences were the mining town where we met Arim—since that place was so remote that no one there had ever heard about us—and the time we lived with Yuicia in Lawbyle while hiding our ranks.

I really have first world problems, don’t I? I thought as I watched Selene tell one of her servants to bring her something.

“I actually have been told to give you a certain something when you resume your travels,” she explained, holding out two gold-colored guild cards to us.

“Selene, what are those?” I asked.

“Teto has never seen a guild card like this before!”

“They’re your new guild cards,” she explained. “Come on, use your mana to activate them.”

Teto and I did just that, taking the cards from Selene and pouring our mana into them. The letter S appeared on the surface.

“Um... But why are *you* giving us our new cards? You’re not a guildmaster or anything. Are these fake?” I asked, scrutinizing my new card.

My question drew a chuckle from Selene. “I understand your concerns, but I promise you that these are real guild cards, mom. I’m giving you these cards with the authority vested in me as saintess of the Church of the Five Goddesses and healer at the adventurer’s guild, not as the Liebel margravine,” Selene explained.

With her son having taken on the margrave title, Selene had started working as a healer for the church and the adventurer's guild. At the present moment, she wasn't standing in front of us as a noble lady, but as a temporary guild official.

"You haven't been rewarded for suppressing the stampede and helping out at the refugee camp, right?" Selene continued, a smile on her face.

For some reason, there was an uncanny intensity in her smile; I found myself nodding awkwardly. "I had a lot on my plate with the refugees, so I kind of just shut myself in the Forest," I said sheepishly.

"We didn't even leave to go sell herbs at the guild like we used to!" Teto added.

We had added potions to our list of wares, so we had the demons directly sell them into town rather than at the guild. The only times we had left the forest in the past decade was to go do some shopping, buying things like tea, books, paintings, or tableware for my ever-growing art collection. I'd fund these purchases by selling a few potions at the local guild, but since we'd only popped by a few times in over ten years, we hadn't left that big of an impression.

"But it's S-rank cards we're talking about. Can you really hand them to us like that? Besides, I don't really want to be S-rank. It's only going to make traveling even more of a pain," I said.

"It won't," Selene assured me. "You can hide your ranks."

Selene told us to touch the S on our cards, and Teto and I did just that. Instantly, the letter turned into a C and the color of the card changed to look just like a regular C-rank card.

"Wow, it really worked!" Teto exclaimed.

"Can we really do this, though? Surely, hiding one's rank has to be illegal," I asked, eyeing my "C-rank" card with suspicion.

"It's not. As long as the cards are genuine—and they are. Besides, everyone can hide their status, so hiding one's rank is just another way of exercising that right," Selene explained confidently.

She added that one couldn't lie and claim to be a higher rank than they actually were, but pretending to be a lower rank was fine, as it allowed high-ranked adventurers to escape some of the constraints that came with their position.

"Before you leave, though, let me tell you about your privileges as S-rank adventurers."

From what Selene told us, as S-rank adventurers, we now had the same rights as the Grand Masters and could be treated like quasi royalty if we so desired. She also advised us about taking on quests; for anything C-rank and under, we could just talk to the receptionist as usual, but she suggested that if we wanted to deal with anything higher than that, we should contact the guildmaster directly and disclose our rank, and we'd get the job. Speaking of which, there was a hidden sigil on our fake C-rank cards, and any guild official would instantly be able to tell that we had artificially lowered our rank.

"So by contacting the guildmaster directly, we could take on higher-rank quests without standing out too much," I summarized. "Still, I can't believe they made us S-rank."

"My father, Lord Gyunton, and Mr. Arsus negotiated with the guild to have you two promoted," Selene explained.

I felt a pang in my heart when I remembered that they had all already passed away.

"Since you had a king, a duke, and one of the world's premier adventurers backing you up, the guild didn't hesitate too much. Besides, you played a big part in the stampede and took in the refugees without asking for any sort of compensation. And, lastly, you have two incredible skills: Creation Magic and Unaging. By making you S-rank, they're ensuring that no nation can legally attempt to get in your way."

I was a bit bummed that the three people who had negotiated with the guild for me to be promoted to S-rank weren't here to see the fruition of their efforts.

"I stayed in contact with Gyunton until his death. He could've told me about it," I said with a sigh.

“Maybe he wanted it to be a surprise!” Teto suggested, causing the corners of my lips to curl up.

I wanted to thank Gyunton and the others, but they were gone.

“I guess our first couple of stops are going to be cemeteries, huh?” I mumbled.

If I couldn’t thank them in person, I could at least go visit their tombs—not that I minded, of course.

“Where will we go after?” Teto asked.

“Hmmm... I’d say we should read all of those travel diaries we’ve collected throughout the years and just go where our hearts take us.”

Selene chuckled. “I’m looking forward to hearing what shenanigans you’ll get up to this time around, mom.”

I have no intention of getting involved in any sort of trouble this time around, though, I thought as I took a sip of my tea.

Chapter 31: A Transformation Spell and a Slightly Older Me

Right before leaving on a new journey, I succeeded in developing a new type of magic. I quickly called Beretta and Teto to a room in the mansion and sent for Howl and Devalna to show them the results. The latter two were working as coordinators between the schools in the forest, and they had started helping me with my magic research to develop a new curriculum.

“Take a look at this. *Makeover!*”

A bright light enveloped me and my body started changing in front of the other four’s eyes. My limbs became longer, my chest got a *teeny* tiny bit bigger, and my clothes (on which I had applied a *Size Adjustment* enchantment beforehand) changed to match my new body.



“Oooh! Teto likes grown-up Lady Witch; you look so cute!” Teto exclaimed, throwing her arms around me.

“Thanks, Teto. It feels a bit weird not having to look up to see your face,” I said with a smile.

The new spell I had come up with allowed me to change my body from its usual twelve-year-old appearance to one resembling a slightly older teenager—around sixteen years old.

“I see you’ve finally perfected the spell, Master. Congratulations,” Beretta said.

“I did. It uses a boatload of mana, though,” I replied with an awkward smile.

People always doubted me when I told them that I was an adult despite my appearance. Conversely, pretty much everyone knew of Chise, the twelve-year-old witch, so making myself look older would hopefully prevent people from recognizing me at first glance.

I had hidden in the forest for the past decade to avoid garnering too much unwanted attention (the price of fame), but surely the rumors must’ve started dying down by now. Either way, I wanted my identity as the unaging witch at the head of the forest to stay separate from my adventurer persona. It was the whole reason I’d developed this spell in the first place.

“If it wasn’t for Howl and Devalna, I would never have completed it. Thanks, you two,” I said, turning to the two demons.

“Oh, please don’t thank us! My tribe is honored you chose me as your assistant,” Howl quickly said.

“We learned so much! We’ll use our newly acquired knowledge to improve the lives of demons all around the forest. Thank you so much!”

I thanked them, but they thanked me in return...

“Lady Wiiiitch, how did they help you come up with the spell?” Teto asked.

“I used Howl’s Humanchange skill and Devalna’s ability to hide her wings and tail as reference material,” I explained.

“The Humanchange skill?” Teto repeated, tilting her head to one side.

Before, I had tried using Illusion Magic to make myself look older, but it ended up being a huge failure. After that, I was too busy dealing with the stampede and its aftermath to work on my spell, but now that things had settled down, I finally got to return to my research and perfected the spell right before our departure by mingling with the werewolves and the devilkin and observing them using their shape-shifting abilities.

“I see. Whenever you use the spell, you are basically changing the structure of your body,” Beretta said.

“Exactly, just like werewolves when they switch from one shape to the other. As for devilkin, at first I thought that they used Illusion Magic to hide their horns, tails, and wings, but it turns out that they also alter the physical composition of their bodies,” I explained.

When I first understood that, I was struck with inspiration and went to study all the other shape-shifting skills to get a better understanding of how they worked, and after some thorough testing, I finally managed to come up with my first transformation spell.

“It also enhances your physical abilities to match those of the transformed body,” Howl supplied.

“Not to mention, it’s a revolution for demons! It’ll allow all half-human, half-monster demons to hide among humans without being spotted,” Devalna added excitedly.

For instance, lamias, arachnes, and centaurs could turn their lower halves into normal legs and mingle with humans without any of them noticing that they were demons. All they’d need to do would be to learn the spell—or the Humanchange skill—and practice walking on two legs, and they could pass for humans.

Now, I had to be completely honest: the spell wasn’t perfect.

“Disguise skills and spells are weak to the *Dispel* spell, and outside interference in general,” I explained. “If someone were to cast *Dispel* on me right now, my body would instantly turn back into its original form.”

In stories, you often saw characters turning back into their real form after being driven into a corner or being forced to transform due to outside causes—like the full moon for werewolves, for example. Due to the nature of Transformation Magic, one might accidentally reveal their identity due to things like psychological distress or outside interferences. I had spent many years training my magic control abilities, so I probably wouldn't break my own disguise spell too easily, but it was a lot harder to maintain than, say, Body Strengthening.

"It's also a real mana sinkhole," I continued.

If one wanted to make themselves look one year older or younger, it'd cost them about 10,000 MP to maintain the transformation for an hour. Since I was making myself look four years older, I actually expended 40,000 MP per hour. This meant that it would set me back a whopping 1,000,000 MP to keep the transformation up for a day. Despite eating my strange fruit every day, I only had around 900,000 MP, so even if I wanted to, I couldn't keep the spell up for that long. Not to mention that if I used body-enhancing skills like Body Strengthening or put up barriers, my mana reserves would deplete even faster. But if I kept the spell up for only around fifteen hours a day and canceled it at night, I would only need to spend 600,000 MP a day, meaning that I still had some wiggle room to cast other spells.

"Wouldn't demons quickly run out of mana, though?" Beretta asked.

"It's a bit different for demons; they're hiding their demonic side and emphasizing their human attributes, so it wouldn't cost them as much. But if they tried to make themselves older or younger, or if a nonhumanoid race used the spell to turn into a human, it'd be a lot more expensive," I explained.

"Is that so? Well, Teto loves small Lady Witch and big Lady Witch the same, so she's happy either way!" Teto chirped, rubbing her cheek against mine.

Now that I look the same age as Teto, it feels a bit embarrassing to have her be all over me like that...

"Master, if I may, all of your current outfits have been made for your original body type. I believe it would be wise to have a few more made to fit your new appearance," Beretta said.

“Uh, there’s not really any need to...” I stammered, looking for a way out. But Teto was still hugging me, so I couldn’t run away even if I wanted to.

Beretta gave a silent signal, and the next second, the door swung open and a gang of maids piled into the room.

I felt my face twitch.

Howl and Devalna decided that this was their cue to leave and excused themselves, throwing me sympathetic gazes on their way out.

“Master, please stay right there while we measure you.”

“No, I— Aaah!”

Despite my protests, the maids surrounded me and started taking my measurements.

Usually, Beretta never forced me into anything, but for some reason—perhaps the fact that I would be leaving soon—she spent the remainder of the winter treating me like a dress-up doll.

Chapter 32: Looking for a New Destination

Winter was almost over. Soon spring would arrive, and so would my birthday. I'd officially turn ninety. I had spent the last few weeks going from settlement to settlement to say goodbye to everyone, occasionally dropping by the church.

"Witch, you're here again? And your guardian too," Shael noted when she spotted me.

"Aren't you two leaving soon?" Raphilia asked me. "Do you really not have anything better to do than sit there?"

I had been staring idly at the statues of the goddesses; at the sound of their voices, I turned to greet them, smiling blithely.

"Everyone keeps trying to convince me to stay in the forest. This is the only place where I can truly relax," I explained.

"The kids at the mansion are all really sad to see us go," Teto added.

The representatives of all of the races in the forest had encouraged me to leave, but many others didn't want us to go. The kids would throw their arms around my waist and beg me to stay, while the mythical beasts would bite the hem of my robes and pull it as if to say, "Please don't leave us." While I was moved to see how much they cared about me, comforting them one by one was really exhausting. To top it all off, some of the servants and office staff at the mansion looked like they didn't want me to leave either, and the bigger mythical beasts had even started mock-fighting each other in front of me to show that they were strong enough to protect me on my travels.

And so, whenever I felt like having some peace and quiet, I had nowhere to go but the church.

"That's proof of how much everyone loves you both. Well, I have to say I'm glad you popped by. You even made a statue for the last goddess!" Shael said, pointing at the new Lorie statue I had just installed.

We now had accurate statues of all five goddesses, and while I hadn't voiced

it out loud, I was very pleased to have completed the collection.

“It felt weird having only one statue be different from the others,” I explained.

“They look very pretty,” Teto added.

I had taken inspiration from the goddesses’ appearances as I saw them in the dream oracles and made the statues with my Creation Magic. All five of them looked incredibly majestic. I made a last prayer to the statues, telling them that I would be resuming my travels soon and five soft voices echoed in my mind, all of them wishing me safe travels.

“We’ll be heading on home. See you two later,” I said, standing up.

“Bye-bye! We’ll come again soon!” Teto added.

Shael and Raphilia saw us off, and we returned to the mansion.

Then, a few days later...

“We’re off.”

“We’ll bring you lots of souvenirs! Look forward to them, okay?”

It was finally time for our departure. We had asked the griffins and pegasuses who were traveling to the Liebel margravate to trade to take us to Darryl, and they had kindly accepted. I had preemptively changed into my sixteen-year-old appearance so that no one would recognize me.

“Be safe on your travels, Master. We will look after this land during your absence,” Beretta said as she and the several other maids who had accompanied us to Darryl bowed their heads to us.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re making it sound like a much bigger deal than it really is. We might be going away, but we’ll be dropping by often. And you can always contact me if anything happens.”

I had put my trusty magic communication crystal and a couple of transfer gates in my magic bag in case of emergencies. Beretta would give me periodic reports, and if I deemed that I was needed, I’d use my transfer gates to return to the Forest, so it wasn’t like I’d be out in the wild with no way to be contacted for years. I really wished Beretta wouldn’t take it as seriously as she did.

“Well then, Teto, let’s go.”

“Roger!”

The first leg of our journey would be a trip to the graves of the three people who earned me my promotion to S-rank adventurer: Arsus in Apanemis, King Alberd—Selene’s father—in Ischea, and Gyunton in Gald. King Alberd and Gyunton were a king and a duke, respectively, so we most likely wouldn’t be able to visit their graves directly, but we planned on offering a few prayers to the stone monument honoring their families as our way of paying our respects.

“First stop: Apanemis. *Teleport!*”

We disappeared right from under Beretta’s eyes and found ourselves in a meadow outside the dungeon city.

“It sure has been a while since the last time we came here.”

“Lady Witch, will we be using Teleportation Magic again to go to King Alberd and Gyunton’s graves?”

“Probably not. I’d rather we take our time and stop by a few towns along the way. It’s not like we’re in a hurry or anything.”

Teleportation Magic allowed me to reach my destination in a split second. I had decided to use it to take us to Apanemis, but I didn’t want to abuse it and miss out on the joys of travel: unexpected encounters, unseen landscapes, and local culture. For the past decade, my only outings had been to sell potions and use the money I’d made from them to buy tea, books, and works of art. But I pretty much always rotated between the same couple of towns and hadn’t done proper sightseeing in Gald or Ischea in over fifty years. I thought it’d be nice to take a little trip down memory lane and stop by the towns I used to be familiar with on my way to pay my respects to Arsus and the others. And if there was a new town I hadn’t explored before, then all the better. Besides, with my current appearance and C-rank guild card, no one would recognize me, which meant that there was no reason for me to abuse my Teleportation Magic. I wouldn’t be using our flying carpet either, as it was pretty much our trademark and it’d be an instant giveaway.

“Okay! Let’s go visit Arsus’s grave! Then, we’ll take our time to go see

Gyunton and King Alberd,” Teto said.

“Yeah, that sounds like a plan. But what should we do after?” I wondered out loud.

I took out the travel diaries I had retrieved from the fallen Kingdom of Krista and looked at them with Teto.

“I’d like to go somewhere we’ve never been before,” I said.

“Teto agrees! Teto wants to go eat some yummy food!”

The two of us huddled together in front of the book, discussing our options. We decided to first travel through Ischea and Gald on our way to pay our respects to Gyunton and King Alberd, and then make our way to a brand-new nation.

Teto and I exchanged smiles as we entered the city of Apanemis, our hearts pounding with anticipation of the new adventures waiting for us.

Extra Story: The Changed and the Unchanged

On the day of the winter solstice, Teto and I made our way to the forest to participate in the Stargazing Festival. We arrived there at noon.

“So this is the new venue,” I commented as I looked around.

“There are already so many people!” Teto noted.

The main events wouldn’t start before the evening, but the town hosting the festival was already bustling with activity.

“Look, they’re giving out pamphlets,” I said, grabbing one of them. “It looks like there are a lot of family-friendly activities during the day, probably because families usually come and leave early,” I reasoned.

The town in which the Stargazing Festival was held was on the border of the forest, smack-dab on the trade route between Ischea and Gald. Four hundred years ago, when the forest started expanding, a large lake was formed, and this town was built on its shores. If you looked north, you could see the World Trees on the other side of the lake, making this town a popular tourist destination all year round. On the day of the Stargazing Festival, the people of the forest would set up special means of transportation so that anyone in the surrounding towns could take a day trip to participate in the festival.

“Lady Witch, Teto wants to eat this!” Teto exclaimed, pointing at a food stall.

“Let’s get some food and eat it while we do a little sightseeing, shall we?”

The two of us strolled through the town, stopping at various food stalls to sample the snacks and dishes that caught our eye. Most activities at this time of day were geared towards families and children, with circus acts, outdoor plays, and playground facilities. Teto and I would occasionally stop to watch a play or try a particularly interesting-looking attraction. It reminded me a bit of the amusement parks from my previous life.

Soon we found ourselves at a shop that sold items that seemed exclusive to the festival.

“What are these things?” I mumbled to myself, examining the shelves.

“Everything looks really interesting,” Teto said.

“Hey, welcome to—” the shop clerk—a demon—was about to greet us, but the second his eyes landed on Teto and me, his jaw hit the floor. He must’ve recognized us. I brought a finger to my lips to tell him to keep our identities hush-hush, and he nodded so vigorously I got scared his head would pop off.

“Um... May I ask what brings you to my humble shop, Lady Witch, Lady Teto?” he asked in a hushed voice.

“It looked interesting,” I replied with an awkward smile.

“Can you tell us about what you’re selling?” Teto piped up.

“O-Of course!” the man replied, beaming, clearly proud to show off his wares to us. “I sell items that can be used during the night event.”

“The night event? If I remember correctly, it’s a parade, right?” I said.

From what I had read, women dressed in priestesses’ garb would be performing a dance that looked like my purifying dance on one of the floats.

“Exactly!” the demon nodded excitedly, grabbing two baton-looking things and handing them to us. “These are called ‘light sticks.’ You use them to cheer for the performers in the parade. You can get them for free, so please take them with you!”

Apparently, these would light up if you poured some mana into them. As for the people who didn’t know how to let out their own mana, they could just hold small magic stones in their hands and the sticks would glow.

“This looks like so much fun!” Teto chirped.

“I don’t know why, but these give me a feeling of déjà vu...” I muttered, searching my memories for something similar.

Oh, right; I once stumbled across luminous moss in a cave, didn’t I? If I remember correctly, it also reacted to mana, so perhaps they used something similar to paint these sticks to make them glow in the dark, I surmised.

“And here you have evil-repelling bells,” the shop clerk continued to

introduce his wares. “I highly recommend getting one! Ah, but then again, perhaps I shouldn’t be recommending those to you, Lady Witch. After all, you’re the one who invented them,” the man said with an awkward laugh.

Teto carefully examined the bells, gently poking them and making them emit a soft jingling sound.

“I didn’t invent evil-repelling bells,” I said.

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. I used a kakkhara when I performed the first purifying dance,” I explained. “The metal hoops knocking into each other make a sound that’s a bit similar to that of a bell, but I’m not the one who came up with the idea of putting anti-evil charms on bells.”

People in the forest used to put evil-repelling charms on all sorts of items that made sound, but bells quickly became the most popular choice due to their cuteness. They started putting them on their doors around the winter solstice like one would a Christmas wreath. Later down the line, some people moved out of the forest and the custom of putting evil-repelling bells on one’s door in winter spread in the outside world as well, to the point where it became a staple of the Winter Solstice Festival.

As a side note, two hundred years ago, people came up with a new tradition: ringing the bells once for each year of one’s life to pray for good health in the new year. I thought, amused, that it seemed a bit like a mash-up of the Buddhist event Joya-no-Kane, where priests would ring a bell one hundred and eight times on New Year’s Eve to ward off bad luck, and Setsubun, a ritual where people would throw roasted soybeans out of the front door as a metaphor for driving evil spirits out of their home.

It’s funny to see that, even in two different worlds, people come up with the same sorts of rituals, I thought.

I gave the clerk a brief history of evil-repelling bells and told him that they were used even outside of the forest, and his shoulders dropped. “I see. Looks like I still have a lot to learn about this world.”

“Well, culture is a complex thing. Some traditions end up mashed together,

while others disappear or take on a completely different meaning.”

Take the Stargazing Festival, for instance: it started off as a ceremony to guide the souls lost in space-time back home. But over four hundred years had passed since the first iteration of the festival, and all of the lost souls had been purified already, so there was technically no need to hold it anymore. Yet it hadn’t disappeared; it had simply changed its purpose and its form. Not only that, but each region had its own way of celebrating it. The joint wedding ceremony and the martial arts tournament continued to this day, albeit in different forms and at different times than before. As for the purifying dance, it had been replaced by the parade. Priests still performed a proper purifying dance on the day of the winter solstice, but it was held at the church itself and was a much more modest event.

“Lady Witch, Lady Witch! Teto thinks that the little bell would look very cute on you!” Teto said, holding out one of the evil-repelling bells to me.

“Teto, that shape...”

“It’s cute, isn’t it? Teto thinks it’d look very nice if you pinned it under the red ribbon on your robe!”

The bell she had picked was shaped like a hanging temple bell. I pictured it pinned to my ribbon and was instantly reminded of those classic Christmas bells from my previous life.

“Thank you for picking it out for me, Teto. Let’s see... I think these ones would look nice on you,” I said, taking two hair ornaments shaped like ribbons with little bells on them, thinking that they’d look nice on Teto’s pigtails.

“Thank you, Lady Witch! Let’s buy them!”

I paid for the bells and we put them on each other. I brought a hand to my chest and gently felt the bell under my ribbon, causing it to make a soft tinkling sound. Teto seemed to really like the sound of the bells in her hair; she wouldn’t stop shaking her head from side to side to make them jingle. Right as we finished our purchases, things started getting noisy outside.

“Lady Witch, Lady Teto, the parade is about to begin!” the shop clerk told us.

I hadn’t noticed, but the sun had already set, and it was time for the festival’s

main event: the parade. We exited the shop and saw something approaching from the other side of the main avenue.

“Whoaaa!”

Magical devices illuminated the town while illusions darted across the sky and cheerful music started playing.

“It’s time for the parade! Everyone, please join us!”

Parade floats appeared on the other end of the avenue, illuminating their surroundings. Performers in costumes stood on the platforms, dancing and waving at the crowd, while a group dressed like Winter Solstice Bears ran alongside the floats, giving high fives to the spectators. One of the floats had mages using their powers to create all sorts of mesmerizing illusions while priestesses danced and sang. Fireworks bursting overhead mingled with the cheery music in a joyous cacophony. This didn’t deter the spectators from cheering at the top of their lungs as they swung their light sticks to the beat.

“These are the sticks that shop clerk gave us, hm? So that’s how you use them,” I noted.

“It looks like so much fun!” Teto exclaimed.

It reminded me of those glow sticks people would swing during nighttime events in my past life.

“First a parade, now glow sticks... This really feels like an amusement park, huh?” I muttered with a chuckle.

I let some mana into my own light stick and started swinging it from left to right, following the moves of the rest of the crowd. But then I felt a peculiar presence appear in the air, and I started looking around.

“Ah,” I muttered, my gaze landing on a certain something.

“Lady Witch? Is something wrong?” Teto asked me.

“There are ghosts among the crowd.”

This town was quite close to the center of the forest, so the mana concentration of the air was quite high. Add to that the fact that it was the Winter Solstice, the day when the spirits were at their strongest, and you had

the perfect conditions for ghosts to temporarily materialize into the realm of the living. All of them seemed to be enjoying the festival along with the spectators, watching the parade and rocking their bodies to the beat of the music. But then the sound of the evil-repelling bells intensified, and the ghosts started disappearing one after the other.

“They’re gone!” Teto gasped.

“They must’ve gotten their fill of the festival,” I noted as I watched their souls ascend to the sky among the magic lights and illusions coloring the sky.

“The Stargazing Festival might’ve changed a lot since the first time, but in the end, it still serves the same purpose, hm?” I mused out loud.

None of the tools used during the festival were actually imbued with Purification Magic. Perhaps people believed so strongly that the bells they were wearing could repel evil spirits and ghosts that they actually gained the power to guide souls to the realm of the dead.

Teto and I stayed until the end of the festival before heading back to the mansion, the bells on our clothes jingling softly with each step we took.

Afterword

To new 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.

A manga adaptation of this series by Shin Haruhara-sama is currently streaming on *Gangan ONLINE*; Chise and Teto's interactions are absolutely adorable, so I strongly recommend you go give it a try.

Did you enjoy this volume? I decided to focus the story mostly on the issues of the demons who have recently moved into the Witch of Creation's Forest, and how Chise helped them overcome their problems. I also had a lot of fun coming up with roles for each of these new races.

Personally, I really like the insect demons and the plant demons—although they didn't play that big of a part in this volume. Why do I like them, you ask? I just really like that they built their settlement in the trees. I took inspiration from the first chapter of the manga adaptation of this series and came up with the idea of having them live inside trees and using branches as bridges to travel from one tree to the other. I thought that it screamed "fantasy world," and I really wanted to use it at some point in the series; this seemed like a great opportunity. I'll do my best to come up with more fantastical landscapes for Chise and Teto to explore in the following volumes. At the same time, I also hope that the forest becomes a warm place you'll all want to come back to at some point.

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.







With a little
shake of my wrist,
I made the rings of
my kakkhara sound,
all while pouring mana
into the staff and
releasing waves of
Purification Magic,
my robes fluttering in
the wind with each step.
The purification spell
spread through
the entire Forest;
one after another,
lost souls started
appearing in the
night sky,
dotting the dark
expanse like
shimmering stars.

— The Offering Dance —

Bonus Short Stories

The Little Guests Who Come to Take Shelter from the Rain

“It’s raining really hard all of a sudden,” I commented, raising my head and peering out of the window.

The downpour was so heavy that we could hear the rain falling from inside.

“The wind is really strong too,” Teto noted.

The two of us gazed at the bleak sight out of the window from the comfort of our mansion. The sky was covered in thick, black clouds, and the trees were swaying under the sheer force of the wind.

“It’s starting to feel a bit chilly. Let’s warm up with some hot tea, shall we?”

“Good idea!”

The two of us turned away from the window and started brewing some tea. But then, we started to hear a low buzzing amid the steady downpour.

“What’s that noise?” I asked.

“It’s coming from outside,” Teto said.

Exchanging quizzical looks, we ventured toward the window once again to look for the source. Looking up, we saw a couple of little black and yellow striped creatures huddling together under the eaves of the roof. The sight took me by surprise and my body froze. But after giving the creatures a good look, I finally recognized them.

“Honey bees,” I commented.

“The little monsters that work for the melissae?” Teto said.

Just like regular bees, honey bees collected pollen from the flowers that bloomed in the Forest and turned it into honey and wax.

“But what are they doing here?” Teto asked, her head tilted to the side.

I gave the honey bees another good look and noticed that their fuzz was wet.

“They must’ve been surprised by the rain and are using the eaves of the roof as shelter,” I replied.

Honey bees’ fuzz had some level of water repellency, but the rain was so strong today that the poor things were drenched. This, coupled with the sheer force of the wind, must’ve forced them to take shelter and wait out the storm. As for why they were huddled together, I surmised it was to keep each other warm.

“Lady Witch, can we let them come in and dry them?” Teto asked.

I nodded. “We always eat their honey; drying them is the least we can do.”

I opened the window and we let the three drenched honey bees in.

“We can’t give them a bath like we’d do for regular animals, though, can we? For now, I suppose we can towel-dry them, then use hair dryers and a brush to finish the job.”

And so, we did just that: first, we used towels to get most of the water off their bodies, then we used soft brushes to remove any dirt that got caught in their fur while gently blowing warm air on them with the hair dryers.

“They’re back to being all fluffy!” Teto chirped.

“They are, aren’t they? They’re a lot softer than I thought too.”

I thought that all insect-type monsters were cold and hard, but, now that they were all dry, the honey bees were soft and fluffy.

“So soft,” I mumbled with my eyes closed as I rubbed the fuzz of the honey bee closest to me. It twisted its little body as if to tell me to let go of it and, when I removed my hand, it zoomed over to its friends, moving its little antennae excitedly. I watched them in silence for a bit while Teto finished preparing the tea we had started brewing earlier.

“Lady Witch, do you think they eat cookies?” she asked, picking up one of the sweet treats we were going to have with our tea.

“Try holding one out to them, maybe?” I suggested.

If it wasn't safe for them, they probably wouldn't eat it, I thought. Teto nodded at my words, arranging a few cookies on a plate and setting it down near the honey bees. One of them seemed to notice the plate. It grabbed a cookie, opened its maw wide, and started eating it. As I watched the other two do the same, the honey bee who was done with her cookie flew over to the sofa where we were sitting and started hovering around us.

"Why is it sticking so close to us? Is something wrong, you think?" I asked Teto, gently petting the honey bee's fur.

"It probably likes your body warmth," Teto suggested.

"Maybe."

Soon, the other two honey bees made their way to the sofa and started pushing and shoving the third one. This caused their fluffy hair to get all mussed up, making them look like a trio of overstuffed teddy bears.

"They're so cute," I said with a chuckle.

Honey bees couldn't bark or meow or anything of the sort, but, judging by the way they were buzzing around and flapping their little wings, it was obvious they were having a good time.

The rain eventually subsided and the little honey bees flew back to their nest, but not without turning back one last time as if to thank us for keeping them dry and warm during the storm. I couldn't stop a little sigh from escaping my lips.

"Lady Witch, why the long face?" Teto asked.

"I wish I had hugged them before they left," I said.

Their fuzz had felt so nice under my hands; hugging them and rubbing my cheeks against their fluffy bodies would've been heavenly. But alas, it was too late.

"It's okay, Lady Witch! You'll get the opportunity to do it in the future!"

"You're right. That'd be nice."

I didn't know at the time that that opportunity would manifest itself much sooner than I thought.

“Lady Witch, the honey bees are here!”

“What do you mean they’re—whoa!”

On another rainy day, we heard a knock at our window and, when we turned around, we saw another group of honey bees waiting outside, rubbing their little hands as if to ask us to let them in—which we did, of course.

Much later, I learned that the honey bees had associated our mansion with a spot to take shelter from the rain and had told all of their friends about it. As a result, whenever it rained, the honey bees would visit our place for shelter, and I got to hug them to my heart’s content. I was *thrilled*.

A Fun Way to Spend Hot Days

The summer of that year brought with it unbearable temperatures like we’d never seen before. Even the Forest—which was usually nice and breezy in the summer due to all the trees surrounding it—was no exception.

“It’s so hot,” I groaned.

“Lady Witch, are you okay?” Teto asked me.

“Your body is so cool, Teto... Feels nice.”

Usually, Teto was the one clinging to me, but on that day, I was the one who wouldn’t let go. As Teto used to be a clay golem, her body was made out of mud, and it automatically adjusted its temperature to whatever was the most comfortable based on the weather conditions. And right now, to my delight, she was remarkably cool to the touch.

“My apologies, Master. It seems that the mansion’s cooling system has broken down,” Beretta announced to me.

“So that’s why it’s so hot today,” Teto commented.

“Under normal circumstances, I could fix it with my magic, but the timing couldn’t have been any worse...” I said from my spot in Teto’s arms, a troubled expression etched on my face. “I spent the night chatting with Liriel and the others, and I have no more mana left.”

“Lady Witch’s all out of mana!”

Dream oracles were fun and dandy, but they had the downside of draining my mana when they lasted too long. Yesterday had been one of those nights, and I didn’t have a single drop of mana left to fix the mansion’s cooling system.

“Well, we have no choice but to wait either for my mana to recharge, or for the others to fix the cooling system,” I said. “How about we try coming up with ways of staying cool without using magic?”

“Without using magic?” Teto repeated.

“Yeah. We could find a couple of fun activities to pass the time until the cooling system is fixed.”

I smiled, a couple of drops of sweat running down my forehead. Seeing how much I was suffering from the heat, Teto and Beretta gave my suggestion some serious thought.

“I have heard that most residents spend hot days in the forest, as it is cooler there,” Beretta said.

“In the forest, huh? That sounds lovely.”

My first thought was that I could hang a hammock between the trees and take a nice nap in the shade...but I quickly realized that there was a bit of a problem with my plan.

“The mythical beasts won’t leave me alone if I go to the forest. It’ll be impossible for me to cool down,” I said with a sigh.

Every time I went into the forest, the mythical beasts would come and beg me for mana. I usually didn’t mind, but today was so unbearably hot that nothing seemed less appealing than getting surrounded by fluffy critters.

“Let’s go swim in the river then!” Teto suggested.

“I can’t swim, but dipping my feet in the water sounds nice. It’d definitely help me cool down.”

Just thinking about it made me feel less hot already.

“If you don’t want to leave the house, you could also run fresh fruit and

vegetables under cold water and eat them like that,” Beretta suggested.

Apparently, this was also something the Forest’s residents did to cool down.

I nodded. “We could have some watermelon and peaches. They’re summer staples.”

“Teto loves cold tomatoes too!”

“Tomatoes are nice too, aren’t they? Or we could go the opposite route and have some super spicy curry with summer vegetables. That’s a classic.”

Using cooked tomatoes instead of water to mix with the roux yielded a nice tangy curry with a strong umami note. You could also mix in some summer vegetables like eggplants, summer squash, bell peppers, or zucchini, or deep-fry them and add them as toppings to the curry.

Teto loved curry, so the second I mentioned the word, drool started seeping out of her mouth and stars appeared in her eyes.

The two of us sipped on some iced tea Beretta had prepared for us as we discussed more ways to cool down as we waited, when all of a sudden...

“Ah! There’s a nice breeze flowing in!” Teto exclaimed.

“It seems that the others are done fixing the cooling system,” Beretta said.

I felt the sweat on my forehead dry as the refreshing breeze brushed against my skin. For a while, I enjoyed the cool sensation in silence until I noticed Teto looking down beside me.

“What’s wrong Teto? You look sad,” I said.

“Teto was looking forward to the tomato curry, but the cooling system’s all fixed now,” she replied dejectedly.

She must’ve thought that, now that the heat wasn’t so stifling anymore, my tomato curry idea was off the table.

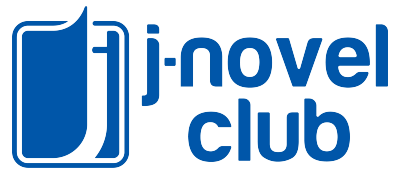
“Summer isn’t anywhere near over, Teto,” I said with a reassuring smile. “We’ll have plenty of occasions to do all of the fun things we discussed.”

“We just harvested a large quantity of tomatoes a few days ago. We could prepare some tomato curry for dinner,” Beretta offered.

Teto's face lit up. "Thank you so much, Lady Witch, Beretta! Teto's super-duper happy!"

She wrapped her arms around me under Beretta's amused gaze.

The heat might have been nearly unbearable that year, but there were plenty of fun ways for us to cool down.



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Making Magic: The Sweet Life of a Witch Who Knows an Infinite MP Loophole
Volume 7

by Aloha Zachou

Translated by Bérénice Vourdon Edited by Will Holcomb

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