



Making Magic

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

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Chapter 0: A Letter from a Centuries-Old Friend](#)

[Chapter 1: Traveling in a Caravan](#)

[Chapter 2: The Trading Town of Lief](#)

[Chapter 3: Folkcrafts of the Great Forest](#)

[Chapter 4: Demolishing a Haunted Mansion](#)

[Chapter 5: The Ghost's True Identity](#)

[Chapter 6: Suppressing the Rampaging Spirit](#)

[Chapter 7: The Spirit Lantern](#)

[Chapter 8: Time for the Revelation—We're Actually S-rank](#)

[Chapter 9: In the Depths of the Elves' Great Forest](#)

[Chapter 10: The Guide](#)

[Chapter 11: The Elves' Forest](#)

[Chapter 12: A Wave of Entertainment Washes Over the Elven Kingdom](#)

[Chapter 13: The Witch Gets Separated from Her Companions](#)

[Chapter 14: The Spirit Corridor](#)

[Chapter 15: The Eltar Forest Kingdom](#)

[Chapter 16: The High Elf Queen](#)

[Chapter 17: Fauzard's New Contract](#)

[Chapter 18: A Stroll in the Elven Capital](#)

[Chapter 19: Installing a Transfer Gate in the Elves' Forest](#)

[Chapter 20: The Ancient Dragon and the Fairy Queen](#)

[Chapter 21: The Fairy Queen's Visit](#)

[Chapter 22: Mythical Beasts' Breeding Grounds and Childish Innocence](#)

[Chapter 23: The Adventuring Novel's Influence](#)

[Chapter 24: Adults Were Once Children Too](#)

[Chapter 25: The Secret Base in the Great Forest](#)

[Chapter 26: The Youths' Dreams Come to an End](#)

[Chapter 27: The Predictable Conclusion of the Elven Youths' Folly](#)

[Chapter 28: Behind the Scenes](#)

[Extra Story: Centuries after the Predictable Conclusion of the Elven Youths'
Rebellion](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 0: A Letter from a Centuries-Old Friend

Teto and I were lazing around in our mansion when we suddenly noticed a flutter of mana near us, drawing our attention.

“Lady Witch, something is coming,” Teto said.

I nodded. “Probably a spirit, judging by its mana,” I muttered.

The next second, a spirit in the shape of a wolf appeared from the shadows, a letter in its mouth. It stretched its neck towards us as if it were inviting me to take the letter.

“They’re using a spirit as their messenger, huh? Yup, that letter’s from the elves’ kingdom for sure,” I said, taking the envelope from the wolf spirit, examining the seal on the wax, and looking for the sender’s name.

“Thanks for the letter! Want some magic stones?” Teto asked the wolf spirit, holding out a handful of magic stones under its nose.

Spirits fed on mana, and magic stones were one of their favorite sources thereof. The wolf spirit chomped on the treats and swallowed them, licking its chops in contentment. As I watched Teto petting the wolf spirit with a soft smile on my lips, I reached for a letter opener and broke the seal on the envelope.

“Lady Witch? What’s it say?” Teto asked me, carrying the wolf spirit in her arms.

“Apparently they found something that I forgot there ages ago,” I explained, showing her the letter. “And they’re inviting us to stay over for a bit, since I need to go retrieve it anyway.”

Teto looked at me with stars in her eyes. “Lady Witch, Teto wants to go! Teto hasn’t eaten the elves’ sweets in sooo long!”

“Sure, why not? I’d like to go visit their workshops. It’s been a while.”

The elves’ kingdom was in the middle of a forest that boasted several large world trees and was plentiful in resources: timber, mushrooms, edible plants,

medicinal herbs, the works. All sorts of monsters and mythical beasts resided there as well. All of these allowed the elves to live comfortably, which, in turn, meant that they had time to focus on other things and develop their own culture, research, and artwork. Of course, they owed a fair bit of their success to their long lifespans too. They would gratefully accept the cultural influence of outside nations as grist for the mill of their own art scenes, among other things, whose products they'd feed back out to the rest of the world. Furthermore, many spirits lived in the elves' forest and granted it their protection, meaning that it housed many spiritual hot spots.

Many years ago, the elves' forest used to be an elusive place where outsiders were seldom let in. But now, it was brimming with tourists year-round, attracting people interested in the arts or those who wanted to visit the spiritual hot spots.

"Magic and spirituality are much more prevalent in this world than in my past life, so these hot spots are a lot more effective than the ones from my old world," I mused out loud.

For instance, if one went to drink from a spring blessed by water spirits, their wounds would heal faster, or if they took a walk through a forest blessed by dark spirits, their minds would become clearer. However, if one were to disrespect the spirits in one of their hot spots, they might get cursed.

As Teto and I smiled excitedly thinking about all of the things we'd do in the elves' kingdom, I couldn't help but wonder about the thing I supposedly forgot there. The sender of the letter was one of my good friends, and we had known each other for several centuries so I had traveled to the elves' kingdom many times over the years. What could I have forgotten there that was important enough to send me a letter about it?

"I have no idea what it is I forgot there, but I should thank them for letting me know," I said, reaching for my letter set and writing a quick reply. I also included the time and date of our next visit to the elves' kingdom. "All done. Can you give this to your master?" I asked the wolf spirit.

It let out an enthusiastic "Woof," grabbed the letter in its jaws, and jumped from Teto's arms. Then it disappeared as if sinking into the shadows.

I carefully put my friend's letter away and stood up from the sofa. "All righty, if we're going to the elves' kingdom, we'd better do some research beforehand."

"Teto's going to grab the guidebook! We should pick the places we'd like to visit in advance."

I nodded and the two of us made for the forest's library to borrow the guidebook. We noted down all of the places that we were interested in visiting, and I decided to ask my elven friends about any hidden gems worth exploring during our visit.

This is the story of how Teto and I found ourselves in the elves' forest, despite it being strictly forbidden to outsiders, and of the friends we met along the way. It is also the story of how one book created an irreparable generational rift in all elvenkind, and why that was kinda my fault.

Chapter 1: Traveling in a Caravan

Beretta's Side

"Miss Beretta, could you please take a look at this document?" a mechanoid asked, handing Beretta a sheet of paper.

They were currently in the mansion's office, taking care of some administrative matters.

"All right. We have made passable progress, so you can go on break. I will do the same once I am done with the document you just handed me," Beretta replied.

The other mechanoid nodded. "I will prepare some tea so that it is ready when you are done."

Beretta nodded. With her master having departed for a new journey, she was in charge of managing the forest's affairs.

"I wonder where Master is now," the other mechanoid said as she set a pot full of water onto the magic burner in the office.

"She contacted me a few days ago, and she said that she and Lady Teto were done paying their respects to Mr. Gynton and the others," Beretta replied, not lifting her eyes from the document. "They must be on their way to a new nation."

Beretta's masters—Chise the witch and her guardian Teto—had begun a new journey. Their first goal had been to travel and pay respects to the graves of the three men whose recommendation to the adventurer's guild had made them S-rank adventurers. With that done, they were bound for a new part of the continent to discover what it had to offer.

"They mentioned wanting to visit the Sunfield Empire in the south, did they not?" the mechanoid asked.

"Yes. It is just south of Gald, and Master has never been there before, so she

has decided to make it her next destination.”

The Gald Beastman Nation was southeast of the forest, while the Kingdom of Ischea stood southwest. The long and thin Lawbyle Kingdom stretched to the east, separated from the forest by a mountain range. Chise had just finished paying her respects to Gyunton in Gald, so she had decided to continue south to the Sunfield Empire.

Beretta set down the document—which she had finished reading—and peered out of the window. “I wonder what Master is doing,” she muttered, looking up at the sky.

Her beloved masters might have been far away, but they were still under the same sky. Beretta was looking forward to hearing where their journey took them and what they got up to.

Tearing her gaze away from the window, she enjoyed some tea and a well-deserved break with the other mechanoid.

The Witch’s Side

A gentle breeze caressed our hair as Teto and I journeyed under the peaceful blue sky. Our mode of transport of choice for our new trip was a horse-drawn little house on wheels with a semicylindrical roof. The rhythmic clip-clop of the horse’s hooves on the highway provided a soothing soundtrack to our trip...but the curious glances and turned heads of the onlookers made it hard to fully relax.

“Maybe our caravan is a bit too out there,” I muttered from my spot beside Teto in the driver’s seat. I was trying to bask in the sun, but the attention we were receiving made me feel a tad awkward.

“Teto loves the carriage Lady Witch made!” Teto—who was holding the reins—exclaimed.

I chuckled. “Thanks, Teto.”

To be fair, I could see why our caravan prompted so many double takes. First of all, our horse wasn’t *exactly* a normal horse. While from afar it looked just like a regular brown horse, if you studied it closely, you’d be able to tell that its

body was made of stone, like an equestrian statue had stepped down from its pedestal and shaken off its rider. In reality, it was a horse golem.

“Horse golems aren’t exactly common, so I tried gussying it up to pass a little better for the real thing, but it’s not working a hundred percent, is it?” I said.

Just like I had done with Kuro back in the day, I had put an illusion charm on one of the horse golem’s accessories...but the most perceptive passersby could still tell something was amiss.

“They’re not just looking at the horse, though, Lady Witch; they’re looking at the carriage too,” Teto pointed out.

“The carriage, huh? Well, I can see why: it is a bit peculiar,” I muttered, glancing back at our caravan, which looked just like a little hut on wheels.

Looking at it, it was obvious it must’ve been quite heavy, yet it didn’t make a sound even as the horse golem dragged it along. With normal carriages, you’d hear the wheels rattle or the coach clatter as it shook over the road. But our caravan’s suspension was *tricked out to hell and back*.

“We’ve got leaf springs, axle bearings for smooth rotation on every wheel, and rubber tires. I threw on a couple Weight Reduction and Shock Absorption enchantments to make it easier on the horse. Put it all together and the whole affair makes for a buttery-smooth ride,” I explained.

By local standards, we were cruising around in the sweetest rig our fellow travelers had ever laid eyes on; I couldn’t blame them for feeling a little incredulous.

“The inside is even more impressive than the outside!” Teto said.

“Oh yeah, I went all out on the interior; the rest is practically an afterthought by comparison,” I said proudly.

“Nothing’s more important than Lady Witch’s comfort!” Teto exclaimed enthusiastically, and I forced a strained smile on my face.

I was definitely proud of the inside of the carriage. While the caravan was only about five meters in length and two in width, I had used a spatial alteration spell to cram a studio apartment’s worth of floor space in there, complete with

a bedroom corner, kitchenette, toilet, and small bathroom. To finish it all off, I had used my magic to incorporate a water and drainage system, making our caravan a comfortable little home away from home.

“I kind of threw it together at the last minute to fill in for our flying carpet, but I have to say this caravan is pretty comfortable,” I commented.

Back when we used to be more active as adventurers, we had picked up quite a reputation, and the flying carpet we used to travel back then had become our trademark. But we were currently hiding our identities and pretending to be C-rank adventurers to avoid garnering too much attention, so we had to find a new means of transportation for our new journey.

At first, we had opted for running alongside the highway using Body Strengthening to give us a boost, and we’d either camp outside or, on rare occasions, stay at an inn for the night. But one evening, as I was setting up camp, I found myself thinking, *Man, having to do this every night sure is a pain.*

It wasn’t like we were in a hurry, or like our journey even had a purpose in the first place—other than sightseeing, that is. We didn’t *have* to be zooming everywhere. I didn’t mind us traveling slower if it meant it’d be more comfortable. And so, I came up with the idea of building a carriage that we could travel *and* sleep in, a bit like a camping car.

My first idea had been to make it like a real car and have it be self-propelled, but after giving it some thought, I came to the conclusion that it would stand out way too much—which was exactly what I was trying to avoid, so I went the “ersatz horse” route instead.

“We’re not going as fast, but we can travel *and* get things done at the same time. I’d say it’s an improvement.”

The inside of the caravan didn’t shake at all, meaning that I could do all sorts of stuff while on the move: potion making, cooking, reading... These just weren’t *options* on foot. Traveling while keeping the comfort of home suited my nature much better.

As I sat in the driver’s seat, mentally patting myself on the back for coming up with the idea of traveling in a caravan, I noticed a fortress in the distance. It seemed that we had reached Gald’s border.

Teto gradually slowed the horse golem's pace and lined up behind the other travelers waiting to pass the checkpoint.

"We're about to say goodbye to Gald for a while, huh?" I said.

"It's a bit sad, but Teto is looking forward to seeing other countries!"

After paying our respects to Gyunton, the two of us decided to head south to visit the nations on this side of the continent. As we reminisced about our trip while waiting in line, it was finally time for our turn. The two beastmen guards—one young and one old—looked at our caravan with puzzlement.

"I've never seen a carriage like this before," the older one muttered.

The two guards were so taken aback by our carriage that they were just standing there, gawking at it.

"We're supposed to show you our guild cards and put our hands on the crime-judging jewel, right?" I said innocently to remind them to get on with it.

The younger one jumped slightly as my words brought him back to reality. "Ah, yes! This way, please. Gramps, check their carriage."

"Aye," the older soldier said after a long pause.

As Teto and I stepped down from the carriage, I could feel him staring intently at us. I didn't know what he wanted, but he didn't seem hostile, so I paid him no mind. When I glanced at him, he gave us a slight bow before going to check our carriage. We returned the gesture, then turned back towards the younger soldier, putting our hands on the crime-judging jewel and showing him our guild cards.

"Wow, you two are C-rank? You're so young; it's impressive," the soldier said with a smile.

I had used my newly developed transformation spell to make myself look around Teto's age, so I wasn't getting the little girl treatment for once, which I was very pleased about.

We made small talk with the younger guard as we waited for the other guy to finish inspecting our carriage.



“Where did you two come from?” he asked us.

“We traveled from Ischea to Gald, and now that we’ve completed our business, we’ve decided to head farther south,” I said.

“We stopped in a bunch of towns along the way,” Teto added.

The soldier nodded. He didn’t ask what kind of business we had in Ischea and Gald; he probably assumed that our adventures had taken us here.

“Have you been to Gragana? That’s my hometown,” he said.

“We did. It’s become a really nice town, hasn’t it?”

“It’s a lot livelier than before!” Teto added.

Gragana was a little town in the south of Gald. About fifty years ago, a huge landslide had devastated a considerable portion of the town, burying it in earth and stones and destroying the fields; Teto and I had been sent there on a quest to help rebuild the town. We’d popped by a few days ago to see how things had evolved since then, and we were pleasantly surprised to see that the town had completely recovered.

“Oh, you’ve been there before? I don’t think it has changed that much in recent years, though...” the soldier said, his head tilted in confusion.

Had our conversation continued, I would’ve certainly exposed our identities. Thankfully, the older soldier came back before we had time to incriminate ourselves further.

“Nothing to report on my end. We hope to see you two again in Gald soon.”

“Thanks. And thank you for your hard work.”

“Thank you!”

Teto and I climbed back onto the driver’s seat and gave one last bow to the soldiers. With Teto taking hold of the reins, we crossed the border from Gald into the Sunfield Empire.

After they had left, the youngest beastman soldier turned to his colleague.

“Hey, gramps? Are they some sort of important folks?” he asked, seeing as

the older man still hadn't raised his head from when he bowed to the two adventurers.

He had initially assumed that the girl with black hair was a noble lady from another nation and that the other one was her escort, but perhaps there was more to them. The older soldier slowly straightened up, his gaze fixed on the spot where the two girls had vanished into the distance. "You're from Gragana too, right?" he asked.

The younger soldier hadn't expected his companion to reply to his question with another question. He paused for a moment, caught off guard, before nodding awkwardly. "Yeah... Why?" he asked, puzzled.

"You already know about the landslide that happened fifty years ago. I was still a kid back then, but I clearly remember two adventurers who came to help us. It was them," the older soldier muttered.

"Huh? Gramps, have you gone senile?!" the young soldier exclaimed, eliciting a chuckle from his colleague.

To this day, tales of the two adventurers who came to save the town of Gragana after the landslide were still recounted by the townsfolk.

"I remember the mage had been a lot younger, but the swordswoman hasn't changed a lick since then."

The old adventurer was positive these two girls were the ones who'd come to save them from the landslide fifty years ago. Besides, he'd overheard them mentioning how much the town had changed when they were chatting with the younger soldier, which only strengthened his conviction.

"No way..."

"You told me that your grandpa and grandma almost died during the landslide, right? If it weren't for those two, you probably wouldn't have been born," the older soldier said before returning to his post.

Utterly dumbfounded, the young soldier gave one last bow in the direction in which Chise and Teto had left and followed his colleague back to the gate.

Chapter 2: The Trading Town of Liefe

Teto and I journeyed through the Sunfield Empire, stopping in various towns along the way. We'd take on a few quests at the guild and use the money we'd earned from those to buy books at the towns' libraries. I also made a point to check the reference room of every adventurer's guild along the way and buy any book that caught my interest to read in the carriage when I was between things.

"Lady Witch, is that book interesting?" Teto asked me one day.

"It's pretty nice, yeah."

The papermaking techniques I had developed to save the orphanage in Apanemis had evolved significantly over the years, and, as a result, paper manufacturing had become more widespread. Printing techniques using magical transcription tools had also been invented, allowing for a more efficient way of reproducing written materials. Printing presses didn't exactly fit my idea of a fantasy world, but hey, if it meant that books would be more affordable and accessible, then I was all for it.

The book I was reading was an adventure novel called *The Legend of the Heroes*. From what I'd heard, it was all the rage these days. To summarize it simply, it was the story of several adventurers inspired by real-life heroes forming a party and going on an adventure. All of the characters were of different races, and the witty banter and silly arguments they engaged in as they journeyed together were pretty entertaining. The writing was simple and to the point, making the most of its casual, middlebrow prose—a far cry from the flowery language favored by the nobles and intellectuals. It truly was a book for the masses. Well, the wealthier masses, I supposed; the literacy rate was still low in this world, so this book was most likely marketed towards middle-class citizens.

"So they even have books like those now, huh?" I commented.

To be honest, the book itself was quite short and it left me wanting more, but

I really hoped to see similar books in the future.

“Lady Witch, we’re almost there,” Teto said.

Raising my head, I noticed the city walls in the distance.

“So this is Liefe.”

“There are lots of people coming in and out of town, just like we were told,” Teto noted.

Liefe was the trading hub of the Sunfield Empire. Just as its name suggested, the Sunfield Empire was blessed with abundant sunlight and fertile soil. Agriculture was its main activity, with thriving farms located all over its territory. A highway system had been put into place to transport the crops as quickly as possible, and Liefe was located smack-dab in the heart of this network. This allowed the town to flourish and turned it into the bustling center of commerce it was today.

Teto and I lined up behind the other carriages, went through all of the procedures that come with entering a new town, and at last, passed the city gates.

“Lady Witch, where should we go now?” Teto asked.

“For now, let’s stop by the adventurer’s guild to park our carriage.”

The guild used carriages to transport loot and to help high-ranked adventurers move between towns, so all guildhalls had a designated parking area, as well as a stable for the horses.

“Here’s the guild,” I said when I spotted the building. “Excuse me!” I called out to a guild employee outside. “Where can we park our carriage?”

“There’s a passage around the back, just follow it and you’ll get to the stables. Here, I’ll show you the way.”

“Thanks!” Teto chirped.

We followed the man to the stables.

“That carriage of yours sure is unusual,” the guild employee noted with an amused smile as he looked up at our caravan.

Most adventurers used horse-drawn carts to transport the bodies of the monsters they had defeated, or large covered wagons to accommodate their party members. Caravans were much more comfortable, but they didn't offer a lot in terms of living space and storage capacity.

"Well, two gals traveling alone can always use a guaranteed safe place to sleep on the road," I said. "Besides, we store most of our belongings in our magic bag," I added, patting the pouch on my hip.

"I see. Well, it definitely seems a lot more comfortable and economical than staying at a crappy inn, that's for sure."

He explained how to use the carriage parking area and headed back to his duties. We had stayed in a bunch of towns over the past few months, so I was already pretty familiar with how the stables worked. Some of the details varied from place to place, but the overall process remained the same.

Teto and I placed chocks against the wheels of our caravan so that it wouldn't roll away on its own, and installed parking boots on the wheels. After that, we removed the harness from our horse golem and led it to the stables.

"Thanks for taking us here," I said, petting it on the head. "*Charge!*"

It happily nuzzled against my hand.

The horse golem used to act a lot more mechanically, but as time went by, it started developing more and more animallike reactions, almost like a real horse. I was a bit worried it was evolving into something else entirely.

"Let's go introduce ourselves at the guild, shall we?"

"Roger!"

Teto and I entered the guildhall and made our way to the reception desk.

"Good afternoon. We've just arrived in town."

"Here are our guild cards!"

"Miss Chise and Miss Teto," the receptionist read. "You two are C-rank? But you're so young! How impressive," she noted with a smile before handing us our guild cards back. "What brings you here today?"

“We wanted to notify you of our arrival, and also to pay for the carriage parking fee. How much is it?”

“Two large coppers a day.”

“We’ll pay for a week, then.”

I paid one silver and four large coppers to the receptionist, and she handed me a pamphlet.

“All of the town’s inns and their prices are listed on this pamphlet,” she explained. “You can refer to it when choosing where to stay.”

“Thanks, but we don’t need it. We plan on sleeping in our carriage.”

The receptionist froze. Staying at an inn would cost us at the very least two silvers a day, meals included. Renting a house would be cheaper, as we could find something for ten silvers a month for the both of us, but we’d have to buy ingredients and cook our own meals. Sleeping in our caravan would be much, *much* cheaper.

“T-Two girls sleeping alone in a carriage?!” the receptionist exclaimed, a worried look on her face. “That’s too dangerous! Besides, you should take the chance to sleep in a real bed when you get it!”

She was so loud that everyone had started looking in our direction. Our caravan was basically a studio apartment, and we could even lock the door, so to us, it beat the hell out of any cheap inn. But I couldn’t tell her that without blowing my cover. It wasn’t the first time I’d encountered this situation, and every single time, I struggled to deal with it.

Thankfully, the guild employee who’d shown us to the stables earlier stepped in. “Hey, give the poor girls a break. You can see you’re bothering them.”

“But it’s too dangerous for two girls to sleep in a carriage alone!” the receptionist insisted.

The man let out a sigh. “Listen, I get that you’re worried, but you don’t even know what kind of carriage these two have. It’s pretty much a house on wheels. They’ll be just fine.”

“A house on wheels?” the receptionist echoed, a look of puzzlement on her

face, before dashing to the stables behind the guildhall.

When she came back a few seconds later, she immediately bowed her head to us.

“I’m really sorry for the trouble I’ve caused you!”

“It’s all right. Your reaction was only natural,” I reassured her.

“Teto didn’t mind either!” Teto piped up.

A look of relief appeared on the receptionist’s features.

“Well then, we’re going to rest in our carriage. Ah, but before we go, could you recommend us a spot for a bite to eat?” I inquired.

“Something yummy, please!” Teto added.

Whenever we stayed somewhere, we always prioritized trying out the town’s specialties rather than cooking for ourselves.

“Of course.” The receptionist nodded and gave a little chuckle. She took out a map of the town and pointed at an inn. “The dining hall attached to this inn is very popular among the townsfolk. There’s also a street full of food stalls nearby. Just follow the path to the right after exiting the guild and you’ll get there eventually.”

We thanked her and left the guild to go grab something to eat. The food we ate that day was delicious. As I mentioned before, we were square in the middle of the breadbasket of one of the most agriculturally blessed countries on the continent, and with Liefe at the heart of its highway network, all sorts of ingredients, seasonings, and recipes converged here. It came as no surprise that the food there was of exceptional quality. For that reason alone, we decided to make Liefe our base for the foreseeable future.

Chapter 3: Folkcrafts of the Great Forest

That morning, the sunlight streaming through the gap in the curtains woke me. I slipped out of bed and gently shook Teto awake.

“Teto... ’S morning,” I mumbled sleepily.

“Good morning, Lady Witch,” she said with a yawn.

The two of us took turns washing our faces, and when we were done, we started preparing breakfast.

“I’m thinking toast, ham, fried eggs, and a salad for breakfast. Is that okay with you?” I asked Teto.

“Teto would like to eat some of the cheese we bought a few days ago,” she said.

“Sure. Let’s go for cheesy scrambled eggs instead of sunny-side up, then.”

When we were done eating breakfast, we got dressed for the day. I put on my usual outfit, complete with my trusty hooded robe.

“*Makeover!*” I chanted, casting my transformation spell on myself. “All right, we’re good to go.”

I hopped down from the caravan and looked up at the bright blue sky overhead.

“It’s already been a year, huh?” I muttered.

Our horse golem peeked at me from its spot in the simple stable I had built with my magic, and I gave it a pat on the head before making for the adventurer’s guild.

I had made the stable after Teto and I’d decided to make Liefé our temporary base. We couldn’t just leave our caravan in the adventurer’s guild parking area forever, after all, so I rented an empty plot of land from the guild and moved our carriage there. We spent the past year gathering information about the other regions of the Sunfield Empire, all while clearing quests for the guild.

Then we'd use the intel we'd gathered to go on little expeditions around the empire and come back to Liefé when we were done.

We'd forced our way through a forest teeming with monsters to go see some ancient ruins, spent time in the old capital to visit the empire's biggest library and read through their entire collection, traveled to a village that made glass beads after they caught my eyes in Liefé... We also had a few dream oracles from Liriel and the other goddesses, and occasionally used our transfer gates to head back to the forest and check on the others.

The receptionist, whom we had grown quite close with, greeted us when we entered the guild.

"Ah, Miss Chise! Miss Teto! Welcome back. When did you two return to Liefé?"

"Hi, it's been a while. We arrived yesterday."

"Hi! We brought you souvenirs!" Teto chirped, handing her her gift.

We had just come back from an excursion into a dungeon, per Teto's request. It took us two months, but we reached the bottom of the dungeon and found quite a lot of treasure on our way. I only sold loot from monsters C-rank and below to the guild, though, just to be safe. As for the higher-ranked loot and items, I brought them back to the forest and had Beretta deal with them.

"You two went to explore a dungeon, right?" the receptionist said. "If you still have some loot, we'd happily buy it from you," she added, looking at us expectantly.

A small smile curled on my lips. "We did keep some of the loot to sell here."

Her face lit up. "Thank you so much! Let me go grab the reference list for that dungeon's loot."

We watched with amused smiles as she ran to a room at the back of the guild. She scrambled back with the list in question, and we moved to the exchange counter, where we started taking the loot out of our magic bag and cross-referencing it with the items on the list. I noticed that the price at which they'd buy the loot from us was slightly higher than it had been at the guild near the dungeon—perhaps to cover for the extra fees we might've encountered while

transporting everything back to Liefé.

“Can you please calculate how much that’ll be?” the receptionist asked the guild member who’d shown us to the stables the first time we had arrived in town.

“Sure thing. Ever since you two arrived in Liefé, we’ve been getting a steady supply of loot. Thanks a bunch,” the man said with a satisfied smile as he carried our haul to another desk.

I decided to ask the receptionist about quests while we waited for him to wrap up calculating how much they owed us.

“Can we take a look at the quests you’ve got posted?”

“We’ll clear the quests that no one wants!” Teto said.

“Sorry, we currently don’t have anything for you,” the receptionist said. She took out a notebook and showed us the quests up to C-rank that the guild had left. Most of them were either routine tasks or escort missions, which were usually pretty long and annoying.

“This is all we have left after this morning.”

“Yeah, we can’t really take on any of these...”

Options were always thin on the ground after the morning quest rush. While we didn’t mind doing easy routine quests, we always made sure to only take the ones that had been left untouched for a while, so as not to steal jobs from apprentice adventurers. None of these seemed to fall into that category, though, so there really was nothing for us to do.

As Teto and I exchanged troubled glances, the receptionist flashed us a smile.

“How about you two take on the B-rank promotion exam soon? You’ve already met all of the conditions to get promoted, and it’ll give you more quest options,” she suggested.

I let out a long hum. “We’re not particularly strapped for money or anything, though,” I said, an awkward smile curling on my lips.

“It’s a shame, though! You two could definitely become famous adventurers if you put your mind to it,” the receptionist said excitedly before reciting the

names of some of history's most well-known adventurers...including "the Witch of Creation"—yours truly.

My smile grew even more awkward.

"You really like adventurers, don't you?" I said to change the topic.

"Your eyes are all sparkly!" Teto added.

"I love adventurer stories!" the receptionist confirmed with a proud expression. "Ever since I was a kid, my favorite thing to do in the whole world has been to go eat at taverns and listen to the minstrels sing the tales of history's greatest heroes! That's why I decided to start working at the guild—to hear adventurers' stories firsthand!"

I couldn't help being impressed by her enthusiasm.

"Speaking of which, have you read *The Legend of the Heroes*?" I asked. "It's an adventuring novel that just came out, and it's pretty good."

"You've read it too?! I've been reading the third volume over and over again since it came out!"

I'd had no idea that the series was already on its third volume. Leave it to a die-hard fan to keep you abreast of any franchise's bleeding edge, I suppose. She was about to launch into a passionate discussion about the series, but the guild member standing behind her cleared his throat.

"Please keep the small talk to a minimum."

"S-Sorry..." she mumbled sheepishly, averting her gaze. She seemed down for a split second, but quickly regained her composure and flashed us a bright smile. "Sorry for the tangent. Just let me know if you ever want to register for the B-rank exam, all right? I'll handle your application personally!"

"Thanks. Well, since you don't have any quests for us, we'll take today off."

"Tell us when you're done calculating the money for the dungeon loot!"

Teto and I went to sit down, and a few minutes later, the receptionist called us back.

"We're all done here!" she said, handing us our money.

“Thanks. Let’s go on a little shopping spree with these, then, shall we?” I asked Teto, holding up the coins before stuffing them into my magic bag.

“Let’s go!”

We bid the receptionist and the other guild employees goodbye and left the guild hall. We first stopped to buy ingredients, then started looking at all of the street stalls to see if any of them sold rare items. We made a quick stop at a food stall to get some snacks when a carriage ran past us.

“That carriage...”

“There are spirits on it!”

It looked like a normal carriage, but we both detected the presence of spirits on it. I followed it with my eyes and saw it stop in front of a shop. Seconds later, a group of elves hopped down. The spirits we had felt must have been bound to them by some sort of contract.

“That shop is run by an elf, right? Then these elves must be from the great forest.”

They had probably come to trade with one of their brethren.

“Lady Witch, do you think that they sell World Tree-and mythical-beast-related items there?”

I hummed. “I don’t know... Probably not?”

Liriel had told me that, before I started growing World Trees, there had only been one left on the entire continent, located in the great forest of the southeastern reaches, where the elves lived. It was a well-known fact that, just like us, the elves also sold World Tree branches and mythical beast materials to the outside world, but it was highly unlikely that a little general store like that one would stock such valuable goods, let alone sell them. It was far more likely such valuables entered the market through an affiliated noble family. That little store in Liefe mostly carried ingredients collected in the great forest, as well as elven tools and folk crafts.

“Should we go take a look, Lady Witch?”

“Sure, why not?”

I was curious to see what they were restocking. When we stepped into the general store, the shopkeeper was in the process of stocking the shelves with the new goods.

“Welcome. What are you looking for?” He asked us.

“We saw that you just received a delivery, and we’d like to see what’s new. Mind if we take a look?”

“Teto wants to buy yummy snacks!”

“Sure, you can look around as much as you’d like,” the shopkeeper told me before turning to Teto. “Snacks, hm? We’ve just received some dried fruits from the great forest.”

Teto headed to the ingredients corner, while I browsed the shelves in front of me and found something that caught my eye.

“Are these monster and mythical beast figurines?” I asked, looking at little wooden sculptures of some very familiar creatures. They were intricately carved and looked very dynamic. I could tell with a single glance that they were fine pieces of craftsmanship.

“Oh, I see you’re a connoisseur,” the shopkeeper said with a smile. “My brethren from the great forest handcrafted these.”

Just like the kibori kuma figurines from Hokkaido—a famous rural craft from my previous world—no two of these sculptures were quite the same. Even the ones depicting the same types of mythical beast carried subtle differences, be it the pose or the overall atmosphere of the figurine. You could really tell the personality of the artisan just by looking at their work.

“There must be quite a lot of people who like these sorts of things, hm?” I commented.

The figurines of the monsters and mythical beasts must’ve been especially popular, since they were so rare.

“Yup. Most people can’t afford mythical beast or monster materials, but they can get figurines of them instead. The mythical beast ones are especially popular with kids.”

I nodded. “There are a lot of children’s tales about mythical beasts in this country, aren’t there?”

Such stories were older than the Sunfield Empire itself, and they were particularly popular in the eastern part of the continent, given its proximity to the elves’ great forest.

“Would you like one? They make nice conversation pieces.”

I hummed. “That sounds great, but I’d rather buy direct from the source; I figure they’ve got to offer a broader selection.”

I didn’t like compromising when it came to things I wanted for myself.

The shopkeeper smiled awkwardly. “My brethren are a bit, ah, *reclusive*, I guess you could say. Even the elves who live in human towns or settlements are very rarely allowed in. I’ve never even been there myself, but I really wish they’d let me visit one day.”

“Then I suppose I have to buy them from you,” I replied with a small smile, examining the mythical beast figurines on the shelves.

I decided to go with a cutesy one—the kind that you could see in a children’s picture book—rather than one of the ultrarealistic ones. It was a bit more childish than the others, but I could tell that the artisan had put a lot of care and attention into its creation, as it was tinged with mana. The name of the artisan was written on the back of the figurine; I decided that if I ever found another figurine from this creator, I’d most likely buy it too.

“Lady Witch, Teto bought a lot of super yummy-looking stuff!”

“Let’s head on home, then, shall we?”

We paid for our purchases and left. As we were walking home, Teto handed me a piece of dried fruit from the mountain she had bought. It was much sweeter than regular fruit. As I munched away, I ruminated on the shopkeeper’s wares.

“I hope I’ll get to visit the elves’ forest one day,” I muttered as we returned to the empty lot where we’d parked our carriage.

I should mention that wooden carving had been considered a folkcraft for the

common people for the longest time. However, as time went by, a number of pressures—not least the perishable nature of the material—had meant that fewer and fewer of such pieces got made every year. A few centuries after our first trip to Liefе, barely any had survived the passing of time, and the ones made by famous artisans went for exorbitant prices.

As it turned out, the artisan who had made the figurine I bought became quite well-known down the line, and the figurine that had cost me five silver coins was now deemed to be worth over a hundred times that price.

Of course, at that time I had no way of knowing; to me, this little figurine was nothing more than a fun little souvenir from my time in Liefе.

Chapter 4: Demolishing a Haunted Mansion

The elven shopkeeper told me to give up on my dreams of visiting the elves' great forest, but I wonder if there isn't a way for me to go nonetheless...

As I was racking my brain trying to come up with a way to secure an invitation to the elves' forest, the guild's receptionist called out for Teto and me.

"Miss Chise, Miss Teto, we have received a special request for you two."

"A request for *us*?" Teto and I repeated in perfect sync.

I tilted my head to the side, trying to think of how that happened.

It wasn't that uncommon for clients to request specific adventurers to carry out a job for them based on their previous achievements or their overall reputation. It cost more than simply posting a regular quest—you'd have to pay intermediation fees to the guild, plus some extra to the adventurers themselves—but you'd have the peace of mind that the job would be taken care of properly.

"I can't think of why anyone would hire *us*; I mean, we're just a C-rank party," I said.

"This is actually a request that the commerce guild has posted and withdrawn before, since no one would take it on, but after hearing about you two, they decided to make it a special request," the receptionist explained.

It seemed that the fact that we took care of all of the leftover quests had reached the ears of the commerce guild, and it prompted them to hire us for the job.

"What kind of job is it?" Teto asked.

"They want you to demolish a mansion of theirs," the receptionist explained.

"Oooh, I get it now. They must've learned about the old warehouses we tore down last time, and that's why they chose us for the job," I said, thinking back on one of the quests we had cleared some time ago.

As a trading town, Liefe had its fair share of land allocated for row after row after row of storage depots. Some of them had started deteriorating, and the town had planned on breaking them down and rebuilding them somewhere else as they expanded the town. With all of the civil engineers and constructors busy building new storage and working on the new district, they decided to leave the demolition work to the adventurer's guild. However, due to the strenuous nature of disassembling all those huge buildings, most adventurers shied away from taking on the task, and so Teto and I ended up being the ones to accept the job.

I'd put up a large barrier around the row of warehouses and used Dark Magic to break down the roof little by little, while Teto took care of the walls with her Earth Magic. We then put all of the scrap materials into our magic bag and dumped them in the disposal area, and the job was over.

The commerce guild must've wanted a repeat performance.

"And so, where's that mansion?" I asked.

"Teto and Lady Witch won't leave a single scrap of wood behind!" Teto said enthusiastically.

The receptionist averted her eyes.

"It's, um... It's in the middle of the forest," she muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"A long time ago, an eccentric magician lived in this country, and he decided to build his home away from civilization, in the forest. Ever since his death, the property rights to his mansion have passed through many hands, but every owner has given up on it eventually. They said it's haunted."

"Haunted?" Teto and I repeated, once again in perfect sync.

The receptionist looked around and lowered her voice so that no one could overhear our conversation.

"Yes. Eventually the property rights fell into the hands of the commerce guild. They want it gone for good."

I nodded. The mansion already had enough of a bad reputation due to the

ghost issue; they probably wanted to repurpose the land for something else as soon as possible. Apparently, they had already hired people to demolish the mansion before, but...

“The previous contractors kept hitting snag after snag, and the job got put on hold indefinitely. In the end, they gave up on the project. Rumors spread, and no one wanted to pick up where the last guys left off, so the commerce guild ended up contacting us to take care of it.”

“So, it’s still...” I said, gulping audibly.

The receptionist nodded, a grave look on her face. “Clergymen have performed countless exorcisms and purification rites on the mansion, but every adventurer who attempted to demolish the mansion all ran into the same complications as the contractors. The commerce guild withdrew their quest, and the mansion has remained abandoned until now.”

“How long ago was that?” Teto asked.

“The commerce guild withdrew their request before I was even born. Apparently, that mansion had been built well over three hundred years ago.”

“Three hundred?!” I echoed in shock. “I’m impressed it’s still standing—especially with no one to look after it.”

“It seems that the original owner has cast some sort of preservation spell onto the building.”

“I see...”

Even with a preservation spell, it didn’t make sense that the mansion would still be standing after so long. Something told me that there might have been more to this job than anyone was telling me...

“We’ll do it,” I said.

“Lady Witch and Teto will wipe the floor with that ghost!” Teto piped up.

“Thanks, you two. I’m leaving it in your competent hands.”

Even if this mansion really was haunted, I could make any ghost or curse disappear with *Purification*. And if our enemy wasn’t either of those things, Teto and I would most likely be able to deal with them without too much trouble.

The receptionist then told us the reward we could expect for the job: three large gold, or three million yen. It was quite low for a teardown gig—especially for a mansion—but the commerce guild’s reasoning was that we weren’t *actual* demolition workers. Besides, they had already paid for countless exorcisms and purification rites, so they couldn’t afford to spend a single copper coin more. In exchange, though, we were allowed to keep anything that we found during the demolition process, and in the eventuality that we failed and gave up on the mission, we wouldn’t have to pay any sort of penalty. All in all, this made up for the less-than-impressive reward—although, if anything, we were the ones doing the commerce guild a favor by keeping the stuff we found in the mansion to ourselves. I could hardly imagine them wanting to deal with things that had been locked inside a haunted house for so long.

“Well then, we’re off. It should take us a few days to get it done and dusted.”

“We’re going to clean it all up!” Teto chirped.

The two of us headed back to our caravan and started making our way to that supposedly haunted mansion. From what the receptionist had told us, it was located in a forest around an hour out from Liefé. Staff members of the commerce guild went to check on it a couple of times a year, but other than that, no one ever went to that mansion, so the path that led to it had almost completely disappeared. I used a few *Wind Cutter* spells to cut some of the overgrown vegetation and we finally reached our destination.

“So that’s the infamous haunted mansion.”

“Teto is so excited to start exploring it!”

The two of us climbed down from our carriage and looked up at the mansion. It was a two-story building surrounded by a tall fence; as soon as I saw it, I could confirm that it was under some sort of preservation spell. The place was a little scuffed around the edges, but otherwise in a pretty good state. This impression was further reinforced by the piles of leaves on the ground in front of it—which must’ve accumulated over the years—and the wild ivy growing on the outer walls.

“Let’s go inside, shall we?”

I used the keys the receptionist had given me to open the gate and entered

the front yard. With a couple of quick spells, I cleared a spot for us to park our caravan and horse golem, and we started heading towards the front door. But then Teto stopped in her tracks, her eyes fixed on the window.

“Teto? What’s wrong?”

She hummed. “Teto feels like something is watching us.”

“Well, apparently there’s a ghost in this mansion...” I said, eyeing the building. “Just to be safe, I’m going to purify the whole place before we go in.

Purification!”

I made sure to cover every single corner of the mansion, but unlike when I dispelled miasma and evil spirits, I felt absolutely no response to the spell.

“I don’t think that did anything,” I said, puzzled.

“Then the ghost probably isn’t a bad guy!”

Would a “good ghost” really spend centuries haunting people, though? I thought to myself.

“There’s something else I don’t really understand,” I mumbled.

“What is it, Lady Witch?”

“The receptionist of the guild told us that the contractors and adventurers all face ‘trouble’ when trying to demolish the mansion, but not a single one of them has died during the process.”

Almost as if whatever lived inside that mansion was trying to give them a warning, to drive them away.

“Well, first things first, we need to identify who that ‘ghost’ is.”

With these words, I pushed open the front door, and Teto and I entered the mansion.

Chapter 5: The Ghost's True Identity

When we stepped inside, I immediately noticed the sledgehammers and saws on the floor of the entrance. These had most likely been abandoned by the commerce guild's original contractors. The tools weren't looking so good, though; unlike the mansion, they hadn't had any sort of preservation enchantment or spell cast on them, and you could tell that they had been in there for *a while*. The same went for the furniture and clothes that had been left behind by their previous owners.

"Let's incinerate the furniture and clothes. They're not going to be of any use to us. As for all the rusty metal stuff, I suppose we can melt it down," I said as I shoved everything that was lying in the entrance into my magic bag. Then I used Wind Magic to air out the room.

"Lady Witch, there are plates scattered all around this room," Teto said, returning from a room connected to the entry hall with a metal plate in her hands.

"Is that silverware? We might actually find something good in here."

Most of the things inside the mansion must've been left virtually untouched for over three hundred years.

It's surprising that no one has ever attempted to plunder this place, I thought. All of a sudden I felt mana filling the room.

"Well, that's quite the rough welcome!"

Clatter, clatter.

The furniture, candlestands, dinnerware, and tools scattered around the mansion started levitating all at once.

"Look, Lady Witch, everything's floating!"

"So we're dealing with a poltergeist, huh? That's a bit cliché, isn't it?"

The furniture and tools were clattering and colliding against each other

loudly, most likely in an attempt to startle us and drive us away. But Teto and I knew that we weren't really in any meaningful danger, so we didn't budge. Seeing as we weren't leaving, the poltergeist seemed to grow more agitated, banging the furniture together even louder.

"Leave. Leave this place at once!"

"Oh, look, it's trying to talk us out of it now," I said, turning to Teto. "So, have you noticed what I noticed yet?"

"Yup! The ghost is hiding in this room!"

Teto and I had managed to locate the poltergeist based on the direction its mana was coming from.

"Let's capture it and hear what it has to say. *Psychokinesis!*"

Releasing my mana into the air, I overpowered our opponent and seized control of the levitating furniture and tools. I quickly maneuvered them to the sides to clear a path, allowing Teto to dash directly towards the hidden poltergeist.

"I got it! Ah..."

Teto had managed to grab our invisible opponent, but it slipped from her grasp and ran away.

"Lady Witch, it escaped!"

"It's okay. All we have to do is follow its mana signature."

Gathering mana into my eyes, I followed the trail of mana left behind by the ghost.

"Go home, go home!" it taunted. I could detect a note of panic in its voice. In another attempt to scare us away, one of the rusty candlestands in the hallway lit up, making it look as if it had a life of its own.

The flames reached high, but lacked any real power. They were nothing more than an empty threat. I quickly set up a barrier to prevent them from reaching us, and they extinguished on their own.

However, something else had caught my curiosity.

“Teto, have you noticed?”

“It wasn’t the same mana signature that lit the candlestand!”

And that wasn’t all.

“Lady Witch, look! A human silhouette!”

“An illusion, huh? A mix of Water and Light Magic, I’d say.”

A woman with long hair and bluish-white skin was staring at us from the other side of the hallway, but I couldn’t detect any miasma coming from her, like there should have been if it was a true evil spirit. With a light swing of my staff, a gust of wind scattered the water on which the illusion had been projected, and the silhouette vanished.

“So we’re dealing with several invisible creatures using different magic types. I think I’ve figured out our opponent.”

As we chased our opponent around the mansion, it hit us with yet another would-be scare—albeit a far more impressive one.

“Leave, leave right this instant!”

A figure in full armor, complete with a sword and shield, emerged from the depths of the mansion, its clattering approach echoing through the hallway. The suit was empty, which might have led a less seasoned adventurer to mistake it for living armor—a monster that I had encountered in the past.

“Lady Witch, Teto can feel mana like hers coming from the armor,” Teto told me.

“They’re controlling it using Earth Magic, huh?”

As we stood there discussing the true nature of the armor, it had more than enough time to rush towards us, its sword raised over its head. But when it tried to land a blow, Teto easily blocked it with her own sword.

“Take this!” she said, kicking the armor in the abdomen and making it collapse backward. The impact scattered its component parts, revealing a lump of mud at the center.

“That’s what they used to make it move,” I noted.

Fire, Water, Earth, Light, Dark, and I was pretty sure that the voice from earlier used Wind Magic to carry through the mansion.

I followed the invisible beings' mana signatures, which led me to a small study on the ground floor.

"How about you show yourselves?" I asked.

The creatures did just that. Some of them were little fairies with fluttering wings on their backs, while others were small transparent animals, each having created their own form using the magic type they wielded. Spirits.

They were all huddled together, shaking like leaves in the wind.

"Go home, go home. Don't come here..." one of them said, its voice trembling as the little spirits stood in front of the bookshelves as if they were standing guard over its contents, ready to fight to the bitter end.

Up until now, they had been able to drive away anyone who stepped foot into the mansion, but Teto and I had ignored all of their threats and forced them to reveal themselves. This must've been quite traumatizing for the poor little spirits. I was a bit at a loss about how to approach them; I mean, I was pretty much the bad guy in this situation. Thankfully Teto, always the friendly one, gently approached the spirits in my stead.

"Everything's all right. Lady Witch won't hurt you; you don't have to worry," she said.

Perhaps the little spirits felt that Teto herself was part spirit; they immediately threw themselves in her arms and started bawling.

"Lady Witch is really nice, I promise. Can we ask you questions?" she asked softly.

I decided to awkwardly stand back and let her do the talking for now. I felt really bad for scaring the little spirits and making them cry. It hadn't been my intention.

After a few minutes, Teto managed to help them calm down. The animal-type spirits couldn't talk, but the fairy-types could, and one of them stepped forward to act as the spirits' spokesperson.

“Um, we’re very sorry for trying to drive you out,” it said.

“And I’m sorry for scaring you,” I replied.

The spirits seemed to relax a bit after I apologized and Teto nodded, satisfied.

“Why do you try to chase off anyone who comes here?” I asked.

“If you tell us, Lady Witch will fix your issues for you!”

“Uh...” The little spirit hesitated and turned around to look at its friends. They exchanged nods and the fairy spirit gave us the lowdown. “A greater fire spirit is sealed here.”

“A greater fire spirit?”

“What’s that?”

The little spirit told us that three hundred years ago, there’d been a war between humans and elves. It couldn’t tell us exactly why the conflict had arisen, but at one point, a human force had abducted a greater fire spirit who’d struck a pact with an elven magician. They’d sealed it under this mansion and abused its powers to fuel their secret research.

The conflict between humans and elves eventually came to an end, and this mansion fell into neglect. The mages who had conducted their research here left, and the little spirits—who had been watching from afar—gathered to help the greater fire spirit. However, they couldn’t lift the seal. All they could do was drive away any human who approached the mansion so that they wouldn’t abuse its powers again.

“But the greater fire spirit’s resentment for its captors has only festered and inflamed with time. Now the humans are the ones in danger, so we’re trying to protect them,” the little spirit concluded dejectedly.

“So for the last couple of centuries you’ve been doing this to keep us safe?” I summarized.

The spirit nodded vigorously.

That conflict must’ve dated back to before the Sunfield Empire had become the prosperous nation it was today. This would have been during the ascendancy of human supremacist thought; it was no wonder there’d been

conflict with their elven neighbors. It was during one of these clashes that the greater fire spirit was abducted. When the previous dynasty fell, the modern Sunfield Empire that replaced it brought with it a much more cosmopolitan attitude; interspecies coexistence was the standard now, after all. But here in this derelict corner of the land, a trace of the old hatreds that defined the past era still burned hot as ever.

“A rampaging spirit, huh? That sounds like a pain to deal with,” I groaned.

“It’s like the mean spirits in children’s books!”

Stories and legends about spirits were prevalent in the Sunfield Empire, especially the closer you got to elf country. There were usually two types of spirits that turned up in these stories: good spirits who would hand down their blessings to those who were kind to them, and evil spirits who rained calamity on those who trespassed against them. Depending on the tale, spirits were either kind and compassionate beings who blessed people with luck, bountiful harvests, and knowledge, or evil creatures who caused misfortune and sorrow.

The lesson one tended to learn from such tales was that if you *had* to antagonize your spirit neighbors, you were best off not starting fights you couldn’t finish. If you ended up crossing a lower spirit, it probably wouldn’t be able to do more than pull a little prank on you, but greater spirits could easily cause large-scale calamities.

“We need to find a way to pacify it...” I muttered.

“Maybe if we talk to it, it’ll listen to us and stop being naughty?” Teto suggested, but the spirits shook their heads.

“It has nothing left but its anger. If you remove the seal now, it’ll unleash its fury upon everything in its path.”

“We could try killing it...” I mumbled. “Or not,” I added, seeing that the little spirits looked on the verge of tears.

Way back in the day, we had used a mana converter to destroy an Archdevil. The mana converter basically sucked the mana from mana life-forms and released it in the air, so we could technically use it to kill the greater spirit too...but the little spirits shook their heads vehemently.

“Under normal circumstances, I’d perform a rite to try and calm it down, but I’d need to keep repeating it for years, or even decades. We have our quest to take care of, though, so I can’t really do that.”

I looked up at the ceiling, trying to come up with something, anything to pacify the greater spirit, but my mind drew a blank.

“I haven’t managed to come up with anything yet, so I’d say that we resume collecting everything inside the mansion for now,” I said.

“Good idea, Lady Witch! We can’t forget our job!”

Perhaps we would find something useful while scavenging for treasures.

“There’s still money in this safe,” I noted. “Don’t mind if I do.”

“Lady Witch, there are lots of swords and armor in this room!”

With the little spirits’ help, we picked over the mansion from top to bottom, shoving anything of value into our magic bag. When we had taken everything, we made our way to the last room we hadn’t explored yet: the basement, the entrance to which was hidden in the study behind the bookshelf the little spirits were protecting earlier.

Chapter 6: Suppressing the Rampaging Spirit

“So the greater spirit is in here?” I muttered as I looked around the basement. The little spirits nodded vigorously.

Using my magic to create a light source, I picked up a stack of old parchment and started flipping through the pages.

“Lady Witch, what does it say?” Teto asked me.

“Looks like a summary of the research that was conducted using the greater spirit’s powers. I have a pretty good idea of what they were trying to do,” I said.

Within those documents lay an outline of the whole life of the mage who’d built this place and the direction of their studies.

“The mansion’s first owner was a court magician. It looks to me from what’s in here like they’d been tasked to find a way to weaponize the greater spirit’s powers.”

A lot of folklore in this part of the continent mentioned weapons and armor that had received the blessing of spirits. It seems that the mage who’d lived here was trying to find a way to extract the greater spirit’s powers and use them to artificially “bless” weapons and armor.

“This type of research is completely forbidden on the continent,” I said. “I’m not sure what to do with these... On one hand, it might be better to destroy them, but on the other, we might want to leave them as proof of what was done here.”

If a spirit was bled dry of its powers, it might go on a rampage and start attacking everything in sight. Moreover, if that spirit happened to be connected to a certain place, abducting it could cause the land itself to become unruly. Abusing spirits’ powers came at far too high a price for anyone in the known world to consider it anything but taboo.

“For now, let’s grab everything in case something goes awry,” I said.

Teto and I went around the basement and grabbed every document related to the mage's experiments. There weren't that many, so it didn't take us long. When we were done, I shifted my focus to the back of the room.

"This is the seal, isn't it?" I said, making my way towards a little pedestal with a gem resting atop it.

Looking around, I saw that it was surrounded by magic circles—on the floor, walls, and ceiling.

"It seems to work in the same way as the jewel of sealing I had made with my magic to capture the Archdevil," I noted. "But the mage had to layer two seals to make sure the greater spirit wouldn't escape."

The magic circles painted all around the pedestal were draining the greater spirit's mana, which in turn kept it sealed. Said mana was also what kept the preservation spell on the mansion going, as well as what prevented the little spirits from interfering with the seal. Now I understood why the mansion hadn't degraded in the slightest in over three hundred years, and also why the spirits hadn't been able to rescue the greater spirit.

"It's a lot duller than the one you made, though, Lady Witch," Teto noted as she studied the jewel, which was pulsating with a reddish-brown glow, her head tilted to the side.

She was right.

"Well, it's been three hundred years; it's only natural that it would have deteriorated," I said. "The magic circles keep the greater spirit sealed, but it looks like the jewel is nearing its limits."

This unfortunately meant that we wouldn't be able to take the jewel with us.

"Guess we're going to have to pacify it here," I sighed.

"How are we going to do that, Lady Witch?"

"We'll have to make it exhaust itself. The question is, *how?*"

As I tried to find a way to bait the rampaging spirit into exhausting its powers without causing harm to our surroundings, a very unwelcome noise came from the jewel on the pedestal.

Crack.

I whipped my head around to look at it, and sure enough, a fissure had appeared on its surface. Mana started leaking from the crack, undulating in the air like heat haze.

“No way... The jewel is about to break!” I exclaimed.

“And the spirit is very, very angry!” Teto said.

“We need to evacuate, and quick! *Teleport!*”

I hurriedly gathered the little spirits and Teto and teleported us all outside the mansion. As soon as we arrived, a pillar of fire erupted from the mansion’s basement, piercing through the building. The mansion started burning, the flames steadily growing. Feeling that something was wrong, our horse golem bolted, pulling our caravan along.

“Gaaaaaaah!”



With a bloodcurdling roar, the greater spirit materialized as a human figure amid the flames. The spirit had taken on the appearance of a man with spiky red hair and dragon horns. His chest was bare, and he wore exotic gold ornaments.

“Lady Witch, why did the jewel break all of a sudden?” Teto asked me.

“Probably because we came near it.”

The gem had already been on the verge of breaking, but my approaching it must’ve been the final straw. The greater spirit held a deep grudge against humans; by coming close to him, I must’ve exacerbated his anger, giving him the strength to break free.

When the greater spirit spotted us, he roared once more, reaching out after us as he loosed a volley of fireballs, his face twisted up into a mask of rage.

“Lady Witch, watch out!” Teto exclaimed, then dropped down and put her hands against the ground. “*Earth Wall!*”

She conjured an earth barrier that intercepted the fireballs before they could reach us. They all exploded upon impact, but Teto’s wall didn’t budge.

This seemed to displease the greater spirit even more, and he spread the flames surrounding his body in all directions; the trees and shrubs around the mansion all caught fire. Using the trees as fresh fuel, he shot another round of fireballs at Teto’s wall. This time a crack formed on the surface, dirt particles scattering everywhere with each explosion.

“The wall’s coming down!” Teto warned us.

Meanwhile, the greater spirit had started burning yet more trees. If we didn’t mount some kind of counteroffensive, we were doomed.

“Let’s isolate him! *Multi-Barrier!*”

I created a dome-shaped barrier all around the greater fire spirit and the burning mansion, trapping him inside.

“I’ll keep him contained. Teto, go extinguish the fire so it doesn’t spread to the rest of the forest!”

“Roger!”

The greater spirit grew increasingly agitated, relentlessly attacking my barriers with flames and explosions, but every time he managed to break one, I swiftly conjured a new one in its place.

“Lady Witch, is everything okay?” Teto asked.

“Yeah, everything’s fine for now. I’ve cut off his oxygen supply, so he can’t set up the feedback loop he wants.”

My barriers were blocking mana and oxygen from getting in or out. Up until now, the greater fire spirit had been using very little mana to attack us, mostly relying on the environment itself to feed his flames. But it was only a matter of time before he consumed all of the air inside the barrier and ran out of things to burn. This would force him to use his own mana to keep up the pressure. All we needed to do was wait for him to exhaust his powers and calm down, and our job here would be done...or so I thought.

“Lady Witch, it’s getting hotter,” Teto noted.

“No way... Heat is leaking from the barriers?!”

If this kept going, there was a risk that the rest of the forest would catch fire.

“We have to lower the temperature or things might take a turn for the worst.
Heavy Rain!”

I poured some mana into my staff, Flying Jade, and cast a rain spell, all while sustaining the barriers around the greater spirit. Using a combination of Water and Wind Magic, I conjured thick clouds in the sky; the next second, a torrent struck the barrier. It was so hot that as soon as the raindrops hit, they instantly evaporated with a sizzling sound. As a plume of steam rose high above us, the ambient temperature dropped to something more manageable.

“I hope this is enough,” I said.

“It’s working! We don’t have to worry about the forest burning anymore, Lady Witch!”

I had the threat contained now, but keeping two powerful spells like *Multi-Barrier* and *Heavy Rain* up at the same time was rapidly draining my MP. Soon

my transformation spell came undone, and I returned to my twelve-year-old appearance. Meanwhile, Teto had used her Earth Magic to build a little hut for us to take shelter from the rain while waiting for the greater spirit to regain his calm.

Chapter 7: The Spirit Lantern

The greater spirit struggled for two hours inside my barriers. After that, he undid his material body and sat on the floor in his spiritual form with one knee raised.

“What have I done...” he muttered in shock.

I could sense that his mana reserves were almost empty. Without all that pent-up destructive energy, his head must have cleared.

“That was impressive,” I said.

“Yeah! But it was a bit scary,” Teto added.

I carefully removed the last of my barriers. The residual heat trapped inside drifted into the air, brushing against my cheeks. A pile of ashes lay where the mansion had once stood. The bricks that had formed its foundation were scattered everywhere, and every last bit of vegetation had been burnt to a crisp, leaving behind bare, scorched earth. The ground closest to where the greater spirit stood had turned into a sort of glassy substance, almost as if it had melted, cooled, and solidified again.

“Can you go talk to the greater spirit?” I asked the little spirits with us.

They nodded. “Leave it to us.”

Teto and I decided to stand back and watch for now.

The greater spirit raised his head when he noticed the smaller spirits approaching. They started talking, although I had no idea what they were saying. When they were done, the greater spirit turned towards us, a stern expression on his face.

“A human. And a spirit girl—albeit quite an odd one. I apologize for the trouble I have caused you.”

Looks like he can tell Teto is part spirit, I noted.

He sounded stiff; I had to imagine he felt pretty awkward apologizing to a

human. He'd only had a scant few minutes at most to let go of the hate that had taken root in him.

"Well, pacifying a greater spirit wasn't exactly on my to-do list today, but oh well." I shrugged. "We couldn't just stand by and watch as you burned down the entire forest—that would've been a problem."

Teto nodded. "Fire is very dangerous!"

The damage the greater spirit could've caused if we hadn't contained him would have been catastrophic. Not only would the entire forest have burned to a crisp, but Lief was only an hour away—the entire town would have suffered from the smoke, and the embers carried by the wind could've caused fires in the town and surrounding fields as well. On top of that, there were monsters in that forest; the flames would have driven them out of the woods, and in the worst-case scenario, they could have attacked nearby human settlements in their desperation to escape.

"Why did you choose to contain my powers that way?" the greater spirit asked me, pulling me out of my thoughts. His expression was still as severe as earlier.

"Why did I use barriers, you mean? I just wanted to cut off your air supply so that the flames would die on their own," I replied.

The greater spirit shook his head. "That is not what I meant. I am asking why you chose such a roundabout way to stop me when you possess so much mana. You could have just buried me in the ground or attacked me with water, couldn't you? That would have been much easier for you."

"I could have, but it didn't feel right to force you down after you'd been sealed for so long," I replied.

"When you're frustrated, there's nothing like moving your body to clear your mind!" Teto added.

The greater spirit's expression seemed to soften ever so slightly at our response.

"So there are good people among humans too, it would seem. I suppose that I was simply unlucky last time," the greater spirit muttered to himself with a long

sigh.

He stayed silent for a short while before opening his mouth again, "Fauzard."

"Excuse me?"

"That is my name: Fauzard. My contractor bestowed it upon me."

Seeing as he'd introduced himself to us, I decided to do the same.

"I'm Chise the witch," I replied.

"And Teto is Teto! Lady Witch's guardian! Nice to meet you, Fauzard!"

"Once again, thank you for helping me appease my anger. I have already caused you much trouble, but if it is not too much to ask, I have another request for you," Fauzard said, an apologetic look on his face.

"Sure. What is it?"

"The humans separated me from my contractor and held me captive. I want to return to him."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, but I don't think that'll be possible."

"Why?" Fauzard asked me with a frown.

"According to the spirits who were watching over you, you've been sealed under that mansion for three hundred years. If your contractor was a regular elf, he's most likely dead by now."

Elves were a long-lived race, but even they didn't live forever. Their life expectancy was three hundred years, meaning it was highly likely that Fauzard's contractor had passed away already.

"I see," Fauzard muttered after a pause, his shoulders dropping. "So he is dead."

"Is there anyone else you know?" Teto asked.

"My contractor lived in Eltar—the place you humans refer to as 'the elves' great forest.' He had a wife and a child. Perhaps they could tell me what happened to him."

After three hundred years, that "child" might likely be dead too...

“The elves’ great forest, huh? Well, I’m not sure if his child is still alive, but he might have grandchildren and great-grandchildren,” I said.

“Teto and Lady Witch will help you look for them!”

I nodded, and Teto and I started pondering how we’d go about that.

“Are you sure? In my current state, I cannot offer you anything in return,” Fauzard pointed out.

After three hundred years in the jewel of sealing plus its rampage from earlier, it didn’t have the power to repay us with a blessing or anything of the sort.

“Well, we’ve already come this far; we might as well help you until the end. We can’t just leave you to your own devices.”

“Exactly! We’re just lending a hand to someone in need!” Teto chimed in.

“Then I shall be in your care for a while longer,” Fauzard replied with a little nod.

Teto and I smiled. From now on, our next order of business would be to find Fauzard’s contractor’s relatives.

There was just a teeny tiny little issue: Fauzard might have been in his spiritual form, but we’d still stand out way too much dragging a greater spirit along. Most people probably wouldn’t notice him, but anyone who could see spirits like me, or simply anyone with sharper senses than usual, would instantly panic at the sight of a greater fire spirit roaming the streets.

“We’re going to stick out like a sore thumb if we travel with you in your current form,” I said. “Let me see what I can do about that...”

I decided that creating an item where spirits could hide would be our best course of action.

“While Lady Witch works on that, you can have some of Teto’s magic stones!” Teto offered.

“Thank you, spirit child,” he said, absorbing the stones.

Meanwhile, I had come up with an idea for my spirit-hiding apparatus.

The first thing that had come to my mind when thinking of a tool for a fire spirit to dwell in was obviously a magic lamp—more specifically, an Arabian-style oil lamp. These were shaped a bit like a watering can, except that instead of putting water in them, you filled them with oil and put a wick inside the spout, which you then set on fire. But after giving it some more thought, I decided that I liked the look of a lantern—the kind one would take camping—more. Plus your typical camping lantern possessed a combustion mechanism, which would be better for maintaining the flames.

“Now all I’ve got to do is imagine a place for Fauzard to regain his strength and... *Creation*: spirit lantern!”

I took a few mana crystals out of my magic bag and used around 1,000,000 MP to create the lantern.

“All done. Does this look okay to you?” I asked Fauzard, holding the lantern in my hand.

He seemed impressed by my little magic display. “That is a very peculiar skill you have,” he remarked before inspecting the lantern. “You have based it on a human light fixture, hm? Interesting. I shall try going inside.”

Fauzard’s body dissolved, and he entered the lantern. The next instant, a little flame flickered inside.

“I made it so that the lantern absorbs ambient mana to help the spirit inside recover,” I explained. “Well, only fire spirits can use it, though.”

“It is quite pleasant,” Fauzard said. “The jewel I was trapped in stripped me of my powers, but this is different. I feel my energies slowly coming back to me.”

“Then it’s a success. I also made a special little compartment at the bottom of the lantern to store magic stones in; you can absorb these to regain some mana too.”

I put a handful of magic stones inside said compartment as a demonstration, and the flame inside the lantern got a little bit brighter.

Perhaps that flame is a reflection of how Fauzard’s feeling? I thought, when all of a sudden I heard footsteps coming from the path to what little remained of the mansion.

“Lady Witch, someone’s coming!” Teto warned me.

“I can’t let them see me like this. *Makeover!*”

I quickly cast my transformation spell, turning my body into its sixteen-year-old form, and waited for the newcomers to arrive. After a few seconds, a group of adventurers appeared in front of us.

“Oh, Chise, Teto! What are you two doing here?” one of them—a member of a B-rank party we’d met at the guild—said.

There were a few familiar faces among the adventurers; I deduced that they had been dispatched here by the town of Liefé.

“We’ve been sent here on a quest. What brings you here?” I asked back.

“Someone witnessed a pillar of flame rise up from around these parts about two hours ago, and the town’s mages said that they were picking up abnormal mana readings. Then we heard a bunch of really loud noises, so we came to investigate what’s going on,” the same adventurer explained.

It seemed that Fauzard had caught people’s attention all the way out in Liefé. The town had quickly formed a fact-finding team of mages, soldiers, and adventurers and dispatched them here.

“I see. I’ll make my report to the guild when we get back to Liefé, but the weird fire pillar was caused by an old magic tool going off on its own,” I lied seamlessly.

I told the group of adventurers that Teto and I had been sent to demolish the mansion and that we found a weird magic tool in the basement that seemed to have been left down there three hundred years ago. When we tried to touch it, it activated on its own—probably because it had been collecting dust for so long.

“We spent the next couple of hours after that extinguishing the fire so that it wouldn’t spread to the rest of the forest,” I said, concluding my little cover story.

“Is that so? I have a hard time believing it...”

The adventurers didn’t look convinced. I supposed I couldn’t really blame

them for not blindly taking my word for it. I took a few sheets of parchment from my magic bag and handed it to them.

“We have proof,” I said. “Here, we managed to gather some documents about the magic tool we found in the basement.”

I had shown them only the ones related to the weapon the mage had been working on—omitting anything about Fauzard—and it seemed to do the trick: they were speechless, but they believed me. Of course, there was no such weapon; only the plans for it. But hey, it wasn’t a *complete* lie. Anyone who could’ve called me out for it was dead anyway, so it was probably fine.

One of the empire’s mages who had been sent here butted into my conversation with the adventurers. “The old empire commissioned that weapon...and it had been hiding here all along? Did you manage to retrieve anything from inside?”

I shook my head.

“No, sorry. We heard more explosions after the first one, so it must’ve self-destructed before we could investigate further,” I said with a solemn air.

“I was the one who caused that explosion, though. Is it really all right for you to lie to their faces like that?” Fauzard asked me telepathically from the spirit lantern.

“Shhh, let Lady Witch handle it,” Teto said. “It’ll be fine!”

My new and improved little cover story seemed to have left a much stronger impression.

“Understood. Thank you for the details. We’re going to investigate the area; what about you?”

“We’ll head back with you to give our report to the guild, so we’re going to rest in our carriage until you’re done,” I said.

The adventurer nodded. “You deserve it; without you, the fire would have spread to the entirety of the forest. Thank you, girls.”

Teto and I locked ourselves in our caravan. As soon as I closed the door, I let out a long, *long* sigh.

“Today was exhausting. I’m almost completely out of mana too, so I’m going to take a nap.”

“Good work out there, Lady Witch!”

I undid my transformation spell and set the spirit lantern down on the table. Then I headed to the bedroom corner of the caravan and flopped onto the bed.

“What a strange carriage; the inside is much wider than the outside... Just who is this human?” I heard Fauzard ask.

“Lady Witch is Lady Witch!”

Teto’s reply did nothing to quell Fauzard’s curiosity, but I paid them no mind and let myself fall into a deep slumber.

Chapter 8: Time for the Revelation—We’re Actually S-rank

While Teto and I were resting in our caravan, the group from Liefе investigated the mansion and its surroundings. Even though most of the mansion had burnt down during Fauzard’s rampage, the mages still managed to discover the entrance to the basement. Unfortunately for them, this was the part that had suffered the most from Fauzard’s attack—perhaps because he resented that place the most after having been trapped there for centuries. Because of that, all that was left was debris of the tools the mage had used to experiment on him. This lent my earlier testimony some credibility; even though there were no traces of the weapon I had mentioned, the extent of the damage in the basement proved that it had indeed been the epicenter of the incident.

They interrogated me several times; each time, I repeated my cover story, not mentioning a single word about Fauzard. I wasn’t too worried that they would catch me out; the only proof of Fauzard’s existence were the documents Teto and I had gathered before the seal broke. In the end, they couldn’t find any contradictions in my story, and all of us headed back to Liefе together.

“Miss Chise, Miss Teto, welcome back! I’m so, so sorry for sending you on that quest!” the guild’s receptionist exclaimed when we stepped inside to give our report. It seemed that they were already more or less aware of what had transpired, which I wasn’t too surprised about; the mansion wasn’t that far from Liefе, so the soldiers and mages had more than enough time to send a couple of messengers back to town to update them on the situation.

“Oh, and the guildmaster has requested a meeting with the two of you.”

I nodded. “That’s fine. I wanted to talk to him directly as well.”

“Let’s go now!” Teto said.

The receptionist threw a confused glance at the lantern in my hand as she led

us to the drawing room. I couldn't blame her; not only was it the middle of the day, but I hadn't been holding a lantern when we left the guild that morning. She didn't ask any questions, though; she just served us some tea and excused herself from the room. When she had left, Fauzard talked to us telepathically.

"Are you sure you want to proceed with your plan? You have lied to the others, yet you plan on telling the truth to that man."

Fauzard wasn't *wrong*. We'd talked about my plan before, after all; but now that we were here, he seemed to wonder if it was really necessary.

"I won't show him the mage's research documents, but if we explain your situation, he might deign to lend a hand. Maybe he could even act as a mediator between us and the elves."

"Will it really go that well, though?" Fauzard asked skeptically.

"Trust Lady Witch! She's done her research!" Teto chimed in.

Teto was right: I hadn't decided to tell him the truth *just* because he was the guildmaster. I had actually spent the past year building a profile on the guy, and I had a pretty good idea of how he'd react. If I'd had any doubts about his character, I wouldn't even have picked Liefé as our base in the first place.

"It'll be fine. After all—"

A knock at the door interrupted me.

"Sorry for the wait. You two are Miss Chise and Miss Teto, yes?" the newcomer said as he entered the room. His pale green, shoulder-length hair was neatly kept, and his features, while delicate, were well proportioned.

He seemed to be around thirty, which was quite young for a guildmaster. But what stood out the most were his pointy ears—though they weren't as long as a regular elf's.

"It is our first time meeting in person, I believe. I'm Phealos, Liefé's guildmaster. I know I don't look the part, but I actually used to be an A-rank adventurer."

Fauzard's voice echoed in my mind. "A half-elf. I understand now."

When the guildmaster was done introducing himself, Teto and I handed our

guild cards to him.

“First of all, I’m going to put a soundproof barrier around the room,” I said, doing just that. “Now, please check the hidden symbol on our cards.”

“The hidden symbol? No way...” Phealos gasped in shock.

His eyes fixed on the engraved symbol on our guild cards, he traced it with a mana-infused finger. Slowly, the C on our cards turned gold, and our real rank appeared.

“You two are...S-rank?” he let out.

“Sorry for deceiving you,” I said before canceling my *Makeover* spell. I returned to my preadolescent shape right where I stood.

For a while, he simply stared at me in shock, unable to find his words. Teto and I patiently waited for him to come back to his senses.

“I... I’m not sure I understand what’s going on,” he ended up saying after a few seconds, bringing a hand to his face and covering one of his eyes.

“Well, I can imagine this is all quite sudden to you.”

Between our revealing that we were S-rank, me turning into a child in front of his eyes, and the fact that my guild card stated that I was over ninety years old, I couldn’t blame him for being overwhelmed. I felt a bit sorry for putting him in that position.

“I have...a lot of questions,” he finally managed to squeeze out.

He took a few deep breaths; once he seemed to have calmed down slightly, he started to ask us questions.

“Um, your guild card states that you’re the Carpet Riders. If I remember correctly, that’s the name of the party that put an end to the stampede in the northwestern reaches, right?”

“That’s actually what promoted us to S-rank,” I replied.

After the stampede, my friends Gynton and Arsus had pushed for Teto and me to become S-rank, along with King Alberd—Selene’s father.

“Are you two *really* the Witch of Creation and her guardian?” Phealos asked.

“Is there any way we can prove our identity to him?” I muttered, deep in thought.

“Lady Witch, show him our flying carpet!” Teto suggested.

“Oh, good idea. That’s what got us our party name after all—he’ll definitely believe us if he sees it.”

I took the flying carpet out of our magic bag, spread it on the floor of the drawing room, and made it float into the air. Thankfully, this little demonstration was enough to convince Phealos we were telling the truth.

After that, Phealos hit us with another barrage of questions: *why were we pretending to be C-rank, why did we reveal our true identity, et cetera, et cetera*. He struggled to accept some of our answers; fatigue took over his youthful face, making him look much older all of a sudden.

“You said that you wanted to report what happened during your quest to me, yes? The magic tool that suddenly exploded. I’m assuming that since you chose this moment to reveal your identity to me, you must have been hiding something from the others.”

“You’ve guessed right. Fauzard, can you come out?” I asked, and Fauzard did just that.

Phealos sensed his presence and whipped his head in his direction, his body shaking like a leaf. “That presence... A high-ranking spirit?!”

“I am Fauzard, a greater fire spirit. This human saved me from my prison.”

Elves worshipped spirits. To them, high-ranking spirits were akin to gods, or at least messengers of the divine. Phealos swiftly sank to his knees, bowing deeply before Fauzard as I told him everything that had happened at the haunted mansion.

“Forbidden arts that abuse spirits’ powers... I cannot believe there was a victim of such dark practices right under our noses,” Phealos said between gritted teeth, his body shaking in anger.

I tried my best to calm him down before continuing, “Anyway, the real reason we’re here today is because of Fauzard. He got separated from his contractor

when he was abducted three hundred years ago, and he'd like to know what happened to him."

"I am aware that he most likely has passed away. However, he might still have relatives in the elves' great forest. I want to meet with them," Fauzard explained.

"As the guildmaster, I can contact the great forest," Phealos replied, his expression serious. "However, it might take some time for me to confirm everything. Would that be all right?"

"I do not mind. What qualifies as 'some time' to you is merely a fleeting moment to us spirits."

"We'll stay in town until you've received a response from the elves, then," I said before leaving the room.

On our way home, we stopped at the guild's reception counter to collect our compensation for tearing down the haunted mansion. I'd considered refusing to take the money, since Fauzard had pretty much taken care of the job for us, but I decided to treat it as reparations for having been sent on such a dangerous quest.

With all that behind us, we headed back to our caravan.

Chapter 9: In the Depths of the Elves' Great Forest

???'s Side

Deep, deep inside the elves' forest, at the base of the World Tree, spread a city. The many layers of the World Tree's leaves and branches filtered the light of the sun to a faint golden glow even at high noon, but the mana it produced cast the city in a sharper, cleaner, brighter light. The water was clear—blessed by the spirits—and a gentle breeze rustled through the leaves.

A palace stood in the middle of the city. Inside, an elven woman was listening to the stories the spirits had to tell her. Stories witnessed through the eyes of spirits were often closer to the truth than those humans could recall. Of course, spirits were hardly infallible; this was why she had her scouts, who lived out from under the shelter of their home tree and sent back word of all the great things that came to pass in the wider world. Between the two currents of story, she could fairly appraise the state of the whole continent, moment to moment.

A knock sounded at the door, interrupting her pleasant conversation.

"Please excuse me! We have received important news from Liefé's adventurer's guild," the newcomer—a dark elf woman—announced as she entered the room.

"Must you bother me? I am busy. Can you not leave that matter to the elders?" the woman asked, displeased that her time with the spirits was cut short.

She hoped to resume her communion, but her companions had sensed the change in atmosphere and vanished. The woman let out a long sigh, shifting her attention back onto the dark elf.

"What 'important news' do you speak of?" she asked, an uninterested look on her face.

"They have found Lord Fauzard, the greater fire spirit."

The woman's eyes shot open. "What?!"

The spirits, still in hiding, were just as shocked by the news, their mana signature wavering.

"How is he?!" the woman pressed.

"It seems that he'd been sealed under a mansion all these centuries; he was only turned up just recently," the dark elf explained.

"Sealed, you say? That bodes ill. We must take the utmost care in freeing him; I fear for us all, should we err."

Under different circumstances, they'd most likely have been able to free Fauzard without too much worry. But he'd been a casualty of the war; if his treatment had been as inhumane as she feared, the odds were good that he would turn his vast anger upon the land. They'd need to send the cream of the crop to pacify him...or so she thought.

"Actually... It seems that Lord Fauzard broke his own seal, and the adventurers who'd found him managed to appease him," the dark elf woman continued.

"They have abated a greater spirit's fury?!" the elven woman exclaimed in shock. "How much has been lost?"

The dark elf woman glanced at the document in her hands. "Nothing but an old mansion slated for demolition."

"Is that all? Are you certain it was *him*, and not some lesser flame?"

A greater spirit's rampage could easily wipe an entire town off the map altogether. And yet it had come and gone with so little calamity... Something didn't add up.

"The guildmaster who reached out to us—the half-elf, if you remember him—stated that it was, without doubt, a greater spirit," the dark elf said. "Also, Lord Fauzard has said that he wishes to return to the city in search of his contractor's next of kin."

The elven woman nodded; it was only natural for a spirit to want to know their contractor's fate after an age spent apart.

“I knew his contractor, and I am acquainted with his granddaughter as well. Pass along all our records of the man, and arrange a meeting with the child.”

“Understood.”

“One last question. Who are these adventurers who saved him? They could hardly be cut from the same cloth as much of their kind,” the elven woman said, her curiosity piqued.

“It seems that they’re a party called the ‘Carpet Riders,’” the dark elf replied.

“The Carpet Riders?” the other woman repeated. “I have heard that name before...”

Standing up, she walked to the bookshelf where she kept her old reports.

“It must be somewhere around here,” she muttered as she picked up a document and skimmed through it. “Not this one... No, not this one either...”

She tossed the ones that didn’t meet her criteria aside as she rummaged through the shelf until she found her prize. Just as she thought, the name *was* familiar; it had appeared in a file from ten years ago, and in another from fifty years ago.

“There it is. They were involved in the suppression of the stampede in the northwest, as well as the coup in Lawbyle.”

According to the records, the Carpet Riders had defeated a colossal monster during the stampede, earning their promotion to S-rank. Moreover, one among their number had been implicated in the scandal that eventually brought about the Kingdom of Lawbyle’s collapse and reconstruction; the old king had stretched his military powers too far for his country to bear, all in the name of wringing the secret of immortality from her. In the end, his own brother dethroned him, and the adventurer he had been after slipped through his fingers, vanishing from history for a time. According to the records, this adventurer belonged to none other than the Carpet Riders.

The elven woman asked the spirits for the name of that adventurer; they told her without hesitation.

“Chise, the Witch of Creation, hm?” she muttered.

She had heard the spirits recall rumors about her countless times before.

She'd turned what had once been the Wasteland of Nothingness into a beautiful forest—or so the stories told—and had in turn become its master. She'd been endowed with a colossal reserve of mana and eternal life—and some said youth. She possessed a skill that let her create anything she desired from thin air. She ruled a nation of demons, had befriended an ancient dragon, and been appointed as a goddess's prophet. Some even claimed that she'd been blessed with knowledge from another world. The claims went on and on.

Ever since she'd started hearing these rumors, the elven woman had been keen on establishing contact with this Witch of Creation, but now she'd gone and done her people a *direct service*.

"Would you like me to do anything else?" the dark elf woman asked, noticing the other woman's heavy air of contemplation.

"Althea. I need you to invite the Witch of Creation and her guardian to our forest. Welcome her personally. Do not, under any circumstances, show *any* disrespect towards her," the elven woman said.

"Are they truly such important guests?" Althea asked.

"She is an immortal witch and is said to have the protection of the goddesses. Besides, even if they had just been regular people, they have freed and pacified Fauzard. Treat them accordingly," the elven woman sternly reminded Althea, who swallowed with a loud gulp.

"Understood. I shall be on my way, then," Althea said before exiting the room.

"I hope that Witch of Creation will prove to be a discussion partner worth my while," the elf queen muttered, a smile on her face.

She was looking forward to finding out.

Chapter 10: The Guide

A few days after our discussion with Phealos, Liefé's guildmaster, we were informed that a letter addressed to us had arrived at the guild. When we next visited the guild, Phealos himself came to deliver it to us. With the letter in hand, we returned to our caravan to read it away from prying eyes.

The first part of the letter concerned Fauzard and his contractor. The sender expressed their joy at Fauzard's release, and then, as requested, proceeded to recount what had happened to his contractor after Fauzard was abducted.

"So he truly has passed away," Fauzard commented in a somber voice when I read that part out loud.

"But it says that his son has a daughter who's still alive," I pointed out.

"They're waiting for you! Teto's glad!"

The letter revealed that Fauzard's contractor had managed to escape to safety during the war. He had more than enough time to witness his son's growth, and he'd even welcomed a granddaughter into the world before passing away peacefully in old age. According to the sender, Fauzard's contractor had told his family about him before his passing, and his granddaughter was eager to meet Fauzard and share memories of her grandfather with him. The letter concluded with a message to Teto and me.

"We will soon send an escort to Liefé to guide Lord Fauzard back to the forest. We would also like to personally thank the master of the Witch of Creation's Forest and her companion for saving him. It would be our pleasure to have them visit our forest as well."

"Oooh, Lady Witch! We've been invited to the elves' forest! We get to go!" Teto cheered candidly.

I, on the other hand, had a sour look on my face as I read those last lines.

"Lady Witch? Is something wrong? You don't want to go?" Teto asked.

“I *do* want to go, and I’m glad they’ve invited us. But I didn’t expect them to know our true identities.”

We had revealed our identities to Phealos, but I hadn’t expected the elves to do their research as well. The sender of this letter had addressed me as “master of the Witch of Creation’s Forest.” This meant that they were interested in me not for my adventuring prowess, but for my achievements as the Witch of Creation.

“Does that mean I’ll have to entertain some elven big shot?” I muttered with a groan.

But I quickly shook my head and focused on the important part instead: we were invited to the elves’ forest. That was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I truly couldn’t believe how lucky we had gotten.

“Let’s look at things positively and make the most of this opportunity by learning everything we can while in the elves’ forest,” I said.

The elves’ forest housed the only other World Tree on this continent, as well as all sorts of mythical beasts who were under the elves’ protection. It overall seemed to be quite similar to my forest, so I was certain there must have been a ton of things for me to learn there. The political part was a bit of a pain, but I decided to just discuss all of the specifics with Beretta before going there.

And so that’s what I did for the next few days, all while clearing random quests here and there.

Finally, two weeks after we received the letter, the guide from the elves’ great forest arrived in Lief. We had received a letter informing us of where and when to meet them beforehand; we headed to the shop that Phealos had pointed out to us.

“Looks like we’re here,” I said.

“It doesn’t look like a shop.”

The building we had stopped in front of didn’t have a sign indicating what it was, but judging by the number of rooms, it seemed to be an old inn that had been remodeled. There were only elves coming in and out of the building, which made me wonder if it was a place exclusive to elves who came to Lief.

for business so that they'd have a safe place to stay.

"Our guide is supposedly waiting for us here," I said, looking up at the building.

"Teto is sooo excited to go to the elves' forest!"

"Let us hurry and head inside," Fauzard urged us from inside the lantern.

The smell of fine wood greeted us as we stepped into the inn. A woman was waiting for us in the entrance hall. She had silver hair, ice-blue eyes, and dark skin, and was dressed in masculine clothes. Judging by her appearance, she seemed to be a dark elf.

She flashed us a reassuring smile.

"Lord Fauzard, I have come to escort you back to the great forest," she said.

"Thank you," Fauzard communicated telepathically to all of us. "I apologize for my current appearance. I have exhausted my powers; I must rest in the lantern until my strength is restored."

"I understand," she said before turning towards me. "I will hold the lantern, if that is all right with you."

I nodded and handed it off.

"Thank you. It is an honor to meet you, Witch of Creation and her guardian. I am Althea. I serve as an aide to Her Majesty, the queen of the elves. Our Eltar Forest Kingdom extends its warmest welcome to you both," she said with a pleasant smile.



“I’m Chise the witch. Nice to meet you.”

“And Teto is Teto! Nice to meet you!”

“It will take a minute to get everything ready, so let us wait in here for the time being, shall we?” she said as she led us to a drawing room.

As we were walking down the hallway, I noticed that the other elves were bustling about, most likely to “get everything ready,” as Althea had said.

We took a seat on one of the sofas in the drawing room; Althea sat opposite us.

“Please feel free to return to your true form,” she told me.

I smiled. “You noticed, huh?”

I lifted my transformation spell, turning back into my twelve-year-old appearance. Althea seemed shocked by how young my real body was, but I paid her no mind.

“Miss Althea, how much do you—no, how much does the Eltar Forest Kingdom know about us?” I asked.

My question snapped her out of her surprise. “Quite a few things,” she replied with a smile. “Spirit magic is quite prevalent in our forest, and several of us are quite adept at intelligence gathering.”

As she said that, a spirit in the shape of a black lizard appeared from her shadow, a letter in its mouth.

“You have dark spirits helping you?” Fauzard said, sounding impressed.

Dark spirits used shadows to travel from one place to the other.

“Shadow Teleportation, huh?” I commented. “That sounds convenient.”

I could use Dark Magic to manipulate shadows as well, but what these spirits were doing was a lot more impressive than anything in my repertoire.

“The lizard is so cute!” Teto exclaimed, extending a hand to the small lizard, which climbed onto the palm of Althea’s hand.

I had to admit, it *was* pretty cute.

As a sidenote, from what I was told, there were basically no differences between elves and dark elves except for the type of spirits they originated from—light, water, and wind for elves, and darkness, fire, and earth for dark elves. They usually tended to have an easier time with magic aligned with their respective spirits, but it wasn't a strict rule. There were elves proficient in Dark Magic and dark elves specialized in Light Magic. Individual aptitudes played a more important role than their lineage.

"We can send each other letters and messages by having dark spirits deliver them," Althea explained.

"I see. This allows you to receive information from all over the continent; that's how you learned about us."

"Exactly. Our deep-cover scouts send us regular reports from our settlements beyond the forest. We analyze them and do our own research afterwards. For all you've done—the impression you've left on the world—it's no surprise that word of you would find its way to us. As for the rest, Her Majesty the Queen learned it directly from the spirits," Althea explained to us.

I nodded. "I'm impressed. You have a better picture of our whole deal than I'm used to people getting from a first impression."

So they learned about us through spirits, huh? While it did seem a bit unfair and sneaky, I wasn't exactly in any position to blame them; after all, I often got juicy gossip from Liriel and the other goddesses about what was going on in other parts of the continent whenever I had a dream oracle. However, it seemed that spirits didn't share their information with just anyone.

"Using spirits to gather information is basically the same as asking spirits to share their knowledge," Fauzard explained. "One would have to pay them in kind for that knowledge. Most could never afford what they ask."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"For spirits and mortals alike, the more dearly kept the secret is, the bigger the price tag grows. Most mortals would wither to dust offering as much mana as the spirits would demand for your secrets. It seems that the elven queen can bear it handily."

Apparently the elven queen and I were a lot alike. I glanced at Althea, who was still smiling.

“To answer your earlier question, Miss Chise, we know that you are the prophet of the goddesses, and that Miss Teto is a demon descended from spirits.”

I hadn’t expected the elves to know *that* much. I hung my head down, feeling a bit ashamed. Teto, on the other hand, was musing about how “amazing” I was as she petted the lizard spirit, completely oblivious to my inner turmoil.

“Her Majesty has been interested in you for a very long time, Miss Chise. Per her words, this is hardly the first time she’s considered inviting you to Eltar. She has requested that I personally guide you to the forest this time around,” Althea said.

So they *did* have plans for me to meet up with the elves’ bigwigs.

There was one question that was weighing on my mind.

“What kind of person is the elves’ queen?”

“Her Majesty is a high elf,” Althea replied, brimming with pride.

“A high elf...”

High elves were considered to be the superior subrace among elves. As soon as I heard Althea’s response, I instantly knew that the elves’ queen must have been a fellow immortal.

“Her Majesty is truly exceptional,” Althea continued, a faraway look on her face. “Her mana pool is almost bottomless, she has many spirits under her command, and everyone in Eltar holds her in high regard. Although, she can be a bit *free-spirited*—but no, that’s not quite right. I should say her curiosity overcomes her at times.”

Her face contorted in a bit of a grimace on that last part. Still, judging by the way Althea was talking about her, the elven queen probably wasn’t a bad person.

“I see. Well, thank you once again for choosing to be our guide to Eltar.”

“Thank you!”

Not too long after, an elf came into the room to let us know that everything was ready for our departure. The three of us were led to the basement, where I ended up face-to-face with a very familiar-looking magic circle.

“Lady Witch, Teto has seen this before!”

“Is that a teleportation circle? Like the ones in dungeons?” I asked.

All dungeons had magic circles like these to travel from one layer to the other.

“It’s a bit similar, yes. Once it is activated, it’ll take us to Eltar. Are you ready?”

I nodded. I had already assumed that we probably wouldn’t get to come back to Liefé for a while, so I had put our caravan and golem horse in my magic bag beforehand and told the guild that we wouldn’t renew the lease on the plot of land we had been renting from them. And so, with nothing holding us back, we stepped into the magic circle.

“We’re ready, everyone,” Althea told the other elves in the room.

“Yes, Miss Althea!”

They poured some of their own mana into the circle, which started glowing brighter and brighter. Then, when it was at its brightest, I felt a floating sensation take over my body.

Chapter 11: The Elves' Forest

The teleportation spell soon came to an end, and the four of us found ourselves in a completely different room, seemingly made of stone. Peering outside the window, I saw that we were in the middle of a lush forest.

"This is..."

"We're in the middle of the forest!" Teto exclaimed.

"I believe we are inside the fortress at the forest's entrance. I came here with my contractor to fend off the humans during the war," Fauzard explained.

Shortly after, I noticed the magic circle beneath us blurring and fading.

"Single-use teleportation circles, huh?" I noted.

When you poured mana into a magic circle, the spell carved into it activated automatically. However, you couldn't just make a magic circle willy-nilly; you'd need to use materials to create it. Of course, the more powerful the spell, the rarer the materials were. And even after all that, you'd still need to pour a boatload of mana into the circle to activate it.

"Elves have a lot of mana, so they could activate the circle with only a few people. In any other nation, they'd most likely need to use a bunch of magic stones," I mused.

Still, I couldn't help but feel like a bit of a VIP, considering how much effort making and activating a magic circle was.

"Are there other teleportation circles in the elves' kingdom?" Teto asked, looking down at the spot where the magic circle used to be.

"Installing magic circles in every settlement—and ones that can be used several times at that—would be difficult, so no. There aren't any teleportation circles in the kingdom," Althea replied with an embarrassed smile.

Carefully cradling the spirit lantern in her arms, she led us out of the room. Outside, elven soldiers were waiting for us, holding the reins of a few mythical

beasts that looked like eight-legged horses.

“I’ve never seen this type of mythical beast before,” I said. “We don’t have any in the forest.”

“They’re so big! And so cool!” Teto exclaimed.

“They’re sleipnirs,” Althea explained to us.

As soon as they spotted me, the sleipnirs started shoving their snouts towards me, begging for some mana.

“Wh-What are you doing?! Calm down, will you? You’re being rude to Miss Chise!” Althea scolded them, grabbing their reins and trying to pull them back, but they wouldn’t budge.

“They seem to like you quite a lot,” Fauzard commented

Teto quickly put a hand on my back so that I wouldn’t fall. “Uh-oh, are you okay, Lady Witch?”

“I’m fine. I hadn’t expected them to be *this* friendly.”

But it’s okay, this isn’t my first rodeo, I thought as I stroked the sleipnirs’ snouts. One after the other, they absorbed mana through the palm of my hand. When they had gotten their fill, they let Althea pull them back.

“Sorry for the commotion. We were supposed to ride the sleipnirs to travel through the forest, but...” Althea trailed off.

“They have started fighting to see which one will get to have Lady Witch ride on their back,” Fauzard muttered.

He was right. The sleipnirs were pressing their foreheads together and glaring, stomping their hooves as if to intimidate each other. The elven soldiers were desperately trying to calm them, to no avail; they wouldn’t let up. After all, the one that I ended up riding on would be able to feed on my mana. None of them wanted to pass on such an opportunity. The only one who wasn’t fighting with the others was Althea’s sleipnir, as it’d get to ride with us no matter what.

“Um... Will you be riding on the sleipnirs as well, Miss Chise, Miss Teto?” Althea asked awkwardly.

There were no roads inside the elves' forest, so riding in carriages was not an option. This must have been why they had brought the sleipnirs for us to ride. But there was one slight issue.

"Teto and I can't ride horses," I confessed. "But it's all right; we'll just follow you on our flying carpet."

"We haven't used it in sooo long!" Teto exclaimed.

I took the magic carpet out of our magic bag and rolled it on the ground. Upon hearing my words, the sleipnirs stopped glaring at each other to face us instead, their eyes wide open in shock and disappointment. An awkward smile curled on my lips when some of them whinnied to try and get my attention, but I did my best to ignore them.

Althea didn't pay them any mind either. "I'll be heading into the forest with this one, then. Follow me," she said, climbing on her sleipnir and heading into the woods, Teto and myself flying after her.

As Teto and I admired the scenery, Althea shot us an apologetic look from her sleipnir.

"I am sure that you must think we're going awfully slow compared to your flying carpet's maximum speed, but please bear with me," she said.

"It's fine. I wouldn't want you to push your mount past its limits."

"Teto likes the flying carpet because she can stick to Lady Witch," Teto said, wrapping her arms around me from behind and resting her chin on my shoulder.

I let out a surprised cry; I hadn't been expecting her to start hugging me out of the blue. "Teto! At least warn me before you do that," I scolded her.

An elegant chuckle escaped Althea as she looked at us.

"You're much cuter and more down-to-earth than I expected. Please pardon me," she said in between chuckles.

My face flushed; I lowered the hood of my robes so that it'd hide my eyes and pretended to look at the trees.

"Lady Witch is feeling embarrassed," Teto—who was more than familiar with

my mannerisms by now—muttered to Althea.

“Is it really that funny?” I grumbled.

Althea stopped laughing and looked at us with a serious expression.

“Most people who come to our kingdom—especially the ones hoping for an audience with Her Majesty—harbor some ulterior motive. That’s why I’m pleased to be able to guide someone with such a mild and pleasant demeanor to our forest for once.”

The elves’ queen was not only immortal, rich, and powerful, but she was also a high elf—a supreme rarity even among elves. Most humans who came to see her did so because they wanted something—usually not something *good*. Some coveted the queen’s magic, some wished to unveil the forest’s secrets, and others wanted to turn all high elves into slaves or learn the secret of their immortality... And there were those who wanted to lay claim to the forest and its resources altogether, including the mythical beasts and the elves themselves. The queen sure didn’t have it easy.

“Our main goal is tourism, so...” I shrugged.

“But, Miss Chise, you might end up in a similar position to Her Majesty in the future,” Althea pointed out.

“I might. I might not.”

In a way, the elves’ forest represented one of the potential futures for our own forest. For now, they were pretty similar: just like the elves, we only exchanged with the outside world through limited points of contact and refused any outside influence. Our current main goal was to protect the forest and the people and creatures living in it. But...

“For now, our main goal in the Witch of Creation’s Forest is to produce mana, but once this world’s mana levels are back to normal, I’m thinking of clearing some land,” I said.

“What for?” Althea asked me, a surprised look on her face.

“I don’t plan on getting rid of *all* the trees or anything, just some of them. Don’t get me wrong; I believe that we should take good care of nature, but, at

the same time, I don't want to get in the way of the development of humans and their culture."

"Lady Witch is always reading books!" Teto supplied.

Just as Teto said, I liked books. For a culture to develop and flourish, books were an absolute must. Besides, I believed that nature and culture could coexist. So while I was absolutely against the complete destruction of nature, I would have loved to create a space where both nature and civilization could thrive together in harmony.

"Teto hopes that one day, the mythical beasts will get to live wherever they want."

I nodded. "Me too. The world is big; it'd be great if they could live outside of our forest. I hope we'll get to see that day come."

Mythical beasts could only live in mana-dense places. Most of them had perished during the fall of the precursors, and very few remained. Not only did this mean that mythical beast poaching was rampant—since they were so rare—but also that they could only live in very specific regions. But if the mana levels of the world were to rise again, the mythical beasts could live in their preferred environments without so much external pressure. Moreover, if they were to spread out across different regions and breed, there would be more of them all over the continent. Perhaps one day, we'd get to see a world where humans and mythical beasts coexisted peacefully, just like the dragonkin with the griffins and pegasuses, my disciple Yuicia and her little cat-sith companion, or Althea and her sleipnir. Of course, I was aware that as their populations grew and spread, they were more threatened by illness, accidents, and attacks from humans and monsters alike, but to me, this seemed like a necessary evil if it meant protecting them from species-wide extinction.

"I called you down-to-earth earlier, but you're actually quite the dreamer, hm? And you seem to really like mythical beasts." Althea said.

"Wouldn't it be beautiful, though?"

A small, gentle smile had curled on Althea's lips, and she looked fondly at Teto and me as if we were children. Which, okay, by elves' standard we *might* have been. She had called me a "dreamer," but as an immortal being, what would be

the point of living if I didn't have an ambition or two?

And so, the three of us (plus Fauzard in his spirit lantern) made our way deeper and deeper into the elves' forest.

Chapter 12: A Wave of Entertainment Washes Over the Elven Kingdom

“Let us stop here for the night. It’ll take several days to reach the next settlement; is that all right with you?” Althea asked us as she dismounted her sleipnir.

“It’s fine. Our flying carpet is pretty comfy.”

“Besides, Teto and Lady Witch are used to traveling in the forest!”

We hopped down from our flying carpet, and I started looking around the village. Besides being in the middle of the forest, it was pretty much a regular village. The only thing of note was that there were metal posts all around the perimeter, probably so that it wouldn’t get swallowed up by the woods.

“Welcome to our humble village, Miss Althea,” one of the village’s elves greeted her.

“I’ve brought Her Majesty’s guests with me. We’ll be staying here for the night.”

The way the elves interacted with Althea felt oddly familiar.

“They sound just like the forest’s people when they chat with you, Lady Witch!” Teto said as if she had read my mind.

“They do... Is Miss Althea really that big of a deal?” I muttered.

She had introduced herself as the elven queen’s aide, so I had already guessed she held some importance, but I hadn’t known just how much.

She must’ve overheard our conversation, as she turned around and flashed us an embarrassed smile. “I’m simply Her Majesty’s humble servant.”

After handing the reins of her sleipnir to a stable hand, she took us on a tour of the village.

“The villagers don’t seem that shocked to see humans,” I noted as we walked

around the village square. “And there are other races living here too.”

“Oh! Lady Witch! This looks really yummy!” Teto exclaimed, pointing at a food stall.

All of the non-elves we saw seemed to be engaged in business transactions.

“Merchants and adventurers with a special permit are allowed to venture this far, but no farther,” Althea explained to me.

It seemed that all the trade goods collected and crafted by the elves were brought to this village. A few select merchants and elven caravans then facilitated their distribution to the outside world.

The three of us made our way to a covered wagon and peered at one of the merchants’ stock.

“Whoa, look at all those magic stones. There are arrowheads too,” I commented.

“The magic stones are so pretty,” Teto added, a hungry look on her face.

“Magic tool manufacture is one of the elven kingdom’s most active and profitable industries, and this includes processing magic stones,” the merchant explained to us.

All elves had naturally large mana pools, and through long years of diligent study, some of them had mastered crafting magic tools. They would import magic stones from all over the continent and turn them into high-quality tools, which they would then distribute to the different elven settlements before selling the surplus to foreign merchants.

“I see. Then what about the arrowheads?” I asked.

“Those are used by hunters. They’re always in need of arrows, so they buy the arrowheads in bulk and assemble them in their spare time.”

Every hunter had their own preferences when it came to the size, weight, and type of their bows, and apparently the same went for the arrows they used. Thus, rather than buying premade arrows, they preferred to purchase the arrowheads separately and assemble them according to their preferences.

“Arrowhead making is actually a pretty popular side hustle for former

hunters.”

“Huh, is that so?”

As I examined the goods on display, I noticed that there were quite a few of them I was familiar with.

“Oh, they even sell books,” I said.

I leaned forward to examine one of the books on the merchant’s wagon, thinking that it must be some sort of scholarly book or essay, but to my surprise, it was a volume of *The Legend of the Heroes*.

“I-Is that the third volume?! Oh, and there are other books too!” Althea exclaimed, all but trembling in excitement. “E-Excuse me! How much for these books?” she asked the shopkeeper.

“Ten silvers apiece.”

“I’ll take those!” she said, picking up a few fiction books—including *The Legend of the Heroes*. She handed the money to the shopkeeper without a moment’s hesitation and happily cradled her new treasures against her chest.

She must’ve felt our gazes; she hurriedly started explaining herself, even though we hadn’t said anything. “Uh, w-we have recently started accepting your more amusing works of prose into the forest. As Her Majesty the Queen’s aide, I have to buy these books and thoroughly review the content to ensure they’re suitable for our people.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I actually really like these books too. No judgment here,” I reassured her.

“Yeah, Lady Witch likes them a lot!” Teto added.

A look of relief crossed Althea’s face.

“I didn’t know books had spread all the way to the elves’ forest, though,” I said.

“We’re all quite dedicated to making sure our children are well educated, so the literacy rate in our kingdom is quite high,” Althea said. “Besides, most elves never get to leave their settlement, so having recreational activities available locally is very important.”

Board games, for example, were quite popular among the elves—or so Althea told me—as they were easy to reproduce and distribute as long as the sellers understood the rules. This allowed the public to stay occupied in the closed season, on top of giving them another source of income by selling them to the outside world.

I noticed that ever since she had bought the books, Althea had started fidgeting. She must've been anxious to be alone with them.

“You said we'd be traveling deeper into the forest tomorrow, right? Let's go to bed early, then,” I said.

“Yeah! We should take this opportunity to rest our bodies properly!” Teto added.

“Y-You're right! Let us head to the inn, then, shall we?” Althea said, and the three of us did just that.

The next morning, we were greeted by a very sleepy-looking Althea. She must've stayed up late reading those books she had bought.

And so, the three of us made our way deeper into the elves' great forest.

Chapter 13: The Witch Gets Separated from Her Companions

“This is the path to the next settlement,” Althea told us.

“We still have a long way to go before we reach the heart of the forest,” Fauzard commented.

As we followed Althea on our flying carpet, I took in the scenery of the forest around us.

“The elves really put a lot of care into looking after their forest,” I said.

“The air is so yummy here!” Teto added.

Despite the profusion of trees, there was still more than enough light passing through the foliage. The elves must’ve been thinning it out to let some light through. As a result, the trees were all strong and imposing. We would occasionally spot wild critters running between the boughs, which made me feel a sense of peace, and the cool, crisp air invigorated me.

“The villagers take care of the forest around their settlements,” Althea explained. “But if you venture even just a bit outside of the animal trail, you’ll end up in wild, virgin forest.”

“If things are still the same as before, the virgin forest is the monsters’ territory. I would advise you not to venture near those parts unless you know the forest like the back of your hand,” Fauzard warned us.

Apparently, the wilder parts of the forest had evolved into Demon Dens over the years. From what Althea told us, the elves constantly monitored the main path, meaning that no intruder could trespass unnoticed. This forced any uninvited individual to go through the Demon Dens, where they ended up as monster fodder more often than not.

“I see... That’s a pretty straightforward, low-effort way to funnel outsiders in through the ways you’ve prepared for them,” I remarked.

“And fewer entry points means less need for guards!” Teto added.

From what I had seen up until now, the elves’ kingdom seemed to be a bunch of settlements linked together by a main road like dots on a map rather than a standard nation. This meant that you absolutely needed someone to guide you through the forest, lest you end up lost in the woods.

“There are only three entry points to our kingdom. One is in the Gald Beastman Nation, the other in Lawbyle, and the last one in the Sunfield Empire,” Althea said.

I let out an impressed hum and made small talk with Althea for the rest of the day.

At night, we would camp outside, and mythical beasts would sometimes come over to beg me for pets and mana.

Althea told us that the second and third settlements counting from the fortress were part of the forest’s “middle stratum,” which also happened to be the territory of a lot of mythical beasts. This explained why so many of them came to beg me for mana, which I gladly gave to them by petting them on the head and the back of the neck.

“You’re all so cute. But we have to go now, I’m sorry,” I said when it was time for us to resume our trek.

The mythical beasts didn’t seem pleased to hear it; some of them tried to pull me into their territory by my robes.

“No, no, no, don’t take Lady Witch with you!” Teto said, making a firm impression on the thronging wildlife.

“Please be careful, Miss Chise. There are a lot of interference spells in this part of the forest, which can disrupt your sense of direction. Even we elves can get lost if we’re not paying attention here,” Althea warned me.

“I am sure you two would be fine even if you were to lose your way into the woods, but it would delay our meeting with my contractor’s kin,” Fauzard said.

It was my first time in the elves’ forest, so if I were to let the mythical beasts pull me into their territory, I would *definitely* get lost. I very much wanted to

avoid that, so I quickly scampered back to Althea's side.

As we resumed our journey, I asked Althea to tell me more about the interference spells she had mentioned earlier.

They'd woven spells into the fog here and there that would disrupt one's sense of direction, enchanted stones and totem poles meant to attract anyone who looked at them, forcing them away from the mythical beasts' territories, and beckoned spirits to constantly watch over the woods.

"You've really gone all out, huh?" I said.

"It's impressive you've managed to protect such a huge forest!"

"I'd like to say it's our pride and joy...but all of these spells require mana to activate, and we don't have anywhere near enough to cover the whole forest."

For that reason, a nonnegligible number of outsiders would manage to slip past the elves' surveillance and into the forest. In extremely rare cases, they even succeeded in poaching mythical beasts and abducting elves. This spurred on other unsavory individuals who wanted to make a quick buck. There seemed to be no end to the stream of interlopers.

As we made our way deeper into the heart of the forest, we found ourselves blocked by rivers, fallen trees, and large boulders, forcing us to stray from the animal trail. We stopped by a few settlements on the way; after about a week, we arrived in a certain village deep into the woods.

"Now *this* screams 'elven village,'" I muttered.

The closer we got to the World Tree, the stronger its mana signature, meaning that the vegetation in this part of the forest grew much faster. This made it near impossible to clear land to build a village on. Left with no choice, the elves had used their magic to hollow out the inside of the trees and live inside the trunks.

"Even the other elves react like that when they reach these parts," Althea chuckled.

Focusing my mana into my eyes, I noticed that there were spirits fluttering about the village, making for a beautiful, twinkling landscape. The large,

perfectly straight trees had doors and round little windows installed in them—they were cozy, snug, literal tree houses. It looked a bit like the village the insect-and plant-type demons had built in my forest, except that the trees in the elves' kingdom were much bigger, and so was the scale of the settlement itself. The soft sound of running water filled the air, and a pleasant breeze danced through the branches of the tree houses, causing the leaves to sway and dappled sunlight to filter through the foliage.

Beside me, Althea looked up at the World Tree from a small gap in the tree line. It was so tall it looked like it would pierce the sky if it grew much taller.

"This is our last stop until the capital," she said.

That night, I went to bed in the tree house I had been led to, my heart pounding at the idea of finally reaching the elven capital.

"The interference spells are even stronger from this point onward. Please be careful not to get lost," Althea told us the next day as we were preparing to depart.

"Noted. But is there really any point in having them set up in these parts? Even with your sense of direction skewed, you could simply look up and head towards the World Tree," I said, my head tilted to the side.

"Yeah, you can just walk towards the big tree," Teto added.

"I see your point. But do you think that the World Tree you're seeing from here is the *real* World Tree?" Althea asked us.

At first, I found Althea's question a bit weird, but then my eyes shot wide open. I hadn't thought about it before, but I had absolutely no way of knowing.

"There are far more spirits dedicated to safeguarding the World Tree at the heart of the forest than in the middle stratum. All of them work around the clock, clouding minds and weaving illusions to ensure no harm will befall the World Tree. Light spirits might shift the scenery you're seeing slightly to the right, while dark spirits might conceal the World Tree entirely. So if you used it as your beacon to reach the capital..." Fauzard trailed off.

"You'd never make it," I concluded.

Teto and I realized that we had been completely deceived by the sight of the World Tree standing proudly over the forest.

As a sidenote, light and dark spirits weren't the only ones who could mess with one's perception; water spirits could envelop the World Tree in dense fog to conceal it, earth spirits could mess up the ambient mana to prevent one from using detection spells like *Earth Sonar*, et cetera. I surmised that they might even have been able to reduce the accuracy of skills like Mana Perception.

Spirits were pretty much the personification of nature itself. The fact that the elves had them on their side made them much scarier than I had initially thought.

And this wasn't even the last of it.

"Huh? Looks like the path...ends here?" I wondered aloud, looking down and seeing that there was no more animal trail.

"Did we take a wrong turn?" Teto asked.

As we wondered what had happened, Fauzard's mana-laced voice echoed from the lantern. "I have returned. Open the path."

Instantly, the trees in front of us started swaying, parting to the sides, while the thorny shrubs and vines formed an arch to let us through.

"Wow! That's so cool!" Teto exclaimed.

"I see. So plant spirits were hiding the way, huh?" I muttered in a mixture of shock and amazement.

"We'll be passing through this thorny tunnel. The ceiling is quite low, so let us proceed on foot for the time being," Althea said as she dismounted her sleipnir and led it by its reins.

Teto and I hopped down from our flying carpet and followed her. Glancing back a few meters in, I noticed that the path had already closed behind us. Feeling a bit of pressure at the thought that we couldn't double back in case we got lost, I focused all of my attention on following Althea.

"This is quite the punishing trek," I muttered.

"Are you okay, Lady Witch?"

As we proceeded deeper and deeper into the woods, a thick fog massed around us. It took all of my concentration to follow Althea and the spirit lantern hanging from her hip.

It was my first time finding myself in a situation where I could rely on neither my vision nor my Mana Perception. Teto and I were used to walking in the forest, but we soon found our paces slowing, and our conversation dwindled until silence enveloped us. Mindlessly following Althea, I glanced back to see how Teto was doing.

“Teto, are you okay? Are you keeping up?” I asked, but then I felt my blood run cold; she wasn’t behind me. “Teto?! Miss Althea! Teto has disappeared!”

I turned back around, only to see that Althea wasn’t there either.

“Huh? How...” I gasped, completely dumbfounded.

I tried to use Mana Perception to look for Teto and Althea, but there were way too many mana signatures jumbled together to pick them out.

“This way! This way!”

The only thing that I could pinpoint was a single voice cheerfully calling for me in the middle of the fog.

“What’s calling for me?” I muttered, following the voice.

The closer I got to it, the thinner the fog got; soon I found myself in a clearing, a beautiful spring glistening in the center.

“What is this place?”

Making my way to the edge of the spring, I used Mana Perception again. The mana signatures that were causing interference earlier all disappeared at once, yet there was no sign of Teto and the others.

“Teto! Miss Althea! Fauzard! If you can hear me, please respond!” I yelled, my voice echoing among the trees.

But still nothing.

“I’ve gotten myself completely lost,” I groaned.

With no other option, I sat at the edge of the spring and decided to wait for

Teto and Althea to come find me.

Chapter 14: The Spirit Corridor

Althea, the Elven Guide's Side

"Lady Wiiiitch! Lady Wiiiitch!" Miss Teto's voice echoed among the trees. She sounded on the verge of tears.

"Miss Chise! If you can hear us, please respond!"

I felt a twinge of pain in my chest, bitterly reflecting on my earlier failure. I was guiding the Witch of Creation to the capital of our kingdom, when all of a sudden, she vanished without a trace into the fog.

The three of us had been walking in a line with me in the front, Miss Teto in the back, and Miss Chise between us. I had just turned around to check that the two of them were still following me, and nothing seemed amiss. Yet, to my dismay, only a couple of seconds later, I heard Miss Teto exclaim, "Lady Witch is gone!"

We had called for her—not straying from the path, so as not to get Miss Teto lost as well—but there was no answer. I tried to detect her mana signature, but the spirits jammed the signal.

"Oh, Teto knows! If we connect Teto's transfer gate with Lady Witch's, we'll find her!"

With those words, Miss Teto took the transfer gate Miss Chise had made with her Creation Magic out of her magic bag and set it down in the middle of the path. From what I had been told, transfer gates worked in pairs: by passing through one, you could instantaneously travel to the other. However...

"This should let us regroup with Lady Wi— Huh?"

Miss Teto tried to take the transfer gate, but she just walked straight through it.

"I am terribly sorry, but unauthorized teleportation spells cannot be used in this part of the forest. Not only is our capital near, but so is our World Tree; the

spirits are hard at work guarding them from outsiders,” I explained.

Tears welled up in Miss Teto’s eyes.

“Lady Wiiiitch! Lady Wiiiitch!” she shouted frantically, on the verge of tears.

I didn’t know what to do.



“Where did she go?” I muttered, thinking that she must’ve somehow deviated from the path and got lost in the woods.

But as I was blaming myself for my carelessness, Lord Fauzard’s voice echoed from the lantern hanging at my hip.

“The spirits did it,” he said.

“Lord Fauzard?”

“Do you know where Lady Witch is?!” Miss Teto exclaimed, turning around to face me.

“Spirits of much greater rank than the ones you are bound in contract with have invited her to the spirit corridor, dark elf child.”

“What did you just say?!” I gasped.

The spirit corridor was a special path only spirits could take. It was some sort of subspace where the spirits could temporarily hide or cross through to teleport to faraway places. The entrance was usually marked by a fairy circle, the kind that often appeared in tales of spirits and fairies. Other tales painted fairies as mischievous creatures who would purposefully lead travelers astray and abduct children, taking them to the spirit corridor. Some other times, benevolent spirits would find lost individuals and teleport them to their original location, quite literally spiriting them away.

“How can we find Lady Witch?” Miss Teto asked Lord Fauzard.

His reply didn’t give us much hope.

“The only one who knows where she will end up is the spirit that invited her. It most likely will not be here, though.”

“Then could you please open a portal to the spirit corridor for us to go find her directly?” I asked.

“I cannot. In my current state, I have too little power.”

I thought for a bit and said, “It would be foolish for us to look for Miss Chise at random. We more likely than not will end up making things worse for ourselves. I suggest that we hurry to the capital to report her disappearance to Her

Majesty and ask the knights to look for Miss Chise.”

We elves could use spirit magic, but almost none of us could interfere with the spirit corridor. The only one I knew with this ability was the queen herself. Our best course of action would be to have her open a portal to the spirit corridor and send in a search party. If they brought greater spirits with them, they’d find her in no time.

“Lady Witch! Lady Witch!” Miss Teto sobbed.

I helped her onto my sleipnir, and the two of us dashed through the woods towards the capital without stopping even once. Whenever we encountered an obstacle in our path, I used *Shadow Shift*, the spell the dark spirit I had formed a contract with had granted me, to pass through the shadows. However, *Shadow Shift* only allowed me to teleport to somewhere in my field of vision, so I couldn’t use it to cross large distances. I usually only used it to teleport small items and letters from one spot to the other. This was the first time I’d used it to teleport two people and a sleipnir, and I could feel my mana reserves depleting quickly. I didn’t let that deter me, downing mana potion after mana potion to replenish my powers and get to the capital as fast as I could. Miss Teto and I took turns holding the sleipnir’s reins, and the two of us pushed forward for twenty-four hours straight.

The Witch’s Side

After having followed the mysterious voice and found nothing, I checked if my transfer gates and magic communication device worked.

“Nope. My magic communication device is a bust too.”

I had hoped I could use at least one of them to contact Teto and Althea, but it seemed luck wasn’t on my side. The spirits’ interference spells must’ve been the culprit.

“Why am I the only one who got led to this place in the first place?” I wondered out loud.

Teto was part spirit, and Althea knew the forest intimately. Whoever or whatever led me here should’ve invited them too, right? I pondered why they

chose not to, but I couldn't come up with a satisfying answer.

"Well, I have no idea what this place is, but it *is* pretty, so I guess I'll take the opportunity to get some rest," I mumbled defiantly, taking a quilt out of my magic bag and spreading it on the ground.

I grabbed a strange fruit and started munching on it as I admired my surroundings.

"It really is a nice place. It feels like my soul is being cleansed just by being here."

As I basked in the sunlight pouring down from the clear sky above the spring, a pleasant breeze gently caressed my cheeks, making me feel refreshed. The soft murmur of the water flowing from the spring and the rustle of the leaves in the wind made for a relaxing melody of nature.

"I wonder when Teto and Althea will come to find me," I muttered, idly admiring the scenery.

All of a sudden, I heard footsteps coming from behind me, and I whipped my head around.

"Hm? What is this child doing here?" the newcomer asked.

She was an elven woman with flawless porcelain skin, blue eyes, and hair so blonde it looked like strands of gold. Her alluring body was clad in an indigo blue dress, a slit in the skirt offering glimpses of her bare leg. She looked completely out of place standing in the woods in such an elegant outfit, but I was so stunned by her beauty (despite being a fellow woman myself) that I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.



“An elf?” I muttered.

She had pointy ears—the trademark of elves—but her beauty set her apart from the other elves I knew.

She shot me a quizzical look. “Yes, I am an elf. Is that so curious?”

“No, not really, but, um... Who are you?” I asked.

“I believe it is I who should be posing the questions. I was summoned by the whispers of my spirits, and what do I find? A strange child lazing on the ground. How did you get here?”

“I don’t really know either,” I confessed. “I was walking in the forest, and I got lost in the fog all of a sudden. A voice called me, so I followed it, and I wound up here.”

The elven woman let out a sigh. “You have been taken to the spirit corridor,” she said.

“The ‘spirit corridor’?” I repeated quizzically.

“Yes. It is a path used by the spirits to travel from one place to the other. The spirits must have taken a liking to you and brought you to this place.”

So that foggy tunnel I found myself alone in was some sort of subspace, and the voice from earlier must have been what led me out.

“Humans refer to this phenomenon as being ‘spirited away,’” the elven woman explained. “Judging by her appearance, her parents must be mages,” she added under her breath, looking at my robe.

“I didn’t see any spirits when I looked around, though,” I said.

“You can see spirits? Hm... If you truly do hail from a mage family, I suppose it is not that strange. After all, one just has to focus their mana into their eyes to see the unseen. However,” she said as if she were explaining things to a young child, “not all that exists in the unseen realm wishes to be seen. Spirits, in particular, are elusive creatures, adept at hiding within the very essence of nature. They cloak themselves in the trees, the earth, the water. Even the most skilled may struggle to perceive them.”

That makes sense, I thought.

When the woman was done with her explanation, she narrowed her eyes and said to the empty air, “It is high time you explain why you have called me and this child here.”

She closed her folding fan with a light *snap*. The next instant, a faint light emerged from the air, revealing several spirits bound in mana chains.

“We just wanted to make you happy, Elna!”

“You said you wanted to meet her, so we made her come to you!”

It seemed that these spirits had dragged me through their ghost hole just so this lady and I could get to know each other.

“You did it for my sake, you say?” the elven woman asked, her brow knitted in displeasure. “I have, indeed, invited some of the individuals who piqued your interest to alleviate my boredom in the past. However, I find it most displeasing that you have invited this child without warning me ahead of time. How am I supposed to receive her properly? I had no time to make any arrangements.”

“Huh? That’s what you’re mad about?” I was so surprised by her priorities that the question slipped my lips.

She didn’t mind the spirits inviting someone to what I could only assume was her place without asking for permission, but she was angry they didn’t let her know?

On hearing my comment, the woman looked even more sullen.

“Normally, I am prepared to send back the spirits’ guests promptly upon their request. However, since I did not know that they would be bringing you along, I did not make the necessary preparations this time. It shall require some time before I can ensure your return to whence you came,” she muttered, her tone tinged with frustration.

She spent some time deep in thought, seemingly debating what to do with me.

“I suppose I do not have a choice,” she said after a few seconds. “You shall come with me. I shall share my mana with the spirits, so I should be able to

send you back by tomorrow.”

“Um, thank you. But I’ve been separated from Teto—from my friend—when I got spirited away. I’d like to find her, if possible.”

“I shall make the necessary arrangements. Well then, follow me!”

The mysterious woman helped me up and led me to a large tree nearby. Still holding me by the hand, she leaped into its shadow. For a second, everything around me was black, but the next instant, I found myself in a completely different place from before. The sky was concealed by the foliage of the biggest World Tree I had ever seen, but the place wasn’t devoid of light by any means; the mana emitted by the World Tree was enough to illuminate the whole town in a whitish light.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed in amazement.

“Welcome to our beautiful nation—the Eltar Forest Kingdom! We are presently awaiting an important guest, so I might have to excuse myself temporarily when they arrive, but I promise I shall help you return to your lost companion.”

The Eltar Kingdom, huh? So as it turned out, I had already reached my destination without even realizing it.

I didn’t have time to dwell on the elven woman’s words, though, as she promptly whisked me away to show me around town.

Chapter 15: The Eltar Forest Kingdom

As I followed the woman towards a large building, I couldn't help but gawk at my surroundings. But then, suddenly snapping back to my senses, I started asking the woman about all the things that were weighing on my mind.

"Did you use *Shadow Shift* to teleport us here? And is this the capital of the elven kingdom? More importantly, are you okay? You just teleported two people, you must've used a ton of mana."

Althea had given us a little demonstration of the *Shadow Shift* spell, but it hadn't been anywhere near that impressive. All it allowed her to do was get letters from inside the shadows and teleport small items around. Possibly the woman had used a regular teleportation spell. But those used up a boatload of mana, and the more people you wanted to teleport, the more expensive they were, so I couldn't help being worried about the woman's mana reserves.

She regarded me with a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. "Oh? Concerned for my welfare, are you? My, what a good kid you are; how endearing," she said before ruffling my hair.



“H-Hey!” I protested, taking a few steps back to put some distance between us. I pulled the hood of my robe up and stood on guard to prevent another attack on my hair.

The elven woman seemed pleased by my reaction, an amused smile curling on her lips. “No need to be so defensive. Besides, my mana pool is not as shallow as you may think. Teleporting two people is a mere trifle for one of my stature.”

“Is that so? Well, I guess that’s elves for you.”

She had incredibly good Mana Control, so I couldn’t see how much mana she had, but I supposed it made sense for an elf.

“Come, child. Follow me.”

“Yes, yes.”

We resumed our walk; I once again found myself gawking at our surroundings.

“What do you think, child? Is our capital to your liking?” she asked me, amused.

“It’s a wonderful place. It looks like it came right out of a fairy tale.”

Most of the buildings were white, but the pristine water of the canal passing through the city and the scattered pockets of greenery added some color. Taking a closer look at the flowers and shrubs, I could tell I had never seen anything like them before.

“You are adorable. I am quite used to this city, so I do not see its charms anymore, but I am glad to see you do,” the elven woman said.

“I’ve never seen any city like this one before, so I’m genuinely in awe,” I said.

The elven woman flashed me another smile before leading me to a building at the root of the World Tree.

“Come,” she said.

“Uh... Am I really allowed to go in there? Are you some sort of big shot here?”

The building she had led me to looked like some sort of imperial palace.

Was she a court magician or something? I wondered as I followed her into the building.

I must have been onto something; all of the people in the palace lowered their heads when they saw her.

“Welcome back, Lady Elnea.”

“I have returned from my walk. I found a little guest in the forest, so I shall be taking her to one of the guest rooms.” Elnea waved her folding fan around and added that they didn’t need to bother with ceremonious greetings.

Stiff smiles formed on the servants’ faces. Judging by their reactions, they seemed to be used to Elnea acting casually around them.

“Hmm... Not this one, not this one... Here. You may sleep here tonight,” she said, opening the door to a room.

“Thank you very much...”

I entered the room and was bewildered by how lavish it was. Not only was it much, much bigger than my room at the mansion, but I could tell with a single glance that the furniture and decorations were of the highest quality.

As I gawked at my surroundings, Elnea went to take a seat on the sofa. With a wiggle of her fingers, she summoned a shadow, from which she retrieved a wine glass and a bottle of alcohol.

“There is nothing quite like a refreshing drink after a stroll in the forest,” she said.

“Um... I’m happy you’ve decided to keep me safe until I’m reunited with my friend, but why are you staying in the room with me?” I asked.

“Well, I cannot leave a child like you in such a large room by herself, can I? Fortunately, the bed is quite roomy, so we should have sufficient space to spend the night together.”

I mean, I guess it is, but...

I glanced at her from the corner of my eye and, upon noticing my gaze, she tilted her head to the side and held out her glass to me.

“What is it? Are you curious about what I am drinking? Would you like a sip?” she offered.

“No, thank you.”

“What a shame,” she said, sounding a bit disappointed. “This fruit wine is brewed right here in our forest. It is quite delectable.”

She tilted her glass back and took an elegant sip of red wine.

“You must be someone important in the elven kingdom, right, Miss Elnea? Couldn’t you just have let the servants from earlier look after me for the night?” I asked.

“‘Miss Elnea,’ hm? How long has it been since someone last called me that...”

She repeated “Miss Elnea” a few times as she sipped on her wine. When she noticed my gaze, she cleared her throat and said, “You are right; I could have sent you with the domestics. However, I have taken a liking to you, child, so I decided to keep you by my side.”

“That’s quite kind of you, but I should probably mention that I’m not a child,” I pointed out.

“Yes, yes, I am aware. Children like you always like to pretend that they are all grown up. Besides, from my perspective, everyone is but a mere child,” she said, smiling warmly at me.

I didn’t know how to reply to that.

“Here, do not just stand there. Come and join me.” She patted the sofa next to her, but I decided to take a seat on the one opposite her instead. However, before I could take a seat, she folded her fan with a quick movement of the wrist, and the second sofa disappeared into the shadows.

I let out a long sigh. “Fine,” I said, begrudgingly sitting beside her.

She started fawning over me, petting my hair and repeating how cute I was over and over again. Teto also liked to pat me on the head and call me cute, but this lady was clearly treating me like a child. I wasn’t exactly pleased by the situation I had found myself in, but she had kinda saved my life, so I decided to bear with it for the time being.

“Oh, this reminds me, have you ever ventured beyond the border of the forest?” Elnea asked me, still petting my hair.

“I’ve traveled to a lot of places, if that’s what you’re asking?” I replied.

“I have seldom left our forest, you see. I would be most intrigued to hear tales of the outside world.”

I gave her words some thought. I had heard before that not only were outsiders rarely let into the elves’ forest, but the elves themselves almost never ventured into the outside world either. I wasn’t too surprised to hear that she was curious about what lay beyond the kingdom’s border.

“Hm... Would you like me to tell you about the Town of Soap?” I offered.

“Oh! Soap! We also wash our clothes with soapwort herbs we gather in the forest!”

Her eyes sparkled like a child’s, standing at odds with her ethereal beauty. I couldn’t prevent a wry smile from curling on my lips at the sight.

And so I recounted my time in Gash Town, the village I had helped reclaim, Elnea wanted to hear more stories, so I shared more anecdotes of Teto’s and my travels with her. I told her about the orphanage and the training facility I’d helped build, the Church of the Five Goddesses and the beautiful wedding ceremony I’d once witnessed, the little dwarven friend I had made in the former mining town, the bustling port city, the towns that had been destroyed in the stampede... I made sure to alter the stories slightly and exclude some details so as not to blow my cover.

Elnea listened intently to my travel anecdotes, occasionally nodding and asking for more details. I tried to reply to the best of my ability without giving too much information about myself. When I came to, I noticed that several hours had passed since I had started talking. Looking out of the window, I saw that the mana coming from the World Tree had dwindled—a sign that night was about to fall.

“I’m a bit hungry,” I said.

“Hm? Oh. My apologies. I have forgotten to have a meal prepared for you.”

“It’s fine; I brought my own food.”

With those words, I took out a jar and an earthenware pot from my magic bag. Time didn’t pass inside my magic bag, meaning that I could store freshly made meals in it and have them still be warm by the time I wanted them.

“That is a magic bag, is it not?” Elnea said, her curiosity piqued.

“You know of them?” I asked back.

“Indeed I do. I have beheld many magic items in my time. There are several dungeons in our forest, and I have heard that you can find magic bags in them. Pray tell, which dungeon did you find that one in?”

“Uh, I didn’t find it myself, someone gave it to me, so I don’t really know. I’m just using it because it’s handy,” I lied before changing the topic. “Anyway, want some?” I asked, opening the lid of the pot I had taken out of my bag.

“This dish smells quite pungent, does it not?” she noted.

The dish in question was Teto’s favorite—curry. As soon as I had removed the lid, the spicy aroma spread into the room. I had made some pork curry using orc meat as the main ingredient.

I heard Elnea gulp loudly beside me. “This aroma is stimulating my appetite... It resembles stew, yet it seems completely different at the same time. I had no idea such a dish existed in the outside world.”

I paid no attention to her rambling, opening the earthenware pot in which I had some cooked rice and ladling some onto a plate. I had used rice grown by the minotaurs in the forest; it was glossy and looked delicious. The next and last step was to ladle some curry on the other side of the plate, and boom: you had curry rice.

“So? Want some? I’m the one who made it. I have bread too, if you’d like.”

“What a splendid opportunity! I shall share a meal with you!”

I prepared a plate for Elnea, as well as side salads for the two of us, and set the dishes on the table. She gingerly scooped some curry rice and brought it to her mouth for a taste. Then another. And another. After taking the first bite, her spoon didn’t stop for a single second. The spicy aroma of the curry mixed with

the sweetness of the sautéed onions, all enveloped in pork fat, must have been giving her taste buds a *wild ride*.

“I’m glad it’s to your liking,” I said, picking up my own spoon and digging in.

While I was technically an adult, my body was still that of a preteen, and that unfortunately included my tongue, meaning I had to limit myself to what some would call “moderately spicy” curry. It was a good thing, since Elnea had never had curry before; had it been spicier, she might’ve struggled with it, but this one was mild enough for her to dig in to her heart’s content. She was still as poised and elegant as ever, silently sipping on her wine and taking small bites of her salad, but she was devouring her curry rice with much more gusto. She had treated me like a child the entire day, yet I managed to blow her socks off completely with my dish; I felt a bit like I had won this battle.

Pleased with myself, I resumed my meal.

“It was delicious. Much better than stew,” Elnea said when she was done with her food.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“You must be tired. You should go take a bath.”

I put the used dishes into my magic bag and headed to the adjoining bathroom. I had used *Clean* to get rid of any dirt and grime while we were in the forest, so I wasn’t *dirty* per se, but there really wasn’t anything like the feeling of soaking into a nice, hot bath.

“Haa... This is heavenly,” I sighed in happiness.

“Let me join you, child!”

Elnea entered the room, her beautiful figure unabashedly revealed before my eyes.

“Wh-What are you doing here?!” I squeaked.

“Children should not bathe alone. You and I are both female; no need to be embarrassed.”

“I can take a bath by myself, thank you very much! And, yeah, we might both be women, but you still took me by surprise...”

“No need for you to concern yourself with such matters,” she said, joining me in the bath.

I glared at her from the corner of my eye as she started washing her body beside me.

At least this bath is more than big enough for two people, I thought, seeing the silver lining in this otherwise dire situation. But then, my eyes caught sight of Elnea’s ample, perfectly round breasts, and another wave of despair struck me as I looked down at my own, completely flat chest.

“One day your chest will grow just like mine, child. Do not lose hope,” Elnea comforted me.

I couldn’t possibly tell her that, no, my body would never grow past this point, so I simply mumbled a quiet little “Th-Thanks.” I felt a bit guilty for not telling her the truth, but oh well.

I could use my Transformation Magic to make myself look older, but even when I did, my chest was nowhere near as big as Elnea’s.

Soon the two of us exited the bath and headed to bed, but today had been such a hectic day that I had a hard time falling asleep. Elnea, on the other hand, was dead to the world, having had quite a few glasses of wine.

As I glanced through the window from my spot on the sofa, I couldn’t even rejoice at reaching my destination. I just felt weird and out of place.

“I wonder what Teto’s doing...” I muttered.

I still couldn’t parse everything that had happened to me in the past few hours; I was too worried about Teto and Althea. Still, there was nothing I could do at the moment, so I ultimately decided to try falling asleep again.

I lay down on the sofa, feeling myself sink into its plush softness. It was more than big enough for me to fall asleep on.

Chapter 16: The High Elf Queen

I was sleeping peacefully, curled up on the soft sofa, when hurried footsteps echoed from outside of the room, waking me. My senses still dulled, I noticed that someone was speaking.

“Lady Elnea! Why are you sleeping in a guest room?! I’ve been looking for you everywhere! If you’re going to sleep somewhere, at least do it in your own room, I beg of you!” a female voice said. I felt like I had already heard that voice before. Despite being half asleep, I found my attention drawn towards it.

“Why does it matter so much? We seldom have guests over. Should someone of importance arrive, they could easily be accommodated in another chamber,” Elnea replied to the other woman. Judging by the direction from which her voice was coming, she must’ve been standing in front of the door. “More pressing, however, is your evident fatigue. And what of the girl with you? Why is she in tears?”

Now that Elnea mentioned it, there was indeed a girl crying on the other side of the door. “It’s terrible! The Witch of Creation disappeared on our way here!”

“What?!” Elnea exclaimed.

“She disappeared yesterday,” the other woman supplied. “Lord Fauzard has suggested that she might have been taken to the spirit corridor! We have sent a request to the order of chivalry to form a search party and look for her!”

“She is such an important guest, yet we...” Elnea muttered. “My spirits and I shall help you search for her!”

Ugh, they’re being awfully noisy at this hour... I grumbled inwardly in my half-sleeping state as I rubbed my eyes. I stood up from the sofa and made my way to the door.

“Is there something wrong, Miss Elnea?” I asked.

“Oh, have you awakened, child? A guest of ours has disappeared in the forest, and I must go look for them. Can you remain in this room until my return?”

I peered through the door and made eye contact with the two women standing on the other side.

“Ah,” Althea and I said at the exact same time.

Beside her, Teto was crying for me, tears running down her face.

“Morning, Teto, Miss Althea,” I said.

“L-Lady Wiiiitch!” Teto exclaimed, throwing herself at me as she cried, sending us both tumbling backward.



Taking a good look at Teto, I noticed that there were small cracks on her face. She must've cried so much that she had almost no moisture left inside her body. Meanwhile, I had been peacefully sleeping on the comfy sofa of Elnea's guest room... I couldn't help feeling incredibly guilty.

"It's okay, Teto; everything's okay. Calm down and drink some water, all right?" I said softly.

"Teto is so glad! Teto is so glad you're okay, Lady Witch!" she bawled.

A couple of feet away, Althea was glaring at Elnea. "Lady Elnea... Please don't tell me you're the one who took Miss Chise away!"

"I did not; it is all a misunderstanding. I would never do anything of the sort!" she said, looking at me with pleading eyes, as if she were begging me to back her up.

I felt a bit guilty for her, so I explained the entire situation to Althea.

"I hope Lady Elnea wasn't too rude to you," she said when I was done talking.

"Not at all; quite the opposite, actually. She was very kind to me. Although, she did treat me like a child...but I blame my appearance for that," I replied as I made Teto drink some water I had taken from my magic bag.

"My apologies. I cannot believe she was that rude to the ruler of another nation..."

"I do apologize, but I did not know her identity, so what was I supposed to do? Besides, I am a ruler too," Elnea grumbled.

"The spirits told you about her, did they not?! How did you not put together who she was?!" Althea demanded, her voice laced with frustration.

"I was aware that she was over ninety years of age, but the spirits do not concern themselves with mortals' appearances, so I did not know what she looked like. Besides, skilled witches can change their appearances at will. Even if I knew what she was supposed to look like, I could still have been fooled," Elnea replied defensively.

"But Miss Chise is famous for looking much younger than her actual age," Althea pointed out.

“I have lived for over two thousand years; such trivial details are hardly worth remembering. Besides, one can discern much about a person’s character upon meeting them, and not a moment sooner. Either way, the spirits led her to me, so all is well that ends well,” Elnea said with a dismissive flick of her hand.

Althea grumbled something too quietly to make out, a discontented expression on her face. I started feeling a bit bad for her.

“Well then, allow me to properly introduce myself to you, child—no, ruler of the Witch of Creation’s Forest. I am Elnea, the queen of the Eltar Forest Kingdom. And this is—”

“Althea. I serve as an aide to Her Majesty Lady Elnea.”

I had pretty much put two and two together when Althea and Elnea were arguing, but Elnea had been the queen of the elves all along, huh?

I decided to introduce myself properly as well. “I’m Chise, from the Witch of Creation’s Forest.”

“Thank you for finding Lady Witch. Teto is Teto,” Teto said beside me, and the two of us lightly bowed in front of the elven queen.

Elnea nodded, a pleased expression on her face. “Chise and Teto. Those are fine names, indeed. Now that I know your name, it would be impolite to keep calling you ‘child.’ Besides, as fellow immortals, our time together looms long into the future. May I call you Chise?”

“I don’t mind, Your Majesty,” I replied.

A cute pout appeared on Elnea’s face. “You do not need to start acting all formal with me,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I do not care for formality. I do, however, have a fondness for cute things.” She extended both hands to pet Teto and me on the head, but stopped herself when Althea cleared her throat behind her.

“Your Majesty,” she whispered harshly.

Elnea reluctantly retracted her hands, a displeased look on her face, although I couldn’t tell if it was because she had been disturbed or because she didn’t

like being called by her title.

“Good gracious, you used to be so cute when you were little. How did you come to be as you are now?” Elnea said before proceeding to imitate what I supposed was a young Althea crying.

The real Althea turned as red as a tomato. “Please stop talking about my childhood! It’s embarrassing!” she squeaked.

She had been so calm and composed while we were traveling, it was interesting to see her losing her cool like this. It also gave me a glimpse into the nature of her relationship with Elnea.

“You two may use this room,” Elnea told Teto and I. “Now, there is one last thing that caught my eye...”

She lowered her gaze to the spirit lantern hanging from Althea’s hip.

“Long time no see, high elf queen. Are you well?” Fauzard asked.

“I am as I have always been. Leaving that aside, I could not help but notice that intriguing lantern you are staying in.”

“Lady Witch has made it for me. It allows me to replenish my power, so it is quite handy.”

Judging by how familiar Fauzard and Elnea were around each other, I surmised that they must’ve known each other before he was abducted. Well, I supposed it wasn’t too surprising; Elnea had mentioned being over two thousand years old earlier, and Fauzard’s contractor used to live in the elves’ forest. It wasn’t that far-fetched to think that they must’ve met before at some point.

The two of them kept up the small talk for a bit until a saddened look appeared on Elnea’s face. “Apologies, Fauzard. We noticed your disappearance, but you eluded us for all this time,” she said.

“It is a thing of the past,” Fauzard replied dismissively. “More importantly, have you located my contractor’s next of kin? Can I meet with them?”

Elnea nodded, her lips curled up into a small smile. “We have. Per your request, we will organize a meeting between you and her in the next few days.”

“I shall wait,” Fauzard replied.

“Chise, Teto, you two can stay in this room and get some rest until the day of the meeting,” Elna told us before she bid us adieu, Althea and Fauzard in tow, leaving only Teto and I in the room.

“Lady Witch...” Teto hiccuped between her sobs. She was still clinging to me, refusing to let go. “Teto doesn’t want you to disappear ever again.”

“I won’t,” I reassured her softly. “I’m so glad nothing happened to you.”

“Teto did her best!”

She told me about how she and Althea had traveled nonstop for an entire day and night on Althea’s sleipnir in hopes that they’d arrive as soon as physically possible.

“Teto wanted to start looking for Lady Witch right away, but Teto thought, ‘What would Lady Witch do?’ and decided to listen to Miss Althea,” she told me.

“You did very well, Teto,” I praised her. “You made the right decision.”

A smile finally appeared on her face, and she fell asleep in my arms.

I was incredibly grateful to Althea for stopping Teto from looking for me in the forest and getting herself lost in the process, as well as to Elna for coming to find me after I got teleported to the spirit corridor. If it weren’t for them, who knew how much time would have passed before Teto and I could have been reunited?

I mentally thanked them as I combed Teto’s hair, waiting for her to wake up.

Chapter 17: Fauzard's New Contract

Now that Teto and I were finally reunited, the two of us stayed at the royal palace for a few days while we waited for Elnea and her servants to organize a meeting between Fauzard and his contractor's next of kin.

On that day, there was a knock at our door; when I answered it, Elnea was standing on the other side.

"Good day to you, Chise, Teto. Is my palace to your liking?" she asked.

"It is. We went to check out your museum again yesterday."

"The magic stones looked really yummy!" Teto piped up.

We had asked Elnea's servants to take us to the museum inside the palace and spent the past couple of days looking at everything on display. We were only allowed to look at part of Elnea's collection—the rest was restricted to her and her advisers. Nevertheless, what we saw was definitely impressive: elven pottery and wooden statues, taxidermied dangerous monsters, trophies crafted from magic stones, and raw amber ore unearthed from deep within the forest, to only mention a few things. Some of the art pieces on display were so confusing that neither Teto nor I understood them, while others—in particular, the magic stones—aroused Teto's appetite so much I had to drag her away. A few pieces caught my eye, and I asked the servants where I could find similar ones to buy for my own collection. All in all, it was an enriching experience.

"I am glad to hear that. I personally have little interest in material possessions, but after two thousand years, they've piled up into quite a collection. Some of these items were given to me as offerings, while others were displayed in the museum by my advisers. They claimed that it was to highlight my achievements," she explained with a chuckle.

Judging by her words, it seemed that she had been the one who had defeated all of those monsters and collected the magic stones used to create the trophies.

“I have no interest in magic stones and the like. I can offer them to you, Teto, if you so desire,” she said.

“Really?!” Teto exclaimed. “Yes, please!”

“Hold on a minute, Lady Elnea!” Althea intervened. “Those mounted monsters and magic stones are there to show off your strength and deter others from attacking you!”

Despite Elnea being a high elf and having ruled over the elves for two millennia, there were still, to this day, some elves who dared to underestimate her prowess and leadership. The taxidermied monsters and magic stone trophies on display in the palace’s museum were there to remind them that she could defeat even strong opponents with ease.

“Please don’t just start handing off the pieces in your museum to everyone you meet,” Althea said, concluding her sermon.

Teto’s shoulders dropped. “Teto is sorry for saying she wants the magic stones,” she said sheepishly.

Elnea, on the other hand, had started sulking. Her body language screamed *I should be able to do what I want with my own things*.

“Ahem. Could we proceed with the true reason for our visit?” Fauzard asked from the spirit lantern, interrupting Althea and Elnea’s bickering.

I decided to intervene too. “Fauzard’s right. What brings you here today, Miss Elnea? Since Fauzard is with you, I’m assuming it means that everything is ready for the meeting with his contractor’s relative.”

Elnea nodded deeply. “Indeed. She arrived in town earlier; we sent for her not long ago. She should reach the palace any minute now.”

“She has said that she would like to thank you for saving Lord Fauzard,” Althea added.

“I would also like for you two to attend our reunion. You are the ones who appeased my anger, after all,” Fauzard said.

Teto and I nodded in unison. “Sure, we’ll come.”

“We want to see your reunion with our own eyes!” Teto chirped.

“Let us proceed to the drawing room, then, shall we?” Elnea said, and we did just that.

After a short wait, a knock echoed on the door. The next instant, a petite, pale elf entered the room, escorted by a maidservant.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting. I am Rorona, the spirit sorcerer Rowell’s granddaughter,” she said, her eyes closed and her ears twitching rhythmically.

“Thank you for coming, Rorona,” Elnea said.

“Please do not mention it. If it is you beckoning me, Lady Elnea, I shall come running,” Rorona replied as she let the maidservant lead her to one of the sofas.

“As I have told you in my letter, Fauzard, the greater fire spirit your grandfather had bound himself with, has been found. There he is,” Elnea said, signaling for Fauzard to introduce himself.

“It is a pleasure meeting you, Rorona. I am your grandfather’s spirit,” he said from inside the spirit lantern.

Rorona addressed the spirit lantern directly. “It is an honor meeting you. My grandfather told me much about you.”

After that, an uncomfortable silence settled in the room. Both Fauzard and Rorona must have spent days thinking of what to tell each other, but now that they were finally face-to-face, they couldn’t find the words.

“What? After all that fuss about wanting to meet each other, you two merely sit here in silence?” Elnea interjected, breaking the tension. “Oh well. You two can discuss when you are alone, I suppose. Now, Rorona,” she said, turning towards the elven girl.

Rorona let out a little “Huh?” as Elnea’s words snapped her back to reality. “Ah, um, what is it, Lady Elnea?”

“These two here are the ones who released Fauzard from his seal and alleviated his anger. You may hand them the spirit tags,” Elnea said.

Rorona nodded and stood up, bowing slowly before Teto and me. “It is an honor to meet you. My name is Rorona. I work as a priestess in the forest.”

“I’m Chise the witch. It’s nice to meet you.”

“And Teto is Teto! Lady Witch’s guardian!”

I held out my right hand for a handshake and Rorona did the same, but she missed my hand repeatedly, grasping at thin air.

“H-Huh? That’s weird. I cannot feel your mana signature properly, so I cannot shake your hand.”

“Ah, my bad. I usually keep my mana signature concealed.”

I released a bit of mana; this time, Rorona got hold of my hand with ease.

“Are you visually impaired, Miss Rorona?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ve been blind since birth, but I can feel mana and spirits, so it is not usually that inconvenient,” she replied with a smile before shaking hands with Teto.

“I asked her to make spirit tags for you and Teto as a thank-you for saving Fauzard,” Elnea said.

“Spirit tags?” I repeated, trying to make sense of what it could be. “What are they?”

At my words, Rorona took out two wooden tags wrapped in red cloth from her bag and set them down on the table.

“Lady Elnea told me to make these for you two when she informed me of Lord Fauzard’s return,” she explained.

She explained that these wooden tags were magic items made out of wood chips that fell from the World Tree and were further enchanted with magical seals.

“Most outsiders have a difficult time in our forest due to the spirits’ interference,” Elnea explained. “However, if you have one of these spirit tags on your person, you will be able to bypass them.”

She added that all we had to do was release some of our own mana onto the tags to activate them. They were exclusive to a single individual, so no one else would be able to use ours.

A bit like guild cards, I thought, as Teto and I each picked up a wooden tag and passed some mana into them. Instantly, they changed color and texture; they still weighed the same as before, but they looked and felt like metal.

“Congratulations. Now you two can move about the forest freely,” Elnea said with a mischievous smile.

I could easily discern the meaning behind her words.

“So we can come visit you whenever we want, right?”

“You have found me out.”

Now that we had the spirit tags, we could use our transfer gates to pop by the elves’ kingdom and come see Elnea without having to go through the whole ordeal of crossing the forest. Considering she was a fellow immortal, she wouldn’t be disappearing anytime soon, meaning we’d have plenty of occasions to visit.

“Lady Elnea, if you keep handing these to outsiders, you will put us in danger,” Althea scolded her.

“But they shall have a much simpler time coming to help us if we ever need it,” Elnea retorted, dismissing Althea’s concerns with a wave of her hand.

“Still! I beg of you, please be more cautious!”

Rorona listened to their exchange, an amused smile on her face.

We exchanged some more pleasantries before Rorona left with Fauzard’s spirit lantern. A few days later, we were told that the two of them finally managed to have a conversation about Rowell, Rorona’s grandfather, and that Fauzard decided to forge a new contract with Rorona, swearing to protect her.

Chapter 18: A Stroll in the Elven Capital

Now that we were free from the spirits' interferences, Teto and I could finally contact Beretta with our magical communication devices.

"Oooh, it worked!" Teto chirped when we got connected to Beretta.

"Beretta, how's the connection?"

"It is satisfactory," Beretta replied from the other end of the line.

Using teleportation and communication spells in this part of the forest was completely impossible due to the spirits' interference. When Teto and I got separated, both of our first reactions had been to try using our transfer gates and communication devices, but to no avail. But now that we had the spirit tags Rorona had made for us, we could *finally* contact Beretta. I was feeling a bit moved to be able to talk to her at last, and it must've shown on my face, as Beretta threw me a quizzical look.

"Have you arrived in the elves' forest already, Master?" she asked me.

I nodded and proceeded to tell her everything from the moment Althea came to pick us up in Lief. Teto occasionally interrupted me to supply some details, and Beretta nodded at regular intervals to show she was still listening.

"I see," she said when my little story time was over. "So that is what happened."

"Yup. There were a couple of hiccups along the way, but we've successfully reached the elves' kingdom *and* delivered Fauzard to his contractor's kin."

Now that we had accomplished what we came here to do, we didn't exactly have any other plans in the elves' forest.

"Will you be returning home, then?" Beretta asked.

"Probably. The elves are a bit unsociable with other races, so it's not like we can just wander around and go sightseeing. We'll come home soon," I said.

"It's a bit of a shame we didn't get to buy souvenirs for you guys before,

though,” Teto lamented, her shoulders slumping.

“Let’s ask Miss Elnea to let us visit the town next time,” I suggested to cheer her up.

“I shall eagerly await your return, Master, Lady Teto,” Beretta concluded.

We told her goodbye and cut the call right as someone knocked on our door.

“Chise, Teto, do you have some free time at the moment?” Elnea asked as she opened the door.

“We have nothing but free time. Humans can’t just wander around town on their own here, can they?” I pointed out.

Elnea’s art collection had kept us occupied for a few days, but there was only so much we could do to pass the time without leaving the palace. It was fine when we were with Elnea and Althea, given their status, but we couldn’t just walk around town on our own.

“I must go conduct an inspection of the town shortly, so I was thinking of inviting you two to join me,” Elnea said.

“She is just using her royal duties as an excuse to take you sightseeing,” Althea said with a deep sigh.

So, Elnea wanted to give us the nickel tour, huh?

“Thank you so much! Teto will buy lots of souvenirs for Beretta and the others!” Teto cheered.

On the other hand, I was a bit concerned for Elnea. “Are you sure we can come? Don’t you have work to do?”

She could pretend to be on an official mission as she showed us around town all she wanted, but she was still the queen; she must have had duties.

“I can just delegate my tasks to the elders and my most promising young advisors. I do not involve myself too much in the kingdom’s politics in the first place.”

“Personally, I wish you’d act in a way more befitting of your rank, but...” Althea sighed.

“I think most immortal beings tend to be that way,” I pointed out.

It seemed that, just like me, Elnea reigned over her kingdom but didn't actively participate in its day-to-day affairs. I completely got her; after all, the two of us were immortal. If we took care of everything by ourselves, the younger generation would never have the opportunity to grow and develop. For that reason, I believed our way of doing things was the most appropriate.

“Well then, let us cease dillydallying and head out, shall we? Chise, Teto, is there somewhere you two wish to go?” Elnea asked.

“We don't really know what's out there, so I'm thinking we can just walk around, and you can tell us about the town,” I suggested.

“Lady Witch loves books! And Teto loves yummy things!” Teto supplied.

“Then let us visit the shops and marketplaces,” Elnea decided.

And so she and Althea took us out of the palace for the first time since our arrival in the elven capital. It was the middle of the day, so the streets were bustling with activity; every time we crossed paths with the elves, they would bow their heads to Elnea and greet her cheerfully.

“Are you all doing well? I have decided to give my guests a tour of the town,” she explained.

This aroused the elves' curiosity, and they gathered around us to steal glances at Teto and me, but Elnea calmly made them understand that we preferred not to be disturbed, and they all left soon enough.

After that, we headed to what looked like a shopping district, where Elnea caught the attention of the shopkeepers once again.

“Welcome to the shopping district, Lady Elnea! We would be honored to have you visit our shop.”

“Ah, please come to our shop too!”

“Your shop's a weapon store! What's she gonna do there? She doesn't need weapons!”

“Lady Elnea, we have just produced this year's new batch of magic silk. Would you care to have a garment tailored from it?”

Words flew from all directions as we made our way through the street.

“Well then, Chise, Teto, is there a shop you would like to visit?” Elnea asked us, a stiff smile on her face at the overzealous attention of the shopkeepers.

“Hm... What about—”

Gurgle.

“Huh? What was that noise?”

As I was looking around the street, trying to pick a shop to visit, Teto’s stomach suddenly started growling.

“I’m a bit hungry,” she said, giggling bashfully, which drew a chuckle out of me in turn.

Well, our first stop is all decided, then.

“Miss Elnea, Miss Althea, are there any eateries you recommend in the area?” I asked.

“I shall take you to my favorite spot!” Elnea declared. “My treat!”

“I appreciate the feeling, but friends shouldn’t loan each other money when they’re both flush. We’ll pay our own way.”

We followed Elnea to her favorite café, which sold sweets made with legumes, nuts, and berries, all of which were abundant this deep into the forest. I had some dried fruits, as well as a slice of maple syrup tart, and washed it all down with a cup of acorn coffee. Since reincarnating in this world, the only coffee I’d had was the stuff I made with my Creation Magic. The kind brewed by the elves had a bit of a different flavor, making for a fresh experience. It was pretty good, so I bought two jars of ground acorns to brew at home. After we were done with our meal, Elnea took us on a walk around town, where we got to see a lot of exciting sights. It was, overall, a really fun day.

Chapter 19: Installing a Transfer Gate in the Elves' Forest

“We got to see so many interesting things today,” I commented after we were done with our walk.

“You looked like you were having a lot of fun, Lady Witch!” Teto said.

The elves were known for their magic abilities, and you could really tell that they took that stuff seriously; all of their magic items were much more refined than the ones you'd find in other towns. I also had a good time browsing their other wares: hair ornaments and accessories inspired by the spirits the elves worshiped, daily necessities, folkcrafts, and so on and so forth. The elves also happened to be well-versed in pharmaceuticals, so I dropped by an apothecary to check out their stock. They had all sorts of ingredients and medicine I had never seen before.

We didn't come anywhere near close to touring the entire town, but we decided to call it a day when the sun started setting, and the four of us started heading back to Elnea's palace.

“I guess that's all for today, huh? Thank you for showing us around, Miss Elnea,” I said.

“Today was a lot of fun! But Teto is a bit sad Lady Witch didn't get to go see the books.”

“It's fine; we didn't have time.”

Teto and I both sighed with a mixture of contentment—for having finally gotten to visit the elves' capital—and disenchantment at not having seen everything we wanted to.

On seeing our reactions, Elnea suggested, “How about you stay here a few days more? I do not mind entertaining you longer.”

She didn't just “not mind” us staying longer in her palace; she seemed to

really want to show us around the forest again. I couldn't help but chuckle at her enthusiasm.

"It's a kind offer, and Teto and I would love to stay, but we're actually planning on going back home soon."

"Beretta and the others are looking forward to Lady Witch coming home!" Teto supplied.

"Oh. Well, I shall miss you," she said, a slightly dejected look on her face.

This time, I was the one who had a suggestion for her. "How about you come visit our forest?"

"Oooh, good idea, Lady Witch! Teto wants to introduce Miss Elnea to the others!" Teto chirped.

"What...are you two saying?" Elnea stammered in bewilderment.

"Thanks to the spirit tags you had Miss Rorona make for us, we can install a transfer gate in your forest and connect it to ours. We'll be able to visit each other whenever we want," I explained.

"Yeah! You can even come to see Lady Witch when you feel like it!" Teto added.

Elnea stayed silent for a few seconds before muttering, "I have never even thought of leaving this land."

I valued my bond with Elnea and wanted to spend more time with her. But I didn't want to always be the one imposing on her. We were both immortals; there was no reason she should be the only one inviting us over. I'd feel bad if I was always freeloading at her palace. Besides, I wasn't interested in a life where I'd just spend my time fooling around without working at least a little. It just didn't seem very fulfilling to me. I *could* technically stay in the elves' kingdom and find some sort of job there, but that option didn't feel right with me either; the elves probably didn't want or need an outsider like me to contribute to their society. If anything, I'd be bothering them. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that resuming my life in the forest and having the option of visiting each other whenever we felt like it was better suited to me.

Besides...

“That is not the only reason, is it?” Elnea—who had broken out of her shock—asked me, a serious look on her face.

“You’re right; it’s not. To be completely honest, I want you and Miss Althea’s opinion of our forest.”

I wanted them to tell me what they thought of our World Trees and our forest as a whole, as well as to ask them for advice on how to prevent trespassers from sneaking in once Liriel’s barrier came down.

I told all that to Elnea, and she seemed to carefully ponder my questions. “We shall lend you our wisdom when it comes to your World Trees. As for ways to deter trespassers, we must first get a feel for your land. You most likely would not be able to incorporate our security system,” she said. “We shall come to take a look at your land. However, I have a request as well.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“I wished to wait a little longer before asking it of you, but I was wondering if you could spare us some World Tree seeds.”

This time, I was the one finding myself at a loss for words. It wasn’t that outrageous of a request; I just hadn’t been expecting it at all.

“I mean, I don’t mind, but can I ask why?”

“You already have a huge World Tree in your forest!” Teto added.

We could see it even through our window as we talked.

“Our World Tree has long stopped producing seeds,” Elnea said. They didn’t know why that had happened; was their World Tree simply too old to produce seeds? Or was there another reason?

“I see...” I muttered before opening my magic bag and taking out a handful of World Tree seeds, each roughly the size of a walnut. “Here you go, then. World Tree seeds.”

Elnea pursed her lips into a pout. “We have been wishing for these for so long, yet you are willing to part with them that easily? You could have at least attempted to negotiate with us—to ask for *something* in return.”

“I don’t mind just giving them to you. The ground of our forest is basically covered in these anyway. And besides, if for one reason or another all of the World Trees in our forest came to disappear, I’d at least have the peace of mind of knowing that you can replant more in your land,” I explained.

In addition, more World Trees meant more mana, which was exactly what Liriel and the other goddesses wanted.

“You have my thanks, Chise,” Elnea said. She hadn’t made a grandiose speech to thank me or anything, but her words were laden with such sincerity that it made me feel a bit embarrassed.

“In the end, we ended up talking about work, huh? And here I thought I would just spend a nice, relaxing day visiting your guys’ capital,” I mumbled with a sigh.

A wry smile curled on Elnea’s lips.

“That is business for you. You start by inviting the other party to relax with some idle chatter, and when you both begin to feel comfortable with each other, then you can begin to do the real work.”

I supposed she had a point; no businessperson would listen to a stranger’s request out of the blue, nor would they make a proposal without first establishing some level of rapport and trust.

“Teto had fun going out with Lady Witch and Miss Elnea and Miss Althea!” Teto said innocently. “Next time, Teto will show you around our forest!”

I instantly felt myself relax at her innocence and kindness, and I could tell Elnea felt the same.

“Well then, it appears that this discussion has reached its conclusion. You two are welcome to install your teleportation device in your chamber and leave whenever you so wish,” she said.

“Thanks, we’ll do just that.”

“We’ll get everything ready with Beretta and the others to welcome you two into our forest!” Teto chirped.

“I am looking forward to it.”

With those words, Elnea took us back to our guest room. I took a transfer gate out of my bag and installed it in the room, connecting it to the forest. Then, when everything was ready, Teto and I took the transfer gate back home to tell Beretta about Elnea and Althea's upcoming visit.

Chapter 20: The Ancient Dragon and the Fairy Queen

Beretta came to greet us when we arrived at the mansion, and we told her the news.

“You’ve invited the high elf queen to visit?” Beretta repeated, a contemplative expression crossing her face.

I nodded. “I shared some of our World Tree seeds with her and requested that she help us find ways to secure the forest against intruders. Can you get everything ready for her arrival?”

“We wanna thank her for showing us around the elves’ capital!” Teto added.

“Understood. I shall prepare to receive her and for the technological exchange you have planned.”

I knew that Beretta and the other maids would do a great job getting everything ready. I felt a weight being lifted off my shoulders, but I couldn’t afford to relax too much.

“Master, may I suggest going around the forest and informing the residents of your safe return?” Beretta said.

In the two years that had passed since Teto and I had left the forest, we had returned a couple of times through our transfer gate, but we had never gone to visit the residents. So, all of them were eagerly awaiting our return.

“Oh, you have a point. We’ll go do that,” I said.

“Teto is excited to see everyone! It’s been so long!”

To us, two years was nothing, but it was more than enough for most people to change at least somewhat. And so, the day after our return, we popped by a few settlements here and there to show our faces to the residents.

“Oh! Lady Witch, you’re back! Welcome home!”

“Long time no see, Lady Witch. So many children were born during your absence! Here, come say hi.”

“Who are you, misses?”

As we toured the different settlements, people came to greet us one after the other, including children who had no idea who we were.

“Everyone looks happy and healthy. I’m glad,” I commented to Teto, who nodded excitedly.

“And there are lots of new babies too!”

You tended not to really pay attention to the small changes that build up with time if you stayed in one spot for a long while. But if you left that place and came back two years later, you’d immediately notice all of the things that changed since you were last there. This was one of the reasons I found traveling to be so interesting.

After we were done touring most of the settlements, we headed to the Great Elder’s cave.

“Oh, Lady Witch, Lady Guardian, it has been a while since I last saw you two. How are you holding up?” he asked us.

“Long time no see, Great Elder.”

“Hello, Mister Great Elder!”

“Care to tell this old dragon about your journey?”

We nodded and started telling him about what we had gotten up to during our absence: our trip through Ischea and Gald to pay our respects to Arsus, Gyunton, the days we spent on the road in our caravan, our brief life as C-rank adventurers in the Sunfield Empire, and our stay in the elves’ forest and the new friends we met.

I had told Beretta all about this during our calls, and she must’ve shared some of our adventures with the Great Elder, but he still listened intently to my story.

“Have you met the mythical beasts living in the elves’ forest?” he asked us.

I nodded. “We saw the sleipnirs and all of the critters who came to beg me for

mana while we were traveling through the woods.”

“Teto hopes we’ll get to see the other mythical beasts one day!”

I mused that it would be nice if Elnea showed them to us the next time we visited, and the Great Elder nodded enthusiastically.

“So what kind of person is that new friend you two made in the elves’ forest?” he asked.

“She’s a high elf, and their queen,” I replied.

“She’s called Elnea, and she’s really nice!” Teto added.

A distant look appeared on the Great Elder’s face. “The queen of the elves, you say?” he muttered.

“Do you know her?” I asked.

“I have never *met* her per se, but a long time ago, before I had even created the floating island, I heard rumors of a ‘fairy queen’ living in the great forest where the last World Tree stood,” he said. “If she and that high elf you two are speaking of are one and the same, I would love to meet her.”

I promised that we would arrange an introduction.

After that, Teto and I headed back to the elves’ forest, where we coordinated with Elnea to decide on a date for her visit. I also mentioned in passing that a friend of mine wanted to meet her.

“Hm? Someone who wants to meet with me?” Elnea repeated, her voice tinged with surprise.

“Yeah. He’s very fond of mythical beasts, and he’s helped us many times in the past. He said that he’d love to meet you, so I’m passing on the message,” I explained.

“He’s a really nice grandpa, and he takes very good care of the mythical beasts!” Teto added.

A contemplative look crossed Elnea’s face.

“I see... It is to be expected that he would wish to meet with me, if only to see what kind of person his dear Chise’s new friend is,” she mused.

“If that person has indeed ‘helped’ Miss Chise, he must be some sort of authority figure in the Witch of Creation’s Forest,” Althea surmised. “I believe it would be best if you met with him, Lady Elnea.”

In the end, the pair agreed to meet with the Great Elder. There was, however, one teeny tiny little detail I hadn’t told them.

“Don’t tell the high elf queen that I am an Ancient Dragon,” the Great Elder had told me before I left. “I would like to see her reaction for myself.”

And so we had kept the Great Elder’s identity a secret. Still, I couldn’t help but be a little worried about Elnea’s reaction when she realized that we had played a prank on her.

“Very well! Then I shall meet with this person before touring your land,” Elnea declared.

With that out of the way, we finally decided on a date for her visit to the forest.

Soon, said day was upon us. Teto and I used our transfer gate to head to the elves’ kingdom, and we waited for Elnea in our guest chamber. After a while, we heard a bit of a commotion forming in the hallway, and the next minute, Elnea slammed the door open.

“Good day, Chise! As promised, we have come to visit your land!” she exclaimed, her voice filled with enthusiasm as she entered the room.

“Lady Elnea! Please refrain from acting so exuberantly,” Althea chided her.

Judging by the way she kept fidgeting, Elnea must’ve been pretty jazzed about the trip. Behind her, Althea bowed her head and apologized to me for not having been able to stop her.

“It’s fine,” I said. “It’s Miss Elnea we’re talking about; you couldn’t stop her no matter what you tried.”

“I was so enthusiastic at the idea of seeing all of your World Trees and mythical beasts that I woke up much earlier than usual!” Elnea exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Are you a kid? I quipped inside my mind, eyeing her and feeling the

exasperation starting to creep up on me.



“First, you have to pay your respects to the person Miss Chise mentioned last time,” Althea sternly reminded Elnea. “*Please* make sure to leave a good impression.”

This did nothing to quell Elnea’s enthusiasm. Perhaps being an immortal high elf meant that she’d always be young spiritually, or perhaps she had lived for so long that she wasn’t concerned about most things anymore.

“It’s almost time. Let’s go, everyone,” I said.

“The Great Elder is waiting at Lady Witch’s mansion!” Teto chirped.

I guided Elnea and Althea through the transfer gate, and we emerged behind our mansion in the forest.

Althea started looking around the room. “So this is your home, Miss Chi—” she started, but stopped dead in her tracks when she saw what was in front of her.

The Great Elder sat in repose in the plaza behind our mansion, his bluish-green scales (which he had gotten polished by the dragonkin in preparation for today) glimmering in the sunlight as he looked down at us.

“Oooh! Chise, is that...?” Elnea started, looking up at the Great Elder in awe.

Althea, on the other hand, was shaking like a leaf. “A d... A dragon?!” she squeaked.

“Heeey, Great Elder!” I called out. “We brought them over!”

“M-Miss Chise! Shhh! The dragon will notice us!” Althea urged me in a panic.

“Calm down, Althea,” Elnea intervened. “Chise would not keep company with some brainless *feral* dragon.”

I approached the Great Elder and she followed me. Elnea’s and the Great Elder’s eyes met, and for a moment, no one said anything. In the meantime, Teto and I headed back towards Althea—who had fallen to the ground in fear and was fighting tooth and nail to right herself—and the two of us tried to comfort her.

“I am glad to see you chose to come, Fairy Queen and her dark elf attendant,”

the Great Elder greeted Elnea and Althea after a minute. “I am the Ancient Verdigris Dragon. Well, to be completely honest with you, I am but an old dragon looking after my children in Lady Witch’s land. Everyone calls me ‘Great Elder.’”

“I am Elnea, queen of the elves and a high elf. I have a question, ancient dragon; are you the dragon that made a peninsula float in the east to protect the mythical beasts living there?” Elnea asked.

Over twelve hundred years had passed since the Great Elder had created the floating island.

“If you remember that, then you must indeed be the fairy queen herself.”

“Indeed, I am. Though my appearance may belie it, I have lived for over two thousand years,” Elnea said, and the two exchanged amused smiles. “What a delightful coincidence!” she went on. “For the longest time, you and I had only heard rumors and stories about each other, unable to leave our respective domains. After you made that peninsula float, I stopped hearing rumors about you. To think that the two of us had the opportunity to meet at last!”

“Truly. I always believed I would never get to lay eyes on the rumored fairy queen of the great forest. I am truly grateful to you, Lady Witch,” the Great Elder said.

Both he and Elnea turned towards me, and I pulled the hood of my robe up to hide my reddening face.

Once she saw that the Great Elder wasn’t hostile, Althea started to relax as well.

“So? Why did you want to meet Miss Elnea, Great Elder?” I asked my dragon friend.

A distant look crossed his face. “Back when the floating island still existed, there had been a few instances of mythical beasts falling from the sky—both by accident and of their own volition. The only place with enough mana for them to settle in on this continent was in the great forest, near the World Tree. I was wondering if the fairy queen had seen them,” he explained.

Every ten-odd years, the Great Elder’s floating island would dip low enough

that it was visible from the ground. This must have been the moment those mythical beasts chose to try and leap down. There were many tales and legends about what happened to those critters after they arrived on land. The Great Elder knew about them, but he must've wanted to know if Elnea had more information to share with him.

"We indeed oftentimes found mythical beasts near our World Tree whenever the floating island approached. Every beast we found, we placed under our protection. I remember being surprised to see them making their way into our forest all by themselves, but they took well to their new homes; some even started new families," Elnea said with a cackle, drawing an amused rumble from the Great Elder.

We all knew deep down that not all of the mythical beasts had made it to the World Tree; some must have died on the way from monster or human attacks. But the Great Elder seemed happy to know that at least some of them had found their way to a good life after leaving the floating island, even having children of their own.

"Fairy Queen—no, Lady Elnea, you have my thanks for placing my children under your protection."

"Do not mention it! Mythical beasts are our precious neighbors. It is only natural that we should endeavor to help them."

The Great Elder seemed satisfied by Elnea's response and returned to his cave after bidding us goodbye.

"Dear me, one really does not want to make an enemy of such a fearsome being," Elnea muttered as she watched the Great Elder's retreating form.

Chapter 21: The Fairy Queen's Visit

Despite the little prank the Great Elder had played on Elnea by hiding his identity, their meeting ended without incident; now it was time for Teto and me to show Elnea and Althea around. We called over the griffin whom we had preemptively summoned to the mansion.

"Oh, did this griffin come to greet us? It's quite splendid, indeed! Come closer, you little darling, you!" Elnea exclaimed, holding out a hand towards the griffin and scratching the back of its neck.

The griffin closed its eyes in contentment.

As a high elf, Elnea had a boatload of mana. Perhaps the mythical beasts enjoyed snacking on her mana, just like they did mine.

"Our forest is about the size of a small country, so it'd take forever if we started showing you around on foot," I explained. "That's why I asked the griffin to give you a ride."

"Teto and Lady Witch will ride on Lady Witch's staff!" Teto added.

Elnea nodded excitedly. "Good thinking! I could do without its help, but not Althea. How long has it been since I last rode on a mythical beast?" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she climbed on the back of the crouching griffin, Althea following suit, albeit a lot more timidly.

"Everyone ready? Let's go! *Fly!*"

My staff gently floated upward and the griffin followed suit, flapping its wings to take to the air. Beretta waved us off from the ground.

Elnea hummed. "Your forest really is young," she commented.

"Well, it hasn't even been a hundred years since we started developing it," I replied.

"But Teto and Lady Witch are really proud of it!" Teto chirped.

Most of the trees in Eltar were more than a few centuries old, and their

foliage was thick enough to obstruct the sunlight entirely. In the capital, the only light came from the mana emitted by the trees. In contrast, our forest was still, as Elnea had put it, quite young, so it mostly resembled a satoyama—a biodiverse environment mixing nature and settled land, with large grasslands sprawling in between the trees.

“Let us go see your World Trees first!” Elnea commanded.

“Sure. We’ll show you our biggest one!”

I adjusted the direction of my staff, and we headed towards the first World Tree we had planted.

“Oooh! It is just as young as the rest of your forest, but it is a splendid World Tree. I hope that the seeds you have given us will produce trees as beautiful as this one,” Elnea commented as we flew around the World Tree before her attention got caught by something.

“How peculiar...” she said, her eyes fixed on a group of creatures at the base of the tree.

“Ah, those are Teto’s bear golems,” I said.

Elnea looked like she was on the verge of bursting into laughter as she looked at the clay golems with mud balls on either side of their heads—hence the nickname “bear golems”—as they diligently tended to the trees around the World Tree. Thanks to them and the earthnoids and earth spirits, our forest had become a veritable treasure trove, teeming with fruit trees, edible herbs, and mushrooms.

“They’re all very hard workers! Don’t make fun of them, it’s not very nice!” Teto scolded Elnea.

“My apologies. I did not mean to ridicule your familiars; I had just never seen anything of the sort before. I could not help it,” Elnea said.

Most golems had a pretty solid and immovable appearance, but Teto’s bear golems were absolutely adorable, both in terms of looks and mannerisms. Even children loved them.

“Your forest *teems* with earth spirits,” Elnea commented. “I can sense a few

plant spirits too, but no other types.”

This must’ve been due to Teto’s nature as a half-earth spirit. As for the plant spirits, we did have a few plant demons living in the forest—namely, the dryads and alraunes—so their influence might have been what had brought those spirits over.

“Is it a bad thing if the balance of spirits is skewed?” I asked.

Elnea shook her head with a smile. “That is not what I said. I simply observed that, for now, earth spirits are dominant. But as time passes, they may move on to other lands, and new spirits will emerge—whether from the souls of the departed ascending or naturally forming in places rich in mana.”

Elnea looked around, clearly able to see things that were out of my perception. She told the griffin to land near the World Tree, and it did just that. A lot of mythical beasts lived around the World Tree, and Elnea observed their nests one by one, visibly enjoying herself.

“Not only does this place have the protection of the goddesses, but the mana density is strong too. On top of that, you have mythical beasts and several World Trees... There is no doubt your land must attract all sorts of unsavory individuals, just like our great forest,” Elnea said.

I nodded. “That’s why I’ve asked for your help devising strategies to keep intruders at bay.”

“Your forest is quite valuable to us too. I shall lend you my aid.”

“Thank you, Miss Elnea.”

“In exchange, you shall show us more of your land!” Elnea declared.

“Of course!” Teto replied in my stead, her enthusiasm causing the rest of us to smile slightly.

The two of us resumed our tour of the forest, focusing mostly on the surroundings of the World Tree. After a while, we decided to return to the mansion.

“So? Are you satisfied?” I asked Elnea on the way back.

“I would have liked to explore more, but it is quite all right; I shall come again

at a later date. It shall be enough for today.”

“Lady Elnea, please remember to invite Miss Chise over from time to time as well, rather than always imposing on her hospitality,” Althea reminded her. She must’ve remembered that Teto and I had said we’d like to explore their forest some more as well.

“Oh, good point, Althea!” Elnea said.

“Besides, we are not quite done here yet. Once we return to Miss Chise’s mansion, we need to give her and her attendants advice on how to deal with intruders,” Althea continued.

The plan was to have an impromptu meeting with Beretta and the other maids and to exchange technologies and ideas on how to strengthen our Forest’s defenses.

“We shall be having lunch beforehand, though, shall we not? I was so engrossed in exploring this land that I did not notice it was past mealtime,” Elnea said, looking up at the sky from her spot on the griffin’s back. The sun had already passed its zenith.

“Now that you mention it, Teto’s hungry!” Teto commented, her stomach growling.

“I am looking forward to seeing what delicacy you shall prepare for us, Chise. The curry you served me last time was exquisite. I would enjoy another rice dish,” Elnea requested unabashedly.

“Lady Elnea, that’s unbecoming!” Althea chided her, but Elnea paid her no mind, an amused smile curling on her lips.

“Lunch, huh? I wonder what we have that’ll satisfy Miss Elnea...” I pondered.

“For now, let’s head back to the mansion and decide when we’re there,” Teto suggested, and we did just that.

We thanked the griffin who had let Elnea and Althea ride on its back the entire morning and headed to the kitchen. I had decided that I would cook our meal this time.

“We have a bunch of rice in the preservation box, but we don’t really have

time to make anything too complex,” I muttered.

Preservation boxes were a magic tool used, as the name suggested, to preserve food. It was much more efficient than a fridge, as it didn’t just cool things down; it stopped time for anything placed inside. As I looked at the rows of cooked rice and leftover dishes, pondering what to serve to our guests, my eyes landed on one pot in particular.

“We could use this,” I said.

“Oooh!” Teto cheered excitedly beside me. “Teto loves this!”

“Let’s add some pizzazz to it, shall we?”

I took the ingredients out of the preservation box and started cooking.

First, I added some butter to a pan and let it heat up before sautéing some freshly grated garlic until fragrant. Then I dumped in some cooked rice and stir-fried it with the garlic. I sprinkled some salt, pepper, and dried parsley over the buttered rice and set it aside.

Meanwhile, I beat a few eggs, which I then added to another frying pan along with some milk and pepper to make a soft and creamy omelet before repeating the process a couple more times. When I was done, I piled up some buttered rice on plates, topped them with the omelets, and served them to our guests along with a side salad and some soup.

“The smell of garlic and butter has tantalized my appetite since you began, but is *that* the meal you have prepared for us? A mere omelet on top of some buttered rice?” Elnea said, looking extremely disappointed.

Beside her, Althea’s eyes traveled between the omelet and me, an awkward look on her face.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “It’s not done yet, but I wanted you to watch the next part. First of all, you have to put your knife into the omelet...”

I carefully cut open the omelet and—ta-dah! Creamy, fluffy omurice.

Elnea and Althea watched with attention as I cut open both omelets, while Teto was waiting spoon in hand for me to be done.

“Chise! Is it done now?” Elnea asked impatiently.

“Not yet. Now you have to add some stewed beef on top of the whole thing, some fresh cream, and a sprinkle of dried parsley... And, here you go: a perfect omuhayashi rice.”



Elnea's eyes were sparkling with anticipation as she watched the simple omelet I had served them turn into a delicious-looking dish. I repeated the process with all of the remaining omelets, and it was soon time for us to dig in.

Elnea brought her spoon to her mouth and let out a delighted moan when the food hit her tongue. "What an incredible discovery! Stewed beef is not an unusual dish by any means, but by mixing it with an omelet and some rice, it has become an entirely different culinary experience!" she exclaimed before going for another bite. She put some egg and rice onto her spoon, then dipped the whole thing into the hashed rice roux to savor the flavorful combination.

Althea seemed to enjoy it just as much; the second she had her first bite, her eyes had shot wide open, and she had been digging into her meal since.

As for Teto...

"Lady Witch, can I have seconds?"

...she had already polished off her plate.

"Sure, but I don't have any more buttered rice, so I can only serve it to you with regular rice. Is that okay with you?"

"Yup!"

Teto made quick work of her second plate of hayashi rice before absolutely demolishing her dessert.

"It was truly exquisite," Elnea commented as she sipped on her after-meal tea, a pleased look on her face. "I wish I could just remain sitting here like this."

"You cannot, Lady Elnea. Miss Chise's attendants are waiting for you to discuss defense strategies," Althea reminded her.

"How cruel you are, Althea," Elnea whined before Althea dragged her off to the conference room.

Beretta and the other maids spent the next couple of hours relentlessly asking her for techniques and strategies to keep intruders at bay. By the time their meeting was over, Elnea looked exhausted.

"I-I refuse to participate in such a meeting ever again. Next time, I shall ask

someone else to participate in my stead,” she muttered under her breath.

Shortly after, she and Althea took the transfer gate back to Eltar. They didn’t have time to see everything our Forest had to offer this time around, so I had no doubt she’d most likely ask to come back, which would inevitably lead to another security meeting with her and the maids.

I hope she’ll like the next dish I’ll serve her, I thought.

This would have to wait, though, as next time, it would be our turn to visit them.

Chapter 22: Mythical Beasts' Breeding Grounds and Childish Innocence

Since Elnea's first visit, the two of us had been to each other's place a few times. We'd also welcomed a group of elves who came to instruct us in how to best protect our forest's borders, which allowed Beretta and the other maids to reinforce our defenses.

Today, it was Teto's and my turn to go to Elnea's, and she was taking us to a smaller settlement in the middle of the forest.

"This way, Chise, Teto."

When we had first come to the forest with Althea, it had taken us days to reach the capital. But Elnea could pass through the spirit corridor, meaning we'd reach the village in no time.

"Where are you taking us today?" I asked.

"Somewhere fun again?" Teto added.

"Remember the World Tree seeds you gave me? I am going to inspect the village I entrusted them to, so I thought of giving you a tour of the village while I am there—though I cannot take you to the actual place where they have planted the seeds," Elnea told us.

After only a few minutes, we exited the spirit corridor and arrived at the settlement in question.

"Lady Elnea, Lady Althea, we were awaiting your arrival," an old elf greeted our companions.

Rorona was standing beside him, the spirit lantern housing Fauzard in hand.

"We have come to inspect the maturation of the World Tree seeds I entrusted you with," Elnea said, and the old elf started explaining the trees' progress to her.

I could tell by the way he was talking and looking at Elnea that he respected her deeply. However, there was a *slight* issue.

“If I may, who are these humans, Lady Elnea?” he asked, eyeing Teto and me.

“This is Chise, a witch who hails from a forest north of our kingdom. She and her guardian Teto found Fauzard, freed him, and brought him back to us. They are also the ones who have supplied us with World Tree seeds. I owe them a great deal,” Elnea explained.

I gave a slight bow to the elder; Teto remained silent, sensing that it wasn’t the right time to speak. The elder bowed his head to us in return, a look of curiosity on his face.

“We are very thankful for your help in returning the greater fire spirit to us and for providing us with World Tree seeds. However, might I inquire what brings these esteemed guests to our village?” he asked Elnea.

“The mythical beasts in our new World Trees’ surroundings shall soon grow up and look for mates to reproduce with. Many mythical beasts live in Chise’s forest, so I am thinking of arranging some sort of matchmaking event for them in the future. This is why I brought Chise here—so that she could meet the mythical beasts and tour the area,” Elnea explained.

Excuse me?

I brought my lips to her ear and whispered, “Miss Elnea... This is my first time hearing about any ‘matchmaking event.’”

“I seem to have forgotten to tell you,” she said, feigning ignorance. “Well, it is quite all right; the World Trees are not mature yet, so it shall take a long time still before the mythical beasts in either of our domains need mates.”

I flashed her a discreet glare and let out a short sigh. “I’ll let Beretta know of your plans.”

Just as Elnea had said, it would still take decades for the newly planted World Trees to start producing enough mana, so I technically didn’t need to concern myself with this matchmaking stuff this soon, but I still wished Elnea had told me before making plans on her own.

“Rorona, please entertain Lady Elnea’s guests while we take her and Lady Althea to the World Trees,” the elderly elf said to the priestess.

Rorona nodded, and the elderly elf started for the World Tree cultivation grounds.

“See you later, Chise, Teto,” Elnea said as she and Althea followed him.

Teto and I were a bit bummed we couldn’t accompany them, but we’d at least get to tour the village.

“I look forward to showing you around our village, Miss Chise, Miss Teto,” Rorona said when the others were gone, lightly bowing her head to us.

“We’re excited to see what kind of place this village is,” I replied. “It’s been a while since the last time we saw each other, hasn’t it?”

“Long time no see!” Teto piped up. “Teto hopes you’ve been doing well!”

Rorona nodded. “I have, thank you for your concern. May I ask what brings you to our settlement?”

“Miss Elnea had to come to check on the World Trees, so she invited us to tag along,” I explained.

Rorona’s village wasn’t that large, though, so there wasn’t really a lot for us to see. Besides, we didn’t want to arouse suspicion by walking around aimlessly. In the end, we reluctantly agreed to just chat in the middle of the village’s plaza.

“Let’s do some forest bathing while waiting for Miss Elnea to come back,” I said, taking a seat on one of the benches around the plaza and looking up.

All of the houses in this settlement were snug and made of wood, their roofs crafted from layers of interwoven tree bark. Weathered woodcrafts like baskets and trays woven from tree bark and vines were set in front of the houses, and I was having the time of my life observing all the details of each little house. This settlement wasn’t as close to the World Tree as the capital, so the trees weren’t as out of control, allowing sunlight to pass through the canopy. This, coupled with the cool, crisp forest air, made for a pleasant atmosphere.

“The air here is so yummy!” Teto said, plonking herself down beside me and breathing in big lungfuls.

Rorona chuckled softly as she observed us. "I'm glad you like it. I often sit here and take in the freshness of the air myself."

"You live here, right, Miss Rorona? How do you usually spend your days?" I asked.

I was really bummed we couldn't tour the village like I had hoped for. Since I couldn't see it for myself, I asked Rorona, a resident of the settlement, how she spent her days.

She started fidgeting a bit awkwardly at my question. "I, um... I can't see, so I'm probably not the best person to ask. Are you sure you'd like to know?"

I replied in the affirmative and Rorona nodded lightly. "I spend most of my days talking to the spirits," she said.

"Talking to the spirits? Now that you mention it, Miss Elnea also mentioned that she likes to listen to the spirits to learn about goings-on outside the forest."

She let out an airy chuckle. "I cannot commune with them as extensively as Lady Elnea can, but they will tell me things like tomorrow's weather, what plants and nuts we can expect to find in the forest this year, if there are any threats nearby... That sort of thing," she explained.

As a priestess, it was her job to then relay these pieces of information to the other elves in the village. *A bit like a weather forecaster*, I thought.

"The mythical beasts and the village's children often come to spend time with me when I'm sitting here," she said, petting the air above her lap as if there were a small critter curled up there.

I'd felt eyes on us for a while now, and I was pretty sure it must have been the children who usually came to play with Rorona. They must've been hesitating to approach due to Teto's and my presence.

"On clear nights, the villagers sing and play instruments around the campfire," Rorona continued. "They are always a pleasure to listen to."

"Really? What kind of instruments?" I asked.

"Mostly lyres and flutes. Sometimes I join in with my little drum," she said, this time mimicking the action of beating the drum with her hand.

I could tell by her words and her mannerisms just how much she enjoyed those nights. As far as indoor activities went, the elves liked to play board games. Rorona also participated, although she had to rely on others' assistance.

When she was done telling us about how she spent her days, she asked what we did in our free time.

"Let's see... I mostly read books, I suppose," I replied.

"Books?!" Rorona exclaimed. "I can't read, so I can't say I know much about such things, but may I know what kind of books you enjoy reading?"

She seemed really interested in the topic. I took a couple of easy reads out of my magic bag.

"This one is a folktale, and this one is a popular adventure novel called *The Legend of the Heroes*. We have some time on our hands; would you like for me to read it to you?" I offered.

She nodded excitedly. "Y-Yes, please!"

"All right," I said, and began to read *The Legend of the Heroes* to her.

I had already read it several times, so I was more than familiar with the book at this point and could read it smoothly without stumbling. Judging by Rorona's expression, she seemed to enjoy my reading. My voice resounded through the settlement, and soon the elven children who had been watching us from afar approached us timidly.

"Come listen to Lady Witch's story, everyone," Teto said when I took a short break to breathe, beckoning the children over with a sign of the hand.

The children sat on the ground in front of us, looking up at me with expectant eyes, eager to hear the rest of the story. I chuckled inwardly and resumed reading.

"And thus, the heroes and their companions succeeded in defeating the colossal monster and restoring peace in the town. However, their adventures were far from over." I closed the book. "There, this is the end of the first volume."

Rorona and the kids clapped enthusiastically when I was done.

Each volume of *The Legend of the Heroes* was pretty short as far as novels went, but reading it out loud had taken me a couple of hours. Nevertheless, the kids had listened attentively without losing focus until the very end.

“It was so fun, Miss Human!”

“Read it again!”

“The heroes are so cool!”

“Do you have another story?”

The kids were babbling over each other, some reacting to the story, while others were already requesting another one. Unfortunately, we were out of time.

“We have returned, Chise,” Elnea announced, heading our way.

She must have been done inspecting the World Trees, and it was time for us to head back to her palace.

“Sorry, everyone,” I said after explaining the situation to the kids.

As expected, they weren’t happy, whining in disappointment.

Rorona, on the other hand, smiled warmly at me. “Thank you so much for the wonderful story, Miss Chise,” she said.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. Here, take these books with you if you’d like.” I produced a few folktales, picture books, and popular fiction novels from my magic bag and gave them to Rorona.

A troubled expression formed on her face. “I appreciate the feeling, Miss Chise, but aren’t books very expensive?” she asked.

“Most recent books are made with paper—a plant-based writing material—so they are not as expensive as they used to be,” I told her.

Paper was not only much cheaper to produce than parchment, but it was also lighter and easier to transport, meaning books were much more affordable now.

“Also...I can’t read the books myself,” Rorona mumbled.

“But you have Fauzard, don’t you? He could read the letter Althea sent us, so

he should be able to read the novels to you, right?" I suggested.

"Me?! You are asking *me* to read the books to Rorona?" Fauzard's surprised voice echoed from the spirit lantern.

He hadn't said anything the entire time we had been there, but the shock of my proposition was so great that he couldn't stay silent.

"I am a *spirit*; I have never read a book to a human," he muttered.

"Who cares if you're bad at it? Rorona and the kids would love it. Can't you make an effort for them?" I asked.

"Please, Lord Fauzard," Rorona said, clasping her hands in front of her chest.

The flame inside the lantern started wavering.

"V-Very well. However, I refuse to start reading books to the children right away; I shall need to practice first. Rorona, you shall be my practice subject."

"Sure!" she replied, her face breaking into a bright smile. She was so *cute*; the sight warmed both Teto's and my heart, while Fauzard groaned in embarrassment.

Elnea had been standing off to the side the entire time, watching us with a warm smile. While our first visit to Rorona's village had been brief, it marked the beginning of a long-lasting partnership between our forest and this settlement, as this place would become a breeding ground for mythical beasts in the future.

Meanwhile, Althea seemed to be deep in thought. "The children seemed to like *The Legend of the Heroes*. Perhaps I should advise the traveling merchants to add more fiction to their stock," she muttered.

It was a well-known fact that the elves' forest had very little to offer in terms of entertainment, especially in the smaller settlements. It seemed that Althea was considering authorizing the distribution of her favorite novel series to address this issue.

At that time, none of us could have anticipated the consequences of such a seemingly simple decision.

Chapter 23: The Adventuring Novel's Influence

Several years had passed since our visit to Rorona's village. Since returning to the forest, our days had been filled with meetings with various individuals: residents of the forest, Selene and her family, and even the royal family of Gald. We still saw Elnea from time to time as well. Amid the hustle and bustle, time slipped away unnoticed, and I suddenly found myself over one hundred years old.

Today, we had invited Elnea and Althea for tea. To my surprise, they arrived with somber expressions on their faces.

"Chise," Elnea said by way of greeting. "Something quite troublesome has happened."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You look really worried," Teto commented. "You should eat something yummy to feel better! Here, have some acorn coffee and cheesecake!"

Our guests took a bite of the treats Teto had served them and instantly seemed to feel better.

"A wave of youngsters has appeared out of nowhere, demanding to leave the forest," Elnea explained when she was done with her snack.

"Isn't that...normal?" I asked, puzzled.

She shook her head. "Normally around a dozen or so individuals petition to leave every few years. But, this time, over a *hundred* of them are claiming to want to venture beyond the forest's borders all at once! That is completely abnormal!" she exclaimed.

My eyes shot wide open. When she put it like that, it sounded like quite a crisis.

"Do you have any idea *why*?" I asked.

"This," Elnea said dejectedly as she held out a book and a bunch of crumpled

pieces of paper to me over the table.

I instantly recognized the book: it was *The Legend of the Heroes*.

“It’s the book you were reading, Lady Witch!” Teto exclaimed.

“As for the pieces of paper, there’s a poster, an illustration, and a newspaper, huh?” I noted, inspecting them one by one.

“The book is an adventuring novel that is popular among the young folk, and the pieces of paper are what the traveling merchants use to cushion their cargo,” Elnea explained.

As it turned out, the introduction of novels like *The Legend of the Heroes* into the elves’ forest had prompted some sort of craze for human culture among the younger generations, and the imagery on the merchants’ packing material had only exacerbated this infatuation. The poster advertised a theater play, its exuberant design and vibrant color scheme immediately catching the eye, while the illustration showed a street lined with stone and brick houses, which was unlike anything one might find in the elves’ forest. As for the newspaper, it was an old thing from a town I had never heard of. It looked as if the person who’d composed it had tried using every square micron of each individual sheet, to the point where it was almost comical. It reminded me of the Edo period, when people used ukiyo-e instead of wrapping paper to cushion the wares they exported to the West, especially pottery and the like.

To the elves, who had always lived in their tranquil settlements, human culture must’ve seemed incredibly exciting.

As a sidenote, *The Legend of Heroes* was particularly popular in our forest as well, especially among children. All of the books I had bought or found during my travels were stored in the mansion’s library, and anyone could come and borrow them at any time. The children loved to play pretend and play-fight with sticks as if they were the heroes in such books. Some families even went as far as to order their own copies. Just like the teenagers in Elnea’s forest, these children would most likely grow up with an interest in the outside world.

“I see... This is the result of Miss Althea’s proselytizing, huh?”

“I couldn’t have worded it better myself,” Elnea said, nodding gravely. “And

the current situation is no laughing matter.”

Her bitter expression stood out drastically from the pleasant smile she usually wore. She was directly concerned by the matter at hand; I could imagine it weighed heavily on her mind.

As for Althea—whose actions had played no small part in the current situation—she looked noticeably paler than usual. “I had no idea introducing a mere work of fiction to the forest would cause such a commotion,” she muttered, bowing her head to Elnea and apologizing.

Elnea’s expression soured further; it must not have been the first time Althea had apologized for her role in the matter. Knowing Elnea, she must’ve been thoroughly tired of it by now.

She gave us a rundown of the situation; the elven teenagers who wanted to leave the forest had gathered somewhere in the forest to prepare for their departure, and the adults were desperately trying to hold them back—achieving little besides steadily aggravating these would-be tourists. If things kept on this path, it was only a matter of time before the young elves got fed up and left for good. For the time being, they refused to leave the makeshift bases they had built for themselves. It seemed that there were several similar groups all around the forest, some counting members in the single digits, while others had a larger following.

“So they’ve basically run away from home, huh? Typical teenager stuff,” I noted.

“That sounds like a lot of fun!” Teto chirped beside me, her eyes sparkling.

“If we do not find a solution, our forest is doomed!” Elnea exclaimed.

I wish I could say she was exaggerating, but deep down, I knew she was probably right. In my previous life, it was common to hear about villages slowly losing their population as young people migrated to Tokyo. Even in this world, I had heard about many villages vanishing off the map, as there was no one left to work in them after all of the youngsters had moved to bigger towns.

Personally, I wanted to encourage these young elves to travel and see more of the world, but I didn’t approve of them running away from home and

rebellious against their families.

“Who is the fool responsible for mass-producing books on paper anyway?!” Elnea said, fuming. “Had books remained exclusive luxuries, this situation would never have unfolded into such chaos!”

I jolted in surprise at her words. “Th-That’s, um...” I stammered.

“Yes, Chise?” Elnea interrupted me. “Do you know who is responsible for this debacle?”

“Um, well, I’m sure that the person who developed the manufacturing method for paper didn’t...” My eyes darted around nervously as I debated whether or not to tell Elnea that I was the “fool” in question. Unfortunately, Teto didn’t leave me a choice.

“It’s Lady Witch!” she declared proudly.

I immediately buried my face in my hands.

“Is that so?” Elnea said, her voice low as she shot me a glare so intense it made me want to apologize immediately. “So it is *your* fault that this chaos has ensued, Chise.”

“I suppose it is,” I said in a strangled voice. “I’m the one who invented paper, after all. I’ll help you deal with the situation in your forest to the best of my ability.”

A smirk curled on Elnea’s lips. “Is that so? I am pleased to hear that. However, Chise, if I were you, I would stop being so overweeningly kind to everyone. You might fall victim to unsavory individuals in the future.” She cackled, the death glare she had shot me earlier already a distant memory.

Althea shot me an apologetic look, and it hit me.

“Hold on a minute. Did I just get played?” I asked between gritted teeth, bringing a hand to my forehead in exasperation.

“Is something wrong, Lady Witch?” Teto said innocently, her head tilted to the side.



Elnea knew all along that I was the one who had introduced paper manufacturing to this world; she had made it sound like it was entirely my fault and used the guilt I was feeling to force me into agreeing to help her handle the situation in her forest.

“You were playing it up so I’d help you, weren’t you?” I said, shooting her an accusatory glare.

“Not entirely; it *is* true that I am at my wit’s end with this situation and would like your help,” she replied with a small smile.

I sighed. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to go deal with the youngsters from a few villages, including Rorona’s.”

We had some ties with Rorona’s village, as it was located in the mythical beasts’ breeding grounds. I had met the teenagers living there a few times, but we weren’t particularly close or anything.

“You are the one who gave those novels to Rorona, are you not? The children who grew up listening to Fauzard reading her those stories are the source of our current predicament.”

I nodded. I hadn’t *actively* done anything to encourage the young elves to leave the forest, but when she put it like that, it was kinda my fault they got this idea in their heads in the first place.

“You sowed those seeds, Chise,” Elnea added to drive the point home. “For the time being, I expect you to keep a vigilant eye on the youngsters from a distance to ensure they refrain from doing anything reckless. And, if possible, try persuading them to go home.”

It seemed that she had already asked elves with more experience living outside the forest—as adventurers or otherwise—to convince the teens to return home, but there weren’t enough of them to deal with all of the runaways. That was why she turned to us, since we had experience traveling the world and some of the teens knew us.

“Fine. I’ll do my best,” I said.

“Teto will help Lady Witch!” Teto chirped.

A small smile curled on Elnea’s lips, and I could visibly see her relax, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

“You have my thanks, Chise. Still, I am curious as to what aspect of human culture has captivated the youngsters to this extent. Ah, to be clear, I mean no disrespect towards humans,” she said, and I believed her.

“They probably just don’t realize how nice their own culture is,” I replied.

“If they knew more about their homeland, they’d like it even more!” Teto added, and I nodded in agreement.

Elnea brought a hand to her chin.

“So you are saying that if our young elves took pride in their own culture, they would be more inclined to stay?” she muttered before exchanging puzzled looks with Althea. “Is there anything of interest in our forest that would incentivize them to remain, though?”

“I am also struggling to find something...” Althea said.

The two of them stared at their coffee cups, deep in thought.

When I had first visited the elves’ forest, I had been mesmerized by all of the unique things they had to offer, from the acorn coffee to the woodwork made using tree bark in Rorona’s village or the magic silkworm fabric and indigo-blue dye of Elnea’s dress. But Elnea and Althea saw these things every day and had no idea just how wonderful they were.

While I found this thought amusing, I also couldn’t help but wonder if this was what made it so difficult to discover regional resources; we simply could not realize how good what we already possessed was. This was an interesting train of thought, but one for another day; right now, my main priority was to help Elnea solve the crisis in her kingdom. And so, without a moment to waste, I began to think of ways to convince the runaway teens to go back to their villages.

Chapter 24: Adults Were Once Children Too

After Elnea and Althea had left, the two of them still pondering what treasures their forest could boast about, Teto and I started preparing to keep watch over the elven teens. When we were done, we passed through the transfer gate that led to Elnea's palace and met up with Althea.

"I was awaiting your arrival, Miss Chise, Miss Teto. Let me take you to Lady Elnea."

We followed her to the garden adjoining the royal palace and were met with the sight of several elves already gathered there. These must've been the people Elnea had enlisted to talk to the kids; most of them looked like they were adventurers or merchants. Elnea had opened a passageway to the spirit corridor, and everyone was entering one by one as she supervised the operation.

"I'll never get tired of seeing Lady Elnea's spirit corridor," Althea muttered in awe.

"Is Miss Elnea's special in any way?" I inquired.

She nodded. "Normally, the spirit corridor is just a shortcut the spirits can use to teleport to another destination, but Miss Elnea can connect it to multiple places simultaneously. It has helped us many times in the past, mostly to defend the forest against raids by organizing hit-and-run attacks," Althea explained.

The spirit corridor was truly something else; one could anticipate the elves using it, yet remaining clueless about their exact location or timing made it impossible to evade their attacks. The spirits acted as Elnea's eyes and ears, revealing the enemies' locations to her. She would then use the spirit corridor to deploy her elite troops in swift surgical strikes, exploiting the element of surprise to gain momentum or to split up the enemy army and crush them one by one.

“That’s amazing,” Teto said, impressed.

Meanwhile, the only thought that went through my head was that I *definitely* didn’t want to make an enemy of the elves.

We passed the time by chatting about the spirit corridor; before long, it was our turn.

“Oh, Chise! You came,” Elnea said when she saw us. “I shall connect the spirit corridor to a spot near Rorona’s village right away. I am counting on you.”

“I know,” I said.

“Let’s go!” Teto chirped.

The two of us entered the spirit corridor and followed the path until we arrived somewhere in the middle of the forest.

“The teens supposedly have their base somewhere around here,” I muttered, looking around.

“Lady Witch, Teto can sense people this way!” Teto said, and we headed towards the destination she was pointing to.

After a few minutes, we spotted a fenced-off area with a couple of tree houses nestled high in the towering boughs.

“It’s a bit like a secret base, huh?” I noted, looking up at the tree houses with curiosity.

“It looks like a lot of fun!” Teto exclaimed.

It looked like these tree houses were work sheds of some denomination. The surrounding area was well maintained, with no trees or bushes in the way, and there were faint traces of blood on the ground. I surmised that this place was used by hunters to butcher their wild game, all while offering emergency accommodations for anyone needing somewhere to rest or stay overnight.

A group of adult elves was gathered near the fence.

“Quit your nonsense and come back to the village!”

“Human towns are dangerous. Wake up from your stupid daydreaming; you’re not going there on our watch!”

“You’ve all been poisoned by that stupid book! You can’t even catch *prey*; what makes you think you can become adventurers?!”

“Your mom and little brothers miss you! Come back!”

I quickly put together that they were adults from Rorona’s village and the surrounding settlements. They were trying to convince the young elves to come back home, to no avail.

“Shut up! I’m going to a human town, and you can’t stop me!” one of the teens said, poking his head from the tree house.

“‘Human towns are *dangerous*’? What century do you live in? Besides, I wanna be a craftsman, so why should I stay in this tiny village? I’d much rather live in a big town and have lots of customers!”

“I’m more than good enough to become an adventurer! I want to travel the world!”

“Mom and my brothers miss me? You’re just saying that to guilt-trip me into staying! I deserve some me time too! Ugh, this village sucks, I hate it here!”

The teens simply wouldn’t listen to them. They went back and forth a few times but ultimately reached a stalemate. As the adults reluctantly gave up for the day and started for home, they spotted us.

“Miss Witch? What are you doing here?” one of them asked.

“Miss Elnea asked us to try convincing the kids to come home,” I said.

The adults looked a bit embarrassed.

“Sorry for the unsightly display,” a stubborn-looking elven man grumbled, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. “We should’ve dragged them back home by the scruff of the neck. Now even Lady Elnea’s getting involved.”

“If you had done that, they might’ve run away out of sheer defiance,” I said. “We’ll take our time talking them down and make sure they all return home safely.”

The adult elves from Rorona’s village all bowed their heads to us, and so did the ones from the other settlements.

“Please do. We’re leaving them in your care.”

I nodded and let my gaze wander to the tree houses.

“Still, I was surprised to see those tree houses in the middle of the forest,” I commented.

It was just a bit *too* convenient.

“It looks like they must’ve been really hard to build!” Teto added.

On hearing our words, the adult elves started laughing.

“These used to be our hangout spots when we were younger,” one of them said.

“The hunters use them to rest whenever they need a break, so we try to keep them tidy, but the kids have taken over.”

Small smiles had curled on the adult elves’ lips as they reminisced about their youth. Back when they were teenagers themselves, they must’ve gotten up to all sorts of shenanigans, just like their kids now. I didn’t blame the kids for being kids; my only issue with their little rebellion was that getting what they wanted could potentially put them in danger.

Chapter 25: The Secret Base in the Great Forest

As I ruminated on how to convince the elven kids to go back to their villages, Teto and I pressed on towards the tree houses.

“Stop right there! Don’t get any closer!” a voice came from overhead.

I saw a few elven kids peering down at us from one of the tree houses, their bows and spirit magic fixed on us. They all seemed to be around what would have been middle-school age in my previous life. Although elves were long-lived, they aged similarly to humans for the first twenty or so years of their lives, after which the process ground more or less to a halt for the better part of their time among the living. Odds were that these kids were actually as young as they looked.

“Don’t point your weapons at Lady Witch!” Teto shouted back at the kids, overwhelming them with a burst of her mana, but I motioned for her to stop.

“Calm down, Teto. We can’t just use brute force against them, remember? Let me do the talking for now.”

“Fine...” she replied with a pout, reluctantly stepping back as I took a step forward.

“Miss Chii and Miss Teto?” a kid from Rorona’s village said, putting two and two together.

“What, you know them?” one of the other kids asked her. “They’re not elves, though, and it doesn’t look like they’re here to join us either.”

They were starting to grow a bit more hesitant and less ostensibly hostile, so I decided now was the time to open negotiations. “We have no intention of attacking you. We’re just here to talk. Could you please lower your weapons?”

“We don’t believe you! You’re just here because our parents told you to bring us back home, aren’t you?!” one of the youths’ voices echoed from up in the trees.

I opened my magic bag and fished out a little something-something I'd prepared for the occasion.

"Do feel free to open fire, if you like. Just keep in mind that I intend to shield my body with *this*," I said calmly, holding up a book.

"Wha...?! Th-That's volume ten of *The Legend of the Heroes*!" one of them exclaimed in shock, causing the rest to grow increasingly agitated.

That's right; the book I was holding up was the newest volume of the series, which had just come out a few days ago.

The elves' forest had a much smaller population than most human nations, so the market for novels was relatively limited. Therefore, these novels would first be sold in human towns before reaching the elves. Consequently, they were currently one volume behind on *The Legend of the Heroes*.

"So? What are you gonna do? Will you attack the book to force us away? Or will you lower your weapons?" I asked.

The elven kids started grumbling and muttering among each other. To them and their obsession with human culture, this book was practically their Bible—and here I was, dangling the newest volume *right before their eyes*.

"Gah, fine!" an elven boy—who seemed to be the mediator of their little group—exclaimed in resignation. "Lower your weapons and let them up, guys."

The other kids did as they were told. The ones from Rorona's village seemed really relieved as they beckoned us closer. They opened the fence for us, and we were led into a sort of open space surrounded by tree houses.

"So, what are you doing here?" one of the kids asked us. "And who are you in the first place? You're humans, right? Why would you come all the way out to our forest?"

Other than the ones from Rorona's village, all the teenagers were looking at us with suspicion.

"We're adventurers. Miss Elnea has requested that we keep an eye on all of you," I replied.

"Adventurers?!" one of the kids exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with

excitement. “That’s so cool!”

“What the hell are you saying, you idiot?!” his friend rebuked him. “She said that Lady Elnea sent them here! *That* was the important part!”

“Huh? You’re an adventurer, Miss Chii?!” a kid from Rorona’s village exclaimed in surprise.

Once again, the teenagers started growing more agitated, muttering to each other over these new revelations. Meanwhile, the boy who seemed to be in charge around here was glaring at us.

“So? Did you come here to tell us to go home, is that it?” he asked.

“Well, ultimately, that’s our goal, yeah. But we won’t force you to go back or anything—we wouldn’t want you doing something rash. We’re just going to watch over you until you get tired of this and go home by yourselves,” I shrugged.

Teto nodded excitedly beside me. “That’s right! You can have all the fun you want!”

On hearing my words, the boy stood there with his mouth slightly agape, clearly not having expected me to say that we’d just let them be. But then he seemed to have finally processed the second part of my sentence, and his face turned crimson.

“We’re not gonna get tired of this!” he exclaimed in indignation.

Grabbing his bow, he briskly strode out of the fenced area.

“Where are you going?” Teto asked him.

“Hunting! Don’t follow me!” he spat before disappearing into the trees.

After his departure, some of the tension lifted, and the other kids felt free to approach us.

“Can you show us the tenth volume of *The Legend of the Heroes*?” they asked me, eager to get their hands on the newest volume of their favorite series.

I handed them the book with a little smile. “Sure. Be careful not to dirty or damage it, though.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Hey, let me read it too!”

The kid who had gotten the book opened it right there and then, and two others clustered around her to take a peek. Every time one turned the page, you could hear the other two complaining that they were going too fast, that they weren’t done yet, to go back to the previous page, or on the contrary, to read faster.

“Sorry about that,” a fourth girl, who had been watching her friends from afar with an exasperated look on her face, came to apologize to us.

“I don’t mind,” I shrugged. “I have a question, if you don’t mind. You guys want to leave the forest, right? Can I ask why?”

“Why did you leave your homes and gather here?” Teto asked.

The girl looked, in turn, in the direction the boy in charge left and at her friends clustered around the book, her gaze wavering before she answered. “Well... We all have different reasons. Our leader and two of his friends want to become adventurers. The kid holding the book wants to live in a human town so she can buy her favorite books as soon as they come out. The other one says he’s just interested in human culture.”

“What about you?” I asked the girl.

She let out a pensive hum. “I just want some distance from my family,” she confessed. “I have little siblings, and my parents always make me look after them. I want some me time, you know?” she said with a wry smile. “Now it’s my turn to ask you two questions!”

She asked us all sorts of things, mostly about our adventures. This piqued the interest of the kids who were reading the new volume of *The Legend of the Heroes*, and they raised their heads to listen to us. Teto and I told them about all of the travels and adventures we went on—the good and the bad; happy tales and sad tales.

We spent the rest of the day chitchatting; before I knew it, the sun had started to set. The little leader came back from his hunting trip, and the kids built a fire before starting on dinner. The leader was still shooting us the stink

eye, so Teto and I gave the kids some distance. We watched as they merrily ate dinner together while talking about their dreams around the fire. At night, some of them went to sleep in the tree houses, while others built tents on the ground. All in all, it reminded me of a youth summer camp; I found the sight quite heartwarming.

“Let’s head to bed too, shall we?” I suggested to Teto.

“Roger!”

I found a nice little corner in the woods and installed our caravan, which I kept in my magic bag.

For the next few days, Teto and I kept on watching over the elven kids.

Chapter 26: The Youths' Dreams Come to an End

The Elven Youths' Side

The elven youths were using the tree houses in the forest as their base of operations. During the day, they all took their own share of work. Some hunted, while others gathered fruits and nuts for their daily necessities, as well as to exchange in human towns to make some money.

At night, they would talk about their dreams around the fire and borrow the spirits' powers to read adventuring novels and look at art from human towns. At the moment, they were taking turns reading the newest volume of *The Legend of the Heroes* that Chise had kindly lent them. The leader of the youths didn't like Chise and Teto very much, but the others didn't seem to mind them. Whenever the boy wasn't there, they would invite them to their tree houses and show them the theater posters and newspapers they had collected.

Most of the youths enjoyed their communal living situation, but the leader of the little group was getting more and more frustrated with each passing day.

"Is that all you guys managed to gather today?! At this rate, we're never gonna leave this damn place!" he barked at his friends when they brought the day's loot.

The preparations for their journey weren't going as well as the boy was hoping. The other youths, on the other hand, were rather calm.

"We have almost no arrows left, but that should be enough food for today, isn't it?"

"What's the point of hunting more game than we can eat anyway? It'll just rot. We'd have to smoke or dry the meat if we want to use it as provisions on our way to a human town. We've got a bunch of fangs that we don't know what to do with, and we've thrown away all of the pelts we got since we don't know how to tan them."

“I’m actually thinking of going home soon. I like human culture, but it’s not like I *have* to leave my family to enjoy it, you know?”

“The next merchants are coming soon too anyway, aren’t they? They might have some new books and posters they use to wrap their wares.”

“I want to go home too... I wonder how my parents and my little siblings are doing.”

A melancholic atmosphere settled over the elven youths; they were aware that the end of their little rebellion was approaching.

“What the hell are you guys saying?! It’s because of them, isn’t it?! The adventurers Lady Elnea sent here to convince us to go home!” the leader exclaimed.

“No! Miss Chii and Miss Teto just told us all sorts of things that aren’t written in the books!”

After listening to Chise’s stories, the youths had realized that the life of an adventurer wasn’t as easy as they had imagined and that the grass wasn’t necessarily greener in human towns. Yet it didn’t feel like she was trying to dissuade or manipulate them; she was simply telling them the truth, plain and simple.

After leaving their villages, the youths had been too enamored by the thrill and novelty of communal living in the heart of the woods and were purposefully evading the harsh realities awaiting them. But now that a few days had passed, they had started calming down and reflecting on their actions. Could they realistically navigate their way to a human town? Was communal living in the woods truly necessary preparation for their journey? They could simply wait until they became adults and get jobs that’d allow them to venture outside the forest, or at least save up enough money for a smoother transition. Besides, they had it pretty good in the forest. Could they really survive alone without their villages, families, and the spirits of the forest looking after them?

After pondering these questions over and over, they finally came to a collective decision.

“Let’s just go home and apologize to our parents,” said the elven girl who had

been wondering about her parents' and siblings' well-being.

An expression of sheer betrayal appeared on the youths' leader's face.

"We promised we'd leave the forest together! Are you really gonna give up? You traitors!" he exclaimed.

The other youths avoided their gazes awkwardly.

"Tsk! Whatever, I don't care about you guys anymore! I'll leave all by myself!"

"Ah, hold on!"

The other youths tried to stop him, but he shook off their attempts and dashed off into the forest.

"Shit, shit, shit!"

He took to the trees, leaping from bough to bough in the dimly lit evening.

"If that's what they want, then so be it! I don't need them to leave the forest!"

The boy was headed in the direction of the monsters' territory—a place the adults had forbidden him from entering, and for good reasons: there was a seepage point in the leylines there. The deluge of mana that gushed out of the leylines kept giving birth to new monsters, some of which had even mutated thanks to their prolonged mana exposure. The boy's plan was straightforward: defeat a few monsters, obtain their magic stones, and exchange them for money in the human towns. The monsters that inhabited that part of the forest weren't anything like the ones he had fought up until now; defeating them would grant him bigger, purer magic stones, exactly what he needed to secure his immediate financial needs.

As long he was in the forest, he could use his forestry skills and his spirit magic to survive.

"It's a good thing, actually. Now I don't have to wait for these losers to save up for their own traveling expenses. I should've done this from the start!" he said, using the power of his contracted wind spirit to leap from tree to tree.

After a short while, he reached the monsters' territory.

“Dean’s always fighting monsters. If he can do it, then so can I! I’ll be an adventurer too one day!”

Dean—the protagonist of *The Legend of the Heroes*—had fought many monsters throughout the course of the series. The boy, casting himself as the main character of such tales, looked down from the tree he was perched on, his eyes landing on a monster.

“Go!” he exclaimed, drawing his bow and calling forth the power of his wind spirit to enchant his arrow.

The Wind Magic-imbued arrow pierced through the monster’s body deeply. It emitted a short pained cry before falling to the ground, dead.

“I did it!” the boy cheered, pumping his fist.

He jumped from the tree and went to inspect the monster’s body.

“Well, that was easy,” he said with a chuckle.

Drawing the small knife from his hip, he prepared to cut open the monster and retrieve its magic stone. But just as he began, a large root emerged from the ground, wrapping itself around his leg and the monster’s body, dragging them away.

“Huh?! What the hell is that?!” the boy exclaimed.

The dead monster and he were being pulled towards the base of a large tree. Looking up, the boy noticed that the tree had a human face etched onto its trunk.

“Shit! A treant!” the boy cursed.

He had accidentally let go of his knife and his arrows had fallen from his quiver when the treant had started dragging him along the ground.

“Let me go before I make firewood out of you!” the boy yelled, holding out a hand in the direction of the treant and shooting a blade of wind at it, but it barely made a scratch in its bark.

“Aaaaaah!”

Terrified at the sight of the treant’s maw drawing steadily nearer, the boy

offered even more of his mana to his spirit. A whirlwind appeared around the boy, along with countless wind blades that relentlessly slashed at the root wrapped around his leg, the dead monster beside him, and the treant's trunk.

Creeeak.

The spirit might not have been particularly high rank, but, at the end of the day, it was still a spirit; its attack was potent enough to cause some considerable damage to the monster. If a human had wanted to replicate that spell, they'd need to be at the level of a C-rank adventurer at the very least.

The spirit's wind blades slashed at the treant's trunk, homing in on the cavity that contained its magic stone, cutting through the layers of tree fiber one by one until they reached the stone. The treant let out a dying cry, mana gushing from its open wound as its life force ebbed away.

"Hah... Hah... It's over. I won! I won!" the boy cheered, drunk on his victory and roaring with laughter. However, his celebration was cut short as he glanced at his surroundings.

Creeeak.

Three more treants had appeared. With no mana left to defend himself, the boy looked around the forest, searching for something, anything that could help him—to no avail. Despair began to creep into his heart.

Oh... Right. Dean might be incredibly strong, but he never fights alone. His friends are always here to help him when things get tough. That's how he managed to defeat all of these monsters. But me...I'm all alone, the boy realized.

He could only watch as the treants thrust roots sharp as spears at him. In that instant, the boy saw his life flash before his eyes. Someone like him could never have become an adventurer anyway; it was all a stupid dream.

The boy's last thought was surprisingly trivial.

"I should've read the newest volume of *The Legend of the Heroes*."

For some reason, the boy had obstinately refused to read the book Chise had lent the others until the very end. He'd watched the others taking turns reading

it, but never touched the book once, swearing to himself that he'd buy a copy with his own money once he reached a human town. But now that he was about to die, he regretted his decision.

The treant's roots inched closer and closer to the boy.

"Multi-Barrier!"

Miraculously, the roots were repelled as if hitting an invisible wall. Immediately after, the adventurers Chise and Teto landed before him.

Chapter 27: The Predictable Conclusion of the Elven Youths' Folly

"I was distracted by Elnea's letter; I didn't even notice he was gone. Still, looks like we made it," I said with a sigh of relief after erecting several magic barriers between the boy and the treants.

I had stopped watching over the elven kids for a minute to read the letter Elnea had sent me with her dark spirits, and the boy had chosen that moment to disappear into the forest. When I realized what had happened, I felt my blood run cold. Thankfully, the forest's spirits kindly told me where the boy had gone, and we managed to catch up with him before he got hurt too badly.

"Teto, take care of the treants!"

"Roger!"

Teto let her mana course through her black sword and sliced through the treants' thick trunks in one swift stroke. The force of Teto's attack had thrown their upper halves in the air slightly, mana gushing from their wounds.

"Gotta do something about these so they don't fall on the boy. *Psychokinesis!*" I chanted, using my magic to direct the upper halves of the treants towards my magic bag.

With the most imminent threat dealt with, I shifted my attention towards the boy.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah," he nodded slightly, a dejected look on his face as he freed his leg from the treants' roots and tried to get back to his feet. His legs trembled like a newborn calf's; his brush with death had sapped all the vigor out of them.

"No need to push yourself; you can stay seated until you feel better."

"Okay," the boy said, obediently crouching down.

Meanwhile, Teto had picked up the knife and arrows the boy must've dropped.

"Here you go!" she said, handing them back to him.

"Thank you...very much."

"We won't lecture you for what you did," I said. "In exchange, let your parents scold you to their heart's content, yes?"

"Okay." Once again, the boy simply nodded quietly. It was as if whatever evil spirit was inhabiting him before was gone.

He looked up at us, opening and closing his mouth a few times as if he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. Teto and I waited patiently for him to gather his thoughts.

"Um... Thank you for saving me," he finally said.

"You're welcome. Well then, it's late so let's head back to the others.
Teleport!"

Thanks to the spirit tags Rorona had made for us, I could use my magic without obstruction. The next instant, the three of us landed near our caravan.

"Guys! Miss Chii is back!" one of the kids who had been anxiously waiting for us to return with their leader informed his friends when he spotted us from his spot in one of the tree houses. The other kids rushed to their leader's side, all of them speaking at once, telling him how worried they were.

The boy looked like there was something he wanted to tell them too.

"Sorry for earlier, guys," he said sheepishly. "I shouldn't have tried to force you to leave the forest with me. I'm going to give up on becoming an adventurer and stay here."

The others looked at him with sorrowful eyes.

"Isn't it a bit early for you to give up on your dream?" I interjected as I put my caravan into our magic bag.

The next instant, I felt a fluctuation in the ambient mana and turned around; the entrance of Elnea's spirit corridor had appeared right there.

“Miss Elnea is calling for us,” I said, turning towards the kids.

All of them started shaking in fear upon learning that the head honcho of their forest wanted to see them.

“It’s okay, guys! Miss Elnea won’t do anything mean to you!” Teto said to reassure the kids as we led them through the spirit corridor.

After a couple of seconds, we emerged inside Elnea’s palace. Other elven kids were leaving other spirit corridors, escorted by adult elves. These must’ve been all of the teenagers who wanted to leave the forest. There were around a hundred elven kids in the room, all of them looking around anxiously. After a bit, Elnea appeared, Althea in tow.

“Silence, everyone! Lady Elnea has something to say,” Althea announced to the crowd.

Instantly, the elven kids fell silent.

Elnea’s eyes, sharper than usual, scanned through the crowd.

“I assume you all know how much worry you have caused us, forming cliques and occupying important zones of our forest while claiming you were going to leave,” she started, her tone severe.

The kids all hung their heads in shame. They prepared themselves for a lengthy sermon but, surprisingly, Elnea’s next statement went in a completely different direction.

“Our kingdom limits its affairs with the outside world. This measure was put in place a long time ago to protect our kingdom from raids and attacks. But such methods are clearly not sustainable.”

She paused, her gaze fixed on the elven kids.

“Human culture has taken a hold on our youth. However, with our current system, it is impossible for them to leave the forest easily. Our kingdom’s elders have just concluded a lengthy discussion about what measures can be put in place to allow you all to venture outside the forest.”

She took in a deep breath and announced, “Our kingdom is considering expanding our trade caravan network to increase interaction with the outside

world! As a result, we plan to implement an examination system to recruit more merchants and guards!”

Her announcement caused a commotion to spread among the kids once again, but Elnea wasn’t done.

“Anyone with the necessary knowledge, skills, and fighting abilities will be allowed to join our forest’s trade caravans. You shall travel to human towns and learn your chosen profession through hands-on experience! After serving your terms as caravan members, you shall be granted a permit to travel freely inside and outside our forest!”

Cries of excitement ran through the crowd.

Before, the elven kids had no way of leaving the forest other than by taking drastic measures, but Elnea would be building a new system just for them to achieve their dreams. After working as caravan members for a few years, they would be allowed to move to a human town and become adventurers, or craftsmen, or whatever their hearts desired. On top of that, most of the kids here had thought that they would have had to choose between their families and their dreams, but with the new system, they would get to come back to the forest whenever they felt like it.

“We are still finalizing the last details of this new project. As soon as we have fully committed to our plan, we shall make a proper announcement in each settlement. I hope you will await the news eagerly!”

When she was done with her announcement, portals to the spirit corridor opened behind each group, most likely to lead them back to their own villages. One by one, the kids passed through their respective portals, except for the ones who had come with us.

“Um... Did you know about that?” one of them asked us.

“We learned about it the same time you did,” I replied.

This was what Elnea had written about in the letter I had been reading when the leader of the youths disappeared. It seemed that she and the elders of the forest had spent a very long time deliberating over how to let the kids leave the forest safely. It took them a while to reach a compromise, but they had

managed to come up with something.

Upon hearing my response, the kids hung their heads in shame, reflecting on their past actions.

“Um... We’re really sorry. And thank you. I’ll work hard,” the leader said.

“You’re very welcome. Don’t relax just yet, though,” I replied.

“First, you gotta pass the exam to become a caravan member!” Teto added.

The first selection would most likely be pretty brutal. Besides, the kids here probably weren’t the only ones who wished to travel outside the forest; the competition was going to be intense. Upon realizing that, the kids all nodded, grave expressions on their faces.

“Yeah. We don’t know yet what they’ll ask of us, but we’ll do our best!”

With those words, the kids disappeared into the spirit corridor with satisfied expressions on their faces. I encouraged them with a little “Go for it!”

I couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped my lips when I imagined the way their faces would drop once they realized their parents were waiting, ready to read them the riot act on the other side.

And so, the elven youths’ little rebellion came to an end.

Chapter 28: Behind the Scenes

After that, Teto and I moved to another room with Elna and Althea. We took a seat on one of the sofas, while Elna lay down on the one opposite us.

“I am exhausted,” she muttered with a sigh.

“You did good, Miss Elna,” I said.

“Are you okay?” Teto inquired.

She had looked so majestic in front of the elven kids, but now that everything was over, she seemed to have run completely out of steam.

Waving a hand dismissively at Teto’s question, she replied, “I am fine—merely a little tired from our lengthy discussion with the elders and my speech from earlier.”

“You are also almost completely out of mana because of all of the spirit corridors you opened,” Althea pointed out, a worried look on her face as she prepared some mana-replenishing herbal tea. Unlike mana potions, which topped up your MP instantly, mana-replenishing tea was a traditional elven drink that allowed your mana to regenerate over the course of a few hours.

Elna let out a strained chuckle, although she sounded amused nonetheless. “It has been so long since I last exhausted my mana that I had forgotten how it felt,” she said as she sat up slowly to accept the teacup from Althea.

She took a sip and a relaxed sigh escaped her lips.

“I owe you an apology, Chise, Teto. Because of me, you had to get involved in this unfortunate affair,” she said.

“I agreed to help you because it was kinda my fault things got to that point in the first place, but I don’t intend on poking my nose in other nations’ affairs ever again,” I replied.

“But it was fun to spend time with the kids in the forest!” Teto chirped, thinking back on the days we spent watching over and making small talk with

the elven teens.

Elnea squinted as if dazzled. “Spending time with one’s friends, talking about everything and nothing, hm? As an immortal being, I have to admit that I am rather jealous of the youths,” she said.

Elnea must’ve had friends too when she was younger. However, it was highly likely that they passed away a long time ago, and making new friends must’ve been difficult due to her rank.

However, her words made me pause. “Huh? What are you saying? You *are* spending time with friends right now, aren’t you?” I said.

“Lady Witch and Miss Elnea are friends!” Teto chirped. “And Teto is your friend too, and so is Mr. Great Elder!”

I was a bit embarrassed to admit it, but Teto, the Great Elder, and I did indeed think of Elnea as our friend.

A shocked expression flashed across Elnea’s face. “Chise...” she breathed in surprise. “Then let us act even more like friends, shall we? We should see each other at least once a day! This is what friends do!”

“Rejected. I like to keep at least a bit of distance even with my closest friends,” I said, quickly shutting her down.

“You did not even pause to consider my proposition, did you?” Elnea replied, throwing her head back and bursting into laughter.

“Of course she didn’t,” Althea said, looking at Elnea like one would look at a pitiful child. “That would be a huge inconvenience to Miss Chise.”

“You can’t take Lady Witch away from Teto! Besides, Teto and Lady Witch want to travel the world more, so there might be times when you can’t see her,” Teto said.

Teto had a point: I fully intended to resume my travels at some point, which would mean there’d be stretches of time where I wouldn’t be able to visit Elnea or have her come to the forest.

“Well, we’ll send you letters and drop by to give you souvenirs from our trips from time to time,” I said nonchalantly.

“We’ll have lots of interesting stories to tell you about!” Teto added.

“I shall come to visit you whenever you have free time as well. And should you encounter any troubles, do not hesitate to rely on me! As your friend, I shall spare no effort to aid you!” Elnea declared, throwing out her chest.

At one hundred years old, I was only at the beginning of my immortal life. But I had once again succeeded in making a friend with whom to share the passage of time. Things would undoubtedly change in the decades—no, in the centuries to come, but Elnea and I would have each other’s backs throughout this journey.

When the time comes, it’d be nice if we could reminisce about the memories we’ve shared with each other, I thought.

Extra Story: Centuries after the Predictable Conclusion of the Elven Youths' Rebellion

The date we had agreed upon with the elves soon arrived, and Teto and I took our transfer gate to their palace. Usually, we'd spend at most one night at her place, but this time the plan was for us to spend an entire week in the elves' forest to truly experience everything it had to offer. As I was getting excited thinking about the prospect of doing some sightseeing with Teto, we arrived at the palace, only to find Elnea—my century-old friend and queen of the elves—waiting for us on the other side of the transfer gate.

"Chise! Teto! I was awaiting your arrival."

"Thank you for inviting us to spend time in your forest, Miss Elnea," I said.

"Thank you!" Teto chirped beside me.

Elnea waved her hand in the air dismissively. "No need to thank me. I have been the one taking up your time with visits of late, and I always miss my chance to invite you over before you leave for yet another journey," she said with a pout, and I felt a bit guilty.

Elnea often came to visit us in the forest or to pass the time with the Great Elder in our absence. We hadn't gone to her place in a while.

"Well then, should we spend the day relaxing inside and leave the sightseeing for the rest of the week?" Elnea offered.

"That sounds lovely, but I was thinking I wanted to go take a little stroll in town," I said.

"Teto wants to go to a café and eat sweets!"

Elnea nodded. "The capital has changed quite a bit since your last visit. Come, I shall give you a tour," she said, and the three of us left the palace.

The capital of the elven kingdom sprawled around the ginormous World Tree, with the core government building and main facilities at the center, encircled by

residential districts. That part still looked the same as it did centuries ago. However, the outskirts of the town had since been expanded to include a sightseeing area, which was entirely new. As we strolled down the streets lined with trendy shops, I spotted quite a few non-elves among the crowd.

“It’s only been a couple hundred years since you opened the kingdom to outsiders, hasn’t it? I didn’t expect the capital to have changed so much in such a short amount of time,” I commented.

The elves’ trade network, once confined to the towns on the outskirts of the forest, had developed significantly. As a result, the paths leading to the heart of the forest had been expanded, making it easier for outsiders to travel through the woods. The elves’ unique crafts, traditions, and history had captured the hearts of many, turning the elven kingdom into a popular tourist destination.

“Ah, this café!” Elnea said, pointing at a building excitedly. “It’s a subsidiary of the one we visited together once. They’re *still* experimenting with the menu.”

We entered the café and I noticed that the acorn coffee we’d had that one time (and that I had since then introduced to the forest) was still on the menu.

“I’ll take the apple pound cake,” I said. “What about you, Teto?”

“Teto wants the same as Lady Witch, and also a nut tart, and a berry cake!”

I placed our order with a strained smile, and soon our sweets were ready.

“Lady Witch, it looks delicious!” Teto commented.

“It does,” I agreed, taking a bite of my cake. “This apple pound cake is lovely.”

Before, the sweets served in this café chain were plain and simple; nowadays, their appearances and taste had been refined to delight the tourists. They were even better than the last time we’d tried them.

“Lady Witch, have some of Teto’s nut tart!” Teto offered, holding out a spoonful to me.

“Thanks, Teto,” I said, opening my mouth and accepting the spoonful.

I couldn’t help but let out a surprised moan when it hit my mouth; that tart too had become a lot better than on our first visit.

“It’s so good... Are they using different nuts than before?” I asked.

Elnea nodded. “Indeed. They have added World Tree seeds to this specific tart.”

Just like walnuts, World Tree seeds had a hard outer shell and edible kernels inside. The owners of this café had apparently started incorporating them into several of their treats, not just the nut tarts: my apple pound cake had some World Tree kernels mixed in as well.

“These never would have seen the light of day if you had not shared your World Tree seeds with us, Chise,” Elnea told me.

“Both you and I have a lot more World Trees than before now. World Tree seeds are still precious, but they’re not as rare as they used to be.”

Before, when there were only a few World Trees in the world, eating the seeds would’ve been considered insanity. But now they were even being incorporated into certain snacks—although I had never seen that outside of the elves’ forest.

The Eltar Kingdom is the only place where we can enjoy such snacks, isn’t it? I mused as I sipped on my acorn coffee.

Having gotten my fill of cake and coffee, I turned towards Elnea. “This reminds me—you said that I forgot something here, right? I have no idea what that could be. Don’t leave a girl hanging.”

“We have recently dismantled an old house and found something with your mana signature imbued on it,” she explained, retrieving a book from the shadows. “Here. Do you remember this book?”

“Oh, Teto can feel Lady Witch’s mana on it too!” Teto noted.

“That’s...volume ten of *The Legend of the Heroes*,” I said.

Several hundred years ago, I had lent this book to a group of elven kids. I had preemptively enchanted it with a preservation spell so it wouldn’t get damaged, so it still looked the same as the last time I saw it.

“This really brings me back,” I muttered, softly caressing the cover.

Back in the day, this book had absolutely no value, being considered one

cheap adventuring novel among many others. But now, this series was considered classical literature, and new editions with beautiful bindings compiling multiple volumes were still released to this day. There were even simplified versions with pretty pictures for children.

“This book caused a real stir with your young folk,” I noted with a hint of nostalgia.

“I still remember the headache it caused me,” Elnea said with an amused chuckle. “Those kids are long gone, but it is all thanks to them that we opened our kingdom to the outside world.”

The average elf’s lifespan was around three hundred years; the kids who had rebelled against Elnea’s authority had already passed away. If it weren’t for them, perhaps the elves’ forest would still be an isolationist nation nowadays—although I was by no means saying that would’ve been a bad thing.

After reminiscing about the past for a bit, we paid for our coffee and sweets and left the café.

“Well then, should we take a little stroll around town to digest all of that cake?” Elnea suggested.

Teto and I agreed, and we followed her through the busy streets of the elven capital.

Feeling nostalgic after our conversation, I tried to look for vestiges of the kids who had caused the little uproar we had been talking about, but I couldn’t find anything. However, I knew that—even if they weren’t obvious at first—the traces left behind by the kids were indeed there. It was their rebellion that had shaped the Eltar Kingdom into the prosperous tourist destination it had become nowadays.

Teto, Elnea, and I would never forget about them as long as we lived.

Afterword

To new readers and old readers alike, 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 highly suggest you go give it a try.

In this volume, the focus was on the elves' forest and its World Tree. I hope you found it enjoyable. This part was originally cut from the web novel when the series began serialization, but I rearranged it and decided to have it be the main plot of this volume.

One of my biggest challenges in writing this volume was crafting the manner of speech for the elven queen, Elnea. With the speech pattern I had come up with at first, no matter what I did, she ended up sounding like a self-important loli character in my head, despite supposedly being a beautiful, mature woman. I experimented with various speech patterns from different manga characters but couldn't find one that suited her. It was only when I saw the character design created by Tetubuta-sama that Elnea's image finally clicked in my mind. I adjusted her manner of speaking to match this new vision, and she emerged as a cool and pleasant character, if I daresay so myself.

Moving forward, my plan for Elnea is to keep her around and have her and the Great Elder serve as mentors to our immortal protagonist and her friends.

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.



**“Let us not
dwell on
details!” ✨**

**“I can
take a bath
by myself,
thank you
very much!”**





Bonus Short Stories

The Witch Makes Origami

Thanks to the spread of plant-based paper, producing and purchasing books had become much more affordable. Some aspiring authors had even appeared in the Forest; with paper being so cheap, they could buy it in bulk and attempt to write their own stories.

“Urgh, no, this isn’t right. It should be more like this... No, this isn’t it either!”

However, writing books wasn’t a walk in the park, and putting one’s ideas to paper in a satisfactory way wasn’t as easy as it seemed. On top of that, since they were writing by hand, they produced vast tracts of wastepaper. Sometimes, they would throw away dozens of sheets with barely anything written on them because they couldn’t come up with the perfect sentence.

It would’ve been a shame to dispose of all of this perfectly good paper, considering most of it was still usable, so we usually repurposed it by either giving it away to the school so the kids could practice their writing and doodle on it, or by cutting the blank parts up and assembling them to make small notepads. We’d have someone collect the used paper in every settlement on a regular basis so that we could bring it to the school.

On that day, I had decided to make the wastepaper run myself.

“Lady Witch, you don’t want to write stories?” Teto asked me.

I hummed pensively. “I don’t think I have the talent for it,” I replied.

I was perfectly fine with just reading books. I didn’t have the time or the will to make up my own stories—at least, not for the time being.

I glanced at the pile of paper, and a thought crossed my mind.

“It’s a bit of a shame that we’re only using it for writing,” I muttered before picking up a sheet of paper and folding it up.

“Lady Witch, what’s that?” Teto asked me, looking at the final product in confusion.

“A paper plane,” I said. “Look, if you throw it gently...”

I softly tossed the paper plane. It glided through the air until it hit one of the classroom walls and fell to the ground.

“Lady Witch! Paper planes can fly?!” Teto exclaimed.

“Wanna try throwing it next?” I offered.

“Yes, please!”

I went to pick up the paper plane and handed it to Teto, who threw it with all of her force, causing it to smash into the ground.

“Lady Witch, the tip is broken,” she said dejectedly when she picked it up.

“How about you try making another one yourself?” I offered.

There was still lots of paper left, so I picked up another sheet, showed Teto how to fold it, and taught her the proper way of throwing the paper plane.

“It flew this time!” she exclaimed.

Her excited cries echoed throughout the school, catching the kids’ attention, who rushed to join us.

“What’s that, Miss Teto?”

“Wow, it’s flying!”

“So cool! Show us how to do it!”

Most of the boys gathered around Teto, and she showed them how to make their own paper planes. Soon, there were a bunch flying across the room.

Meanwhile, I picked up more sheets of paper and started folding them into all sorts of different shapes, to the delight of the kids surrounding me.

“Let’s start with a classic—a paper crane.”

I cut the rectangular piece of paper to make it into a square and explained to the kids how to fold it into the shape of a crane. When I was done with that one, I moved on to stars, ribbons, and small boxes, things that the kids were

familiar with, along with people and animals that were easy to recognize. I even made a dragon, which had the kids squealing with excitement.

Some of the kids gave up their creations halfway, finding it too difficult, but we still ended up with enough origami to fill an entire shelf.

“It was so much fun, Lady Witch!” Teto chirped.

“It’s pretty nice to do these sorts of things once in a while, huh?”

This time, I had used old paper to make my origami, but I thought it’d be nice to do it again using fresh, colorful paper.

As a side note, the dragonkin and the godkin were amazed by my dragon origami and came to ask me to teach them how to make it themselves.

“Oooh! This looks just like the Great Elder! It’s incredible!”

In my previous world, paper cranes were the most popular type of origami, but thanks to the dragonkin and the godkin, paper dragons took the crown here. Needless to say, I had not been expecting this turn of events.

The Queen of Herbs

One early spring day, Teto and I went on a stroll through the Forest.

“It’s already getting warmer,” I commented.

“The trees have started to grow new leaves too!” Teto noted.

Now that winter was over and the temperatures had started rising, fresh green buds had started sprouting on the plants that had survived the cold.

As we strolled along, we crossed paths with a group of girls of all different races, who seemed to be out foraging.

“Ah, Lady Witch and Lady Teto! Good morning,” one of the girls greeted us.

“Good morning. Are you looking for medicinal herbs?” I asked.

“Morning!” Teto chirped. “Your baskets are full of leaves!” she noted, peering into the baskets in the girls’ hands.

“Not medicinal herbs, no. We’re looking for mugwort.”

“Mugwort?” I repeated.

I took a peek into the girls’ baskets and noticed that they were, indeed, filled with young mugwort leaves.

“What do you use it for?” Teto asked.

The girl we were talking to looked down at her own basket. She flashed us an awkward smile.

“The lamias have asked us to collect it for them, but we didn’t ask what they’re going to do with it...”

Lamias were extremely knowledgeable about medicinal herbs and the like, so I had put them in charge of making potions and other magical concoctions for the other residents of the Forest. The girls we were talking to might not have known what mugwort was used for, but the lamias definitely did.

As it turned out, I also happened to be quite familiar with mugwort myself; the second I saw the girls’ basket, a certain sweet came to my mind.

“We could make kusa mochi with these...” I muttered.

“Lady Witch? What’s kusa mochi? Teto likes the name, it sounds delicious!” Teto exclaimed, looking at me with anticipation-filled eyes.

My lips curled into a little smile at her enthusiasm.

“It’s a sweet made by boiling and chopping up mugwort and kneading it into mochi.”

The dragonkin, oni-kin, and minotaurs had started cultivating glutinous rice, so we now had access to small quantities of the stuff.

The girls seemed curious about kusa mochi, so I invited them to our mansion to make it for them in exchange for some of the mugwort they had collected. I boiled the mugwort to remove the bitterness, then squeezed all of the water out of it and chopped it into a paste. I didn’t have time to boil and knead glutinous rice, so I made my mochi using both glutinous and nonglutinous rice flours, then mixed in the mugwort paste.

“And here you have it: fresh kusa mochi,” I announced when I was done. “You can fill them with red bean paste or sprinkle them with roasted soybean flour.”

Teto grabbed a piece of kusa mochi and sunk her teeth into it without hesitation. “Lady Witch! This is so good!” she exclaimed.

The girls, on the other hand, were a little less enthusiastic as they brought the mochi to their lips, most likely out of fear that it would taste bitter, as most wild herbs did.

“Oh! It’s actually pretty good! The bitterness of the mugwort isn’t bad at all.”

“It adds a nice accent to the mochi!”

I watched them dig into their treat and grabbed a piece of mochi for myself.

“Lady Witch, mugwort is really yummy!” Teto exclaimed.

“Isn’t it just? You can also have it boiled or deep-fried and it’s just as nice. It’s said to be good for the skin too, and can even help people who are sensitive to cold. Women in particular are really fond of it, hence its nickname: the queen of herbs.”

The girls started fighting over the remaining kusa mochi as they listened to my little lecture.

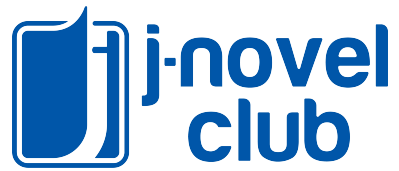
The lamias must’ve been aware of mugwort’s effects as well; being a matriarchal tribe, beauty and issues exclusive to women must’ve been at the heart of their concerns.

“Hold on a minute,” I said to try to stop the girls from shoving more mochi into their mouths. “Mugwort has a lot of benefits, but if you eat too much kusa mochi, you’ll— Ah, that’s no good. They’re not listening to me.”

“Lady Witch, Teto wants to have a mochi with red bean paste next!”

“Well, I guess they’ll soon witness the consequences for themselves soon enough.”

Rumors spread throughout the entire forest and, for the entire duration of spring, all of the girls were preparing and eating kusa mochi. However, they hadn’t realized how *calorically dense* mochi was. By the end of the season, they had all gained a few pounds, and you could hear girls claiming that they would start a diet from summer onward all around the Forest.



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Making Magic: The Sweet Life of a Witch Who Knows an Infinite MP Loophole
Volume 8

by Aloha Zachou

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