

Chapter 71

“I fold.” Alessia threw her cards down, along with Hector and Amari, and I chuckled evilly to myself as I reached out and pulled back the massive pile of chips. I felt a little bad about wiping them clean, but I enjoyed winning. The chips scraped our gaming table as I pulled them backward and clattered all together as they fell into the small hole I made for them.

“Shall we go for another?” I asked as I collected all the cards. Much to my dismay, everyone shook their heads. I wanted to be sad, but we have been doing this for the last few hours, so it was to be expected for them to want to be done. That and the fact I just cleaned the house.

It took them a bit to get a hang of the game, along with the proper use of the currency, but once they got it, the game went on pretty smoothly. I lost a few early, which was good. I wanted to get their hopes up and make them all in, so I can start raking in the cash. Without a second thought, I quickly gathered all the chips and quickly started to count out everyone’s winnings.

“Hector, for you, you win one hundred dollars even. Amari, you are up by one hundred and ten, and Alessia, you pulled in only fifty.” I told them as I quickly counted the chips and distributed the cash. While they couldn’t use it right now, I would have to start implementing ways in the near future. I wonder if I could set up shop somewhere. That also means that I have to set up salaries and whatnot, and honestly keeping track of it all sounds like a pain in my ass. Maybe if I could get kharon off of ferryman duty, then I could change his position to the treasurer or something of the sort. It would be a lot safer than him dealing with adventurers every day.

I distributed the money around the circle and saw that Alessia looked morose. “What’s wrong?” I asked as I slid a fifty-dollar bill in her direction.

“I don’t enjoy losing.” She told me through a pout as she folded up the fifty and slid it into one of her pockets.

“Ah, when I first started playing this game, my chef cleaned me out once. I was devastated, but he taught me a lot that I know now.” I told her as I quickly counted my earnings, which tallied up to well over three hundred dollars. If only my money had value here.

“It’s still embarrassing.” She told me as she huffed and crossed her arms.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I told her as I tucked away my cash. “Just get good.” I laughed as I stood up, and so did everyone else.

Alessia clearly didn’t know how to react to my shit talking, but really, it was fun to finally talk shit with people. Even if they were not totally alive. Ah, how have I missed this. It’s been so long. I sat back in my chair in a mild euphoria. For the first time in such a long time. Alessia stared at the table with a frown on her face, and her arms crossed across her chest. “Come on Alessia,

cheer up, it's just a game," I told her as I cleaned up the chips. The other two had already left the room, leaving us two behind.

"I know, it just isn't fair." She told me as she lounged across the table, with her head faced down. I could hardly hear her muffled voice.

"There there." I reached out and patted her back. I couldn't get over how cute it was seeing her looking so defeated. The poor girl must really take the loss pretty hard.

She sat there for a little longer as I neatly stacked all the chips up, in all the spots. "Come along Alessia, I'm going to go work on some stuff." I gestured to her as I walked towards my office area. I had fun, so now it was work time. There was some stuff I needed to work on for the future of the domain.

I sat down at my desk and rifled through my notebook while Alessia shambled into my room, threw herself into her chair, grabbed one book that she likes to read, and sat there quietly brooding over her loss. I, on the other hand, fleshed out more ideas. Maybe I should make a central bank to help manage the cash, and eventually place Kharon in charge of managing. Now only if I had some computers or something of the sort, that would be fantastic in keeping track of the cash flow. But here I am. It was times like this that I really wished that I had technology. If I could, I would love to build some here, but I had no idea how it worked outside of super simplified basics.

Maybe I should start with electricity and then combine that with magic. Hell, with that I could eventually make tech that could rival that of earth. Well, not me specifically, but with what I can do. I quickly penned in my ideas and named it the Central Asterian Bank. As for the rest, I would figure it out, but it would be super helpful in the future, especially for storing all my excess stuff and whatnot.

I could also include the adventurers as well. I can make an entire division strictly for storing their goods and hiding it away from the outside world. It would be like Switzerland, and it would help with cash flow, along with resources on my end. Mostly since I can recreate anything I consume. Was I overextending myself on the matter? A little, but if I keep navigating myself into a spot that would be invaluable, then the chances of people attempting to kill me off become all the lower. All the while, I would benefit and only grow stronger at the end.

I bit the end of my pen as I kept working out plans and extensions for it. But I had to be sure that I wasn't cramming too much in at once. After all, I still had to consider the use of my resources. I brought up the design of the town that I have been tinkering with and slotted in a bank near the center of the town, but then I also increased the projected size of the town slightly for it to make sense. With that done, I glanced at my essence bar and saw that it had filled up once more. I cracked my fingers, and decided that I should have my companion here., I opened up my menu and quickly typed a message for Kharon, explaining that I wanted him here to guide me through upgrading my domain. With that being done, I sat back and cracked my fingers. Now it was time to wait.

“Ah, it's that time, isn't it mistress?” Kharon appeared and gave me a swift bow.

Maybe a while ago, I would have been uncomfortable with it. But now, it was simply a part of the job. “Of course. Is there anything that I should keep in mind while I'm doing this?”

“The only thing that is vital for you to know is that you will be vulnerable while the process goes through. You will lose access to most of your abilities for the duration of the upgrade. I recommend you check to ensure that your domain is in peak condition while the process unfolds.” As he spoke, he took a seat across from me.

I nodded my head and motioned for my map to appear, and I looked it over. The reinforcements had already arrived at the stronghold, and all the treasure chests looked to be in peak condition. I religiously checked every facet of my domain, ensuring that everything was up to par. “How long will it take?”

“About forty-eight hours, however, you won't have to do anything other than press the button.” Kharon crossed his legs, and lowered his hood, revealing his skull. His red eyes seemed to fluctuate in brightness as he spoke.

I stared at him for a moment longer as I tried to figure out what he was feeling. Even after knowing him for all this time, I could never tell what the skeleton was thinking or feeling. I tore my gaze from him and quickly rifled through my menu and found the upgrade button. I stared at it for a moment as reality hit me. Everything was progressing, and with this, I was another step closer. Though it felt like with each step I took, what I really wanted seemed to change ever so slightly. At first, I wanted to go home, and I still do. But at the end of this all, I want to both keep this place and go home. I'll find a way.

I pressed the button and confirmed that I wanted to upgrade the domain and held my breath as the screen flickered for a few tense seconds. I waited for something grand to happen, which disappointingly never happened. Instead, in the corner of my eye, a timer popped up, counting down from thirty-nine hours and fifty-nine minutes. With that task out of the way, I dismissed the screen and sat forward, lacing my fingers together. “Thank you for the help. While that is finishing, I have a proposition for you.”

The skeleton mashed his teeth together and sat forward. “What would that be mistress?”

“Well, once this upgrade finishes, and I have the resources built back up, I want to expand the domain quite a bit, and create a town. On top of that expansion, I want to create an in-dungeon currency, and I was curious if you wanted to run it.” I rifled through my papers and found the one that held my ideas about the currency and the bank and slid it over to him.

Kharon took the paper and read it over. “This.. is rather interesting. I've never heard of a currency not backed by anything.”

“Yeah, it's how the economy in my world functions. The money has no value other than what we give through supply and demand, which is where I want to start here. I'm thinking we can set up

a few merchant areas, and sell some dungeon unique items that can only be exchanged with this currency. Which means I will need to set up a currency exchange rate.” I sat back in my chair and rapidly sorted through the ideas in my mind.

“What is the precious metal exchange rate in your world?” My companion sat the paper down on the edge of my desk and sat back in his seat.

“That’s an excellent question, and to be quite honest with you, it depends on the metal. However, I want to avoid using that since the value is so high. I don’t want to create billions’ worth of dollars. So I thought we might create our own exchange rate, and use the outer world currency as a backing, or reserve fund if we need it.”

“That is a good idea. If we keep the money flowing, then we should be able to get away with not having to create currency using our essence, which would keep the essence use somewhat efficient. I like the idea so far, mistress. However, there are some flaws that we should consider.” Kharon sat forward and reached out to the stack of blank paper that I kept nearby, and I passed him my pen.

“What would that be?” I asked as I quickly tried to rack my mind for what I could have missed.

“Well, first off, we would need a workforce. With our current roster of undead, few would be smart enough to count or do the math. Which would relegate the task solely to me for the time being. The next problem would be storage. While we can use you to teleport stuff around, eventually it would grow to be impossible if the adventurers use this system frequently.” As he spoke, the sound of my pen scratching punctuated the silence between his words.

He had two very valid points. I would have to create entities that were intelligent if I wanted them. As for storage, we would have to work on that later. For now, I wouldn’t have an issue with moving stuff around and keeping it safe. I would hate for the adventurers to pillage a bank vault, though I would be sure to reinforce it greatly. “Other than that stuff, though, what do you think?”

“Overall, it’s a fantastic idea. We can work out the kinks while we wait for the domain to finish upgrading. I have to applaud you with the stuff that you are coming up with, though. Outside of developing a simple slaughter pit for adventurers to chug through, you are attempting to establish yourself as a political entity. Which is just as strong as having a domain filled with powerful beasts.”

I couldn’t help but fill with pride as Kharon spoke. It made me happy that I was doing well in his eyes. Perhaps after all I wasn’t a disappointment. “Very well. Let’s hammer out some more ideas while we wait for the domain to finish upgrading. Oh, by the way, do you need to be back to the dock at any point to ferry adventurers across?”

My companion shook his boney head. “No, they rarely come around this time of day. Though I will keep my eye on it.”

“Ah, it won’t be a problem if you have to bail to take care of them. It would give me some time to mull over our ideas a bit more. Oh kharon, are you skilled in urban development at all? I want to run some town ideas by you. However, be warned I will use some city structures from my world.”

“Wait, they have buildings that reach that high into the sky?” I swear I could faintly hear surprise crawl across my companion’s usual monotonous voice.

“Yes, however, I want to stay away from buildings that size for now. That won’t be for quite some time. What I have in mind at the moment is a small town, or city reminiscent of what I know.” I leaned over my desk, with an absurdly large piece of paper, and my sharpie in hand.

“You don’t want to make something the adventurers would recognize?”

“Not quite. Once I expand the domain, and they come across the town, it will set the tone for the rest of the domain. Up to this point, they have only seen military installations. What I want them to see next is what the civilian life looks like here.”

He stood up straight, and tapped his chin with his finger, as he looked at my hastily drawn urban map. “It would be interesting. Tell me though, does having multiple-lane roads really make sense though? I mean, if at most we have a buggy, it would be pointless to have anything over two lanes.

“Well, you see Kharon, there is something I have in mind. I want to build up the environment in a way that doesn’t pigeonhole me. I intend on at least trying to create a hybrid between magic here, and tech that I know of from Earth. It would keep things interesting, and would keep me busy while I lounge around my office for now.” I capped my sharpie and placed it on my table and glanced towards my companion. While I lacked the use of magic, and fine knowledge of technology from Earth, that couldn’t stop me from utilizing concepts, and my vast array of rabbit hole knowledge.

He stood there for a moment, unmoving, as he stared at the urban design. “You astound me, Calixa. Instead of just doing the bare minimum, you keep trying to push everything further and further.”

I chuckled and smoothed the front of my robe nervously. “Thanks. Don’t think anything of it, I’m going to keep working at stuff until I know it’s perfect.”

He nodded his head and me and gave me what I hoped was an attempt at a smile. “You do more than enough Calixa.”

“No matter how much I do I can always do more,” I told him as I leaned forward and grabbed the sharpie, and went back to work at fleshing out the city design, desperate to get away from the topic. Mostly since it made me slightly uncomfortable having to address why I’m the way that I am. “Anyways, do you think the city hall would do well here?” I asked as I pointed to a spot roughly in the middle of the town.

“I think it is great. It makes sense, and it would be easily accessible.” He mused quietly as he looked it over.

I made a mental note to keep it as is and moved on to the next part. I was going to be here for quite some time. I had no idea how to plan out a town, and I wanted this one to be perfect, so while I had the time, I might as well figure it out the best that I could.

Chapter 72

I sat down at my desk with a burning headache. Kharon had already wandered off to take care of the new batch of adventurers that had wandered in, leaving me to do one last look over the city design to make sure that everything was taken care of. So far, we changed around some of the commercial districts and combined them more with the residential areas.

We also decided that we would upgrade the town into a smaller city, and make it roughly thirty square kilometers, so it wouldn't be something to scoff at. However, because of the sheer size and resource usage, we are going to break the creation into multiple parts, and constantly expand it as needed. The first phase of the city would be the outskirts, filled with a few small houses and retail areas, but nothing that would hint at the overall size. At least that I hoped so.

Once the outskirts were finished being made, I could start working my way inwards. At least, that was the plan. I sat back in my chair and rubbed my eyes. This was exhausting, and what made it worse was the fact that I didn't know exactly what to do for city planning. I stared at the ceiling for a little while, spacing out until I heard claws scraping concrete. I sat up, unsure of what I was hearing, only to see a pack of wolves sitting in my doorway. Five, to be exact, plus the one that I claimed as my own.

Looks like the little guy brought home some friends. Wolves are pack creatures after all, though I wish I would have known beforehand what it was planning. I wasn't expecting to have so many pets here. I stared at them as I tried to decide if I wanted to keep them or not. But thankfully, it only took a few quick seconds for me to decide. I mean, I didn't have to feed them, nor did I have to do a lot to take care of them. They would do their own thing, and I wouldn't have to do anything more.

With a sigh of resignation, I gestured for the small pack to file into the room, and they took a spot in the far corner, across from my bed. Once my domain upgrades finish, I would have to make them all a bed since it would feel wrong for me to let them sleep on the floor. As they were settling in, I watched them and thought of a few names. For the first, I would name him Grim.

As for the rest, well, I had to figure it out. I put my feet on my desk, settled in, and gestured for Grim to come over so I could rub his head. I spared a quick glance at my screen and saw the domain only had a few more hours left before the upgrade finished. But what could I do while I was waiting? I pondered the thought before I realized I should probably focus more on my training in my downtime. That was something that I couldn't be slacking on since it was a vital part of making sure this domain stayed strong.

I looked through my stats and skills, seeing what I needed to work on. Maybe I should meditate, and get my Ki core up on another level. It saved my ass during that fight with the assassins, and it wasn't something that I overly minded working on. Right after, though, I needed to work on my soul since that was the basis of everything that I was working on. I gave Grim one last pat on the head before I stood up and tried to find a semi-quiet place to meditate at. Sadly my rock was out of the question for now.

I took a deep breath and fell into the Ki realm. The ball of Ki was spinning around, sucking up the haze that still continued to permeate the area. However, instead of the pure orange that I was familiar with, the sphere had turned into a ghostly white color, with the bolts of lightning that came from it a muted grey. That must be because of the draconic ki that I now had. I sat down on my platform, ignoring the bolts of lightning that danced around me, slamming into the ground with thunderous explosions.

The surrounding haze gently caressed my flesh and began filling up all my pores. Though it felt like no matter what I did, the haze didn't threaten to drown me like it did last time. Maybe I was doing something wrong. I focused on the energy and found that it now reacted to my mental commands, though it wasn't to an extreme degree. It was much like running my hand through water and having the energy part rush back into the space.

What if I changed its overall direction? Currently, when I used Ki, it was much like a volcano, which feels so inefficient. I nuzzled the surrounding energy in a tight elliptical shape since it felt right. The energy gently rotated around me as I quickly tried to coax it forward. At first, the energy didn't react all that much, but then the surrounding haze shifted, and a silhouette formed around the sphere that hung in the sky. At first, it was faint, but as I coaxed the energy forward, more fog was torn from the ground and joined the disc that was solidifying around the core.

The core grew darker and trembled slightly as the surrounding disk sucked energy from it before they both seemed to balance each other out. The sphere grew and the disk that encircled it seemed to extend outwards as the interior of it spiraled inwards and connected with the central core. I felt something click inside of me as the energy started to cycle on its own and the sphere became almost impossible to stare at.

Congratulations! You have unlocked the Radiant Lightning Core (Draconic Version).

All ki expenditure will now be faster, and more efficient.

I stared up at the core, as the surrounding disk seemed to draw in the fog, and slowly drug it into an orbit around the sphere, much like watching water circle a drain. The lightning grew even more powerful as it filled the sky in brilliant displays of power. I stood up and clenched my fist as I went through the steps of shifting my ki into various parts of my body. This time, instead of an explosion, it was as if the ki was already in motion, and was reacting before I even considered using it. I clenched my fist, and I felt a smile growing across my face. Good, I was getting stronger. Now all I had to do was practice with it for a bit before I went to my soul realm.

I stood in the large training area that I had constructed a while ago. The lights above were slightly dimmed and a bunch of my guards was in here practicing with one another or running drills. However, in my corner was Alessia and a few of the guard officers. Hector and Amari stood before me, with their weapons bared. Alessia had her arms crossed as she stared at me with a strange look. "Are you sure that this is a good idea?"

"Yeah! Besides, the only way I'm going to get stronger is by practice." I flicked my cloak behind me and clenched my metal fist as I mentally steeled myself for the sparring session. The goal was to only dodge everything that was coming my way the best that I could, and only by using Ki, and my physical prowess.

Alessia pinched her nose and shook her head. "I heavily disagree with this, but if it's what you command, then I will begrudgingly allow it."

I shrugged as I loosened up my shoulders. It's not like she had too much a say, I would have done it regardless if she wanted me to or not. Once I was finished rolling my shoulders, I made a come hither motion towards my two undead. Hector stepped forward and stabbed his spear forward, while Amari vanished from sight.

The tip of the spear rushed towards my face, and I sidestepped and felt a presence appear behind me. Without thinking, I twisted my body and caught the blade with my hand, while forcing my body up to kick away Hector's spear. I felt a primal grin cross my face as the adrenaline coursed through my blood. I danced around the two. Though as much as I was enjoying this dance, I realized that my body couldn't react as fast as my mind was. No matter what I did there was always that small lag. But it didn't matter. The two couldn't hope to keep up with my movements.

After what felt like hours of this, my stamina was running low, so I cut the exercise short and focused on trying to catch my breath.

"Not bad at all Empress. You have improved greatly since the last time we spared." Alessia's voice sounded close by as I felt her hand rest on my shoulder.

"Thanks. This Ki core upgrade did wonders for my speed. I just have to work on the reflexes now and I think I'm set." I stood up, and brushed back some of the hair that had managed to escape from the confines of my hood,

"We will work on that. As soon as we are able, I highly recommend that we work on the hand-to-hand combat a bit more." She patted off the back of my cloak and rested the polearm against the ground.

"Sounds like a plan Alessia, sounds like a plan."

Chapter 73

I walked into my room, stretched out my sore muscles, and sat in my chair. Thankfully, I've done this enough that I had finally gotten over the pain stage, and now, it was just a steady burn that ate away at all of my muscles. I yawned as I sat back and figured out my plan. My domain had a little over an hour left for the upgrade to finish, and I was a little too burnt out to worry about doing anything with my soul at the moment. I glanced over at my bed and decided that I should take a nap, then deal with my domain getting its upgrade. Maybe afterward I can cook!

With my mind made up, I walked over to my bed, and crawled into it, and stretched out. The relief was almost orgasmic as my sore muscles stretched. I nestled into my pillow and stared up at the ceiling for a little while before my eyes meandered over to my map. Lately, before I went to sleep, something has been gnawing at me to make sure that everyone was okay before I slept.

The adventurers were still around, and a few fresh faces seemed to have arrived while I was training. Overall everything looked to be good. The stronghold seemed to hold well. The only sad thing was that one outpost was taken by the adventurers and they seemed like they were setting up shop there. Not that I was complaining, since it was keeping them in the domain. With that fact settled, I rolled over and pressed my face into my pillow, and drifted off to sleep.

When I awoke, it was to a few notifications blinking incessantly in the corner of my eye. I rubbed my bleary eyes and quickly read the stuff over.

Congratulations! You now have a tier two domain!

+Five thousand essence have been awarded to you!

You can now have four more bosses! All essence costs are now reduced slightly, and creation speed has been increased. You can now have up to tier four mob units.

Overall it wasn't too bad. A little less climatic than I would have expected, but it's doable for now. I sat up and wiped away my bleary eyes and tried to plan out my day. First things first, I have to go through and make sure that the troops are doing well, along with the treasure chests. I quickly scrolled through the map and restocked a few of the treasure chests, and consumed a few of the dead adventures and took their equipment for my use.

Once I was finished, I sat up and walked over to my desk, deciding that I wanted to cook, so I needed to look through my templates to see what I was working with. I knew for sure I had pots,pans, knives, and some herbs. I started humming to myself quietly, as I searched through my temples, and quickly separated them based on use. So, with the dead adventurers, I picked up various types of herbs, spices, and even some proteins!

I chuckled as I looked over everything and quickly went to look at everything else that I needed. I lacked an oven, and I lacked a stove, and a few other key things, but I think I can make do with

what I have. If only I could use magic, then I'm sure that I could do something with all this. I strummed my fingers across the desk as I tried to figure some stuff out. Out of curiosity, I looked through some templates from the recently deceased to see if I could find something of use.

Let's see here, some nice armor, weapons. Oh, there is even a wand! But nothing that could directly help me at the moment. I sat back in my chair and ran a few ideas through my mind. Why don't I make a flat top? I could start a fire, under a steel plate, and use that to cook. I could also do a hastily made stovetop as well the same way. Well, I guess it was time to get to work designing a kitchen.

I stood in a cleared-out area underground that was one hundred meters long in all directions. It was a little excessive, but I fully planned on decking this place out with all the equipment that I could imagine. Now all I had to do was set up some stuff so a fire wouldn't start, and so I wouldn't asphyxiate. It was just a matter of how should I do it. In the meantime, I suppose I could make a small vent way to the surface, but I would have to hide it, or find a way to recycle the stuff.

Putting that thought to the side, I created a large metal table that was about two meters long, sat it down near the wall, and then designed a wooden board to go right on top of it. I added a decent shelf underneath it so I could store a bunch of pots and pans. While I could put doors and whatnot in there, it didn't feel right. I'd rather just leave it open so I could grab what I needed.

As that was coming into existence, I started designing what would function as my flat top. Since it couldn't be anything super fancy, I created a small area underneath a small steel slab that would house fire the firewood and place it on another small steel slab that I could pull out and keep clean. Along with a small divot near the top that I could use to scrape all the excess stuff into so, I could clean it out later. As with the prep table that I made earlier, I added in a shelf underneath it to store more equipment that I would need in the future.

I stepped back and watched as my new items were in the process of being created. Now, all I had to do was create some spatulas, an oven, a stovetop, a trash can for sure, and a few other items. The only unfortunate thing is that I have nothing to create a refrigerator with, so I can't make too much stuff otherwise it would go bad. It was times like this that I really missed stuff from Earth.

Finally, I finished my make-shift kitchen. My oven was a bit of a pain to make since it's essentially going to be a bit of a smoker, which would throw off the taste of my food, but I would have to figure out how to make something slightly better. But that would be something to work on later. As for my stove, I went with a small campfire that was situated under a metal grate that would allow the flames to reach upwards, and act as a stovetop.

I grabbed my notebook and jotted out a list of equipment that I would need. So far, I for sure had a traditional pan. I would make a soup pot, along with an extra-sized one, so I can make some broths and whatnot. I would probably make a wok just to have one since woks are life. On top of

that, I would need some spoons, forks, plates, spatulas, whisks, strainers, bowls, and a few other dozen small things. From the looks of it, I would need to increase my storage space, since I intended to make a metric fuck ton of food in the future.

With my list in hand, I quickly went to work designing and creating all the tools that I needed. Sadly, I couldn't do anything overly fancy since I had to worry about not biting too far into my resource reserves. As I worked, I was growing a little more excited. I got to cook again, and the best part is, it's on my own time. No more standing on a line for fourteen hours a day, making the same food. Now I can cook when I want, and whatever I wanted, and there was no one here to tell me otherwise.

Now it was time for me to tally up what I had in the way of spices and food. Let's see, I have salt, cilantro, mint, and a couple that I wasn't sure about since the system gave them names that I've never heard before, so I would do some testing and see. Hopefully, they were something stupidly obvious, and something that I knew how to use. As for the rest, I had some uncooked poultry and pork, along with some cooked chicken, which I would try to see how it was and if I could do anything with it. What I really wish I had here, though, was some seafood, and other proteins, like steak, or just the whole animal, so I could make my own cuts, but it is what it is.

As I was humming to myself, I quickly created a sample of all the herbs that I had at my disposal. Cilantro was, well, cilantro, what more could I say there. Mint was one of my favorites, though I was questioning what I could use it for outside of making some tea. Salt was salt and was one of the most vital of all the spices at my disposal. Now, it was time to test the stuff I didn't know about. The first one up was called Bray's leave and looked a lot like basil. I picked it up and ran my fingers across its surface and smelled it.

Yep, that definitely smelled like it. I set the leaf to the side, quickly scribbled in what it was in my notebook, and went to the next. This time it was a small bundle of leaves with tiny cloves on top called Ewedu, which looked oddly familiar, though I couldn't place why. I picked off a small leaf and placed it on my tongue. As I tasted it, I realized it was a type of parsley.

Now onto the final one! This time it was a black powdery substance called peperine. Now, if common sense tells me anything, this would be pepper, which would be a boon. I reached out, dipped my finger into the substance and tasted it, and nodded my head while grimacing. Ah yes, was black pepper. So far, this was a solid haul. Now, it was time to throw together some food. Now I needed to gather ingredients, and I could start doing more elaborate dishes! Maybe I could even use it as leverage outside of here.

Chapter 74

I sat on the boat and stared out across the river. The sound of the paddle parting the water lightly tickled my ears as I watched ripples spread out across its surface. “What’s on your mind, Lady Alessia?” Kharon asked as the boat slowed down.

“Do you think the Empress notices me?” I clenched my pole arm as dozens of thoughts swirled around my mind.

“You alone spend the most time with her, so I’m sure she does.” His words broke through the thoughts that had chained my mind, yet I still had doubts.

“I mean, does she notice me the way I notice her?”

Kharon bobbed his head in thought as he kept paddling along. “I can’t quite tell you the answer to that. You know how she is. She rarely ever talks about what she thinks or feels for that matter. I’ll be willing to wager that she knows how you feel, but says nothing about it.”

“But why wouldn’t she? I don’t understand her Kharon.” Feelings that were alien to me paraded around my heart, and the frustration was gnawing away at me. I understood nothing that I felt, and I wasn’t even sure why. This all started when she was taken by those adventurers. The fear that she would die overwhelmed me, and awoke something deep within me, something that I don’t understand, but has always been with me since that haze was lifted.

“It’s just how she has always been. She may be naïve at times, but not a lot slips past her. But I wouldn’t prod her. Just keep doing whatever you are doing, and I’m sure she will notice.” The surrounding fog seemed to fade a bit as the dock cut through it.

“I suppose you’re right. There’s just so much that I don’t understand. These feelings are so alien, yet so familiar. They hound me, yet I can’t seem to name them.” I clenched my pole arm and strummed my fingers across its surface. The faintest sense of the cool metal wormed its way through to me. I yearned to feel more, and thankfully it seemed like with each passing day, my sense of touch was growing.

“You are awakened, Lady Alessia. It’s perfectly okay to be confused. It’s been a long time since you were truly human.” The wind picked up around us, gently rocking the boat.

“I don’t even remember those days. All I can see now is what the Empress wants me to see.”

“Do you hate her for it?” He asked as he turned the boat and started paddling away from the dock.

“No! I would never hate her. I just don’t know right now.” I brushed back some of my loose hair as the wind whipped the surrounding air into a frenzy.

“Oh the great Alessia, brought low by a woman.” His tone was filled to the brim with mockery, and sparked some irritation within me.

“You better watch it. Lest, I’d use your head as a footrest.” I huffed at him and crossed my arms.

“You would lose that fight and you know it.” Kharon chuckled as he spun the boat once more, and took us back to the shore.

He had a point. I may be strong, but he would shred me in a fight if I screwed up even once. The sheer amount of magic that the skeleton could dish out was frightening, and frankly, rather absurd. But one day, I would be stronger than him, for no other reason than to protect the Empress.

I rolled my eyes at him and stood up. “Thank you for the advice, Lord Kharon. I must go now. I need to go interrogate those assassins once more.”

“You are welcome, Lady Alessia. Same time next week?” He asked as he pulled the boat up the dock, allowing me to step up.

“Of course. I’ll see you soon.” I replied to him as he nodded his head and pulled his hood back up. The darkness shrouded everything but his crimson red eyes.

“Farewell,” Kharon called out as he pushed the boat away from the dock and faded into the fog once more. I gave him a small nod before I spun on the dock and gazed at my hands. I was thankful that he was doing this for me. It helped me process things a little better. But some things I just couldn’t seem to understand right now. I dropped my hands, and grabbed my weapon, which I left resting on my shoulder, and walked down the road, intent on talking to those assassins once more.

“Have you considered my offer?” I asked as I grabbed a chair and dragged it in front of the cell and sat down. The four zombies stood before me. Though three of them were as mindless as they come. The one that I was interested in was the leader. The one who was the closest to sentience.

The zombie looked at me with hatred in his eyes and his teeth bared. His flesh was green and putrid with puss running freely down his face. “I refuse to serve a necromancer.” His voice hissed into my mind, though the words he groaned out were nothing more than grunts.

“We are offering you this on your own terms. Before the domain erases who you were. You already feel it, don’t you? The voices that whisper in your ear. The scattered thoughts and memories that you know aren’t yours, yet are slowly becoming a part of you.” I stood up, and used the hilt of my pole-ax and drug it across the metal bars, filling the room with the sound of metal being struck, with each strike being slower than the last.

The zombie looked uncertain as he stepped back. I could feel the fear radiating from him as I made my threat. “You’re.. you’re lying.”

“Everyone in this domain went through what you are going through now. We all embraced it, and now we live happy lives, serving our Empress. If you choose to remain defiant, then I will leave you down here with your compatriots, and you will rot here until the end of time. If you tell me what I want to know, and agree to my terms, then I will allow you to pick your future before the last of who you are erodes.” I clanged my polearm against the iron bar one last time before I walked back over to my chair and sat down.

“You’re a monster.” The zombie whispered out as he collapsed. The others barely even glanced at him as they shuffled around the small cell.

“I do what I must for my Lady. Now, do you accept my terms? This will be the last time that I offer it. The next time we meet, you will be just a mindless undead, enslaved to the domain.” I crossed my legs and rested my pole-ax across my legs.

The zombie gazed at me for a moment before he closed his eyes. “Fine, I accept. What do you wish to know?”

I felt the start of a smile start to cross my face as I sat forward. “Who sent you and why?”

“The Theocracy of Velcrest. They sent us to dispose of Redrick and his team, and make it look like the domain did it. As for why, well, they wanted to ensure that his family line had no chance of returning and threatening them.” The zombie assassin spoke, his words filled with defeat.

“Does this Theocracy pose any threat to Asteria?” I didn’t care about that mortal being. All that mattered to me was the Empress.

“Yes. They are followers of the god of nature, and once they hear about a domain of the undead, they will surely make a move, at least if the other countries don’t make a move to stop them.” I felt the faintest twinges of fear as his words weighed in on me. I know the lady has been doing her best to make sure that we have political clout, but that was still bad news. We would have to prepare for it.

“Thank you. Now, since you have cooperated, I will transfer you elsewhere. Once there, you will meet with a woman named Amari. You are to do as she say’s and teach her all of your skills. If you even consider trying to make a break for it, I promise you will yearn for the release of death.” I told him as I stood up and walked out of the cell, motioning for the guards to start the transfer.

This information was troublesome, for many reasons. The first being that I wasn’t sure if I should tell the Empress or not. Everything screamed at me that I had to, but I also knew how she would react. I walked out of the room, and shut the door, and slammed my fist into the wall. I really didn’t know what to do.

Chapter 75

I hummed to myself as I added in some salt and pepper onto the chicken I cooked, along with some crushed and dried parsley. It wasn't much, but it would do for now, at least until I collected more cooking materials. I pulled the chicken onto the plate and cut off a piece to see how it tasted.

I bit into it and nodded my head as I rolled it over my tongue. It was a little dry, maybe a tad bit more salt, and it would be passable. But I didn't care about that. I was just happy that I had food for once. I ripped off another piece of chicken, relishing the taste. It's been so long since I've eaten food, I feel like I could cry from happiness. I had to tear myself away from my food as I looked around the kitchen to make sure that everything was turned off, and all nothing would catch fire. Once I was happy, I grabbed the plate and wandered back to my office.

I sat down at my desk, as I scarfed down my food and looked over my notes. Let's see, the city planning is finished, all that is left is building it. My domain has been stocked up and resupplied, so that's good. It just left me to train my soul, which I did not know how to do. I mindlessly ate at the chicken wing while I prepared myself for the experience. The last time I did something with this, it hurt, and that level of pain was something that I wasn't all that keen on feeling again.

I gobbled down the last of the chicken greedily before I pushed the plate away and looked around. My office was empty, with Alessia gone once more. I had no idea where she was going, but it was lonely here without her. The wolves were gone as well, doing whatever it was they did. Maybe I was just procrastinating like I usually do.

I know why I was doing it. But I guess if I kept putting it off like this, I wouldn't benefit. With a heavy sigh, I pushed away from my desk and sat on the floor, crossing my legs. I shifted slightly as I tried to prepare myself. I took one last deep breath and closed my eyes, and I felt myself plummet as I fell through my realms.

When my eyes opened, I was staring up into the night sky. The constellation of a dragon stood tall and proud. Its face reared up towards the sky, with its wings expanded. On the ground underneath it was a sphere with a light that shot towards the sky in a radiant beam.

I stood there, staring at my soul. The white energy danced and blended with flairs of purple as the orb sat there with a single white flame that seemed to orbit it. The light flickered in the darkness and seemed to recede as I got closer to it. Now what was I supposed to do here? I reached out to my soul and my fingers pushed into its surface. The energy flowed around my hand as if it was syrup and I felt a strange stirring deep within me.

I pulled my hand out, and the energy seeped through my fingers, much like water, as it rushed back into its place. Now, how was I going to do this? I bit my lip as I tried to think about everything that I could do. I reached my hand back in and gently tugged at it once more. A spark of pain exploded in my chest as I quickly let go of it. The memory of what it felt like before was all too painfully fresh for me.

Come on, think there has to be a way. Let's see, for my Ki, I meditate, so maybe I have to do something of the sort for this as well. I adjusted my cloak and sat down from across where my soul originated and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath and felt the energy swirl around the room.

Unlike my ki which seemed to originate in my body, this energy seemed to come from outside and gather inside of this core. With another deep breath, I tried to focus on the energy that rushed around me and catch it. But it kept slipping through the spaces.

I bit my lip and chided myself for getting a little antsy. I remembered what happened when I did that while trying to meditate with my Ki, and that was a mistake that I wasn't willing to make with my soul. Instead, I calmed my mind and focused on the energy that flowed around me.

I focused on gently guiding it into a tight orbit around my soul, but instead of torrential rush, it was just a small trickle. Eventually, I felt my soul tug on the energy. It was only the faintest of traces, but it was a start. In and out I repeated the process, even though I was extremely bored. I guess I was going to be here for quite some time.

After what felt like an eternity, I opened up my eyes, and felt a heavy presence deep within me. Though I wouldn't describe it as painful, just uncomfortable. I glanced at my soul and saw that it swelled up a bit, and a couple of notifications scrolled across my screen.

Congratulations! You have unlocked the first stage of soul cultivation! Your soul reserve has grown slightly, and over all usage has been reduced.

You have unlocked a new passive!

Soul Pressure I: Your soul has gained enough mass and pressure to affect the environment. Anyone caught within it suffers with scaling penalties based on its strength, and any soul skill used in its radius is increased in strength.

I sat back on my hands and watched as the constellation flickered as the ray of light grew in intensity for a second before it settled. Not so bad. I thought it would have been worse. I rolled my shoulders and stood up and gazed at my soul, and I could hear a faint rumble, as if a giant was slumbering within. There was still the dragon soul to cultivate, but I honestly had no idea what to do with that, and I was a little too tired to mess with it.

My body fell back into place in my office, and I saw Alessia sitting on a chair, with a book in her hand, reading it over. I stood up to stretch and get used to the weird pressure that seemed to be pushing on my insides as it tried to settle in. "Hey you're back. Where did you go?" I asked as I walked over to my desk and sat down.

"I went off to interrogate the prisoners. I convinced the assassin to turn his coat and join us. For now, he will train with Amari in a secure area, and she will pass on her skills to others." She replied as she flicked to the next page.

"I see. That's good to hear. Did you get anything vital out of him?" As I talked to her, I quickly organized my desk a bit, trying to bring some sort of order to the chaos here. Not that I needed it since I knew where everything was, but more out of me not wanting it to look too sloppy.

"Nothing too vital. He was sent to kill the adventurer that you conversed with. Also that he hails from a kingdom called the Velcrest Theocracy." She flicked through to another page, not making eye contact with me like she usually does.

I sat back in my chair and thought it over. A theocracy is a religious government, and knowing how radical religions on Earth could be would mean that I have to prepare for the worst. I did have a domain filled to the brim with the undead, and that was certain to attract attention. Especially that of zealots. With a sigh, I sat forward and rubbed my forehead as I worked on a plan to counter a potential invasion. Why does this have to be so hard?

"Are you alright Empress?" Alessia's voice sounded next to me and I felt a cool hand press against my back.

"Yeah, just stressing is all. Can you have the guard train around the clock? We may have another threat to deal with in the future, and I might as well get ready for it." I pinched the bridge of my nose, as I felt another headache start to bloom as I considered the implications. I wanted to do nothing more than curl up into a ball and forget everything.

But just as I spiraled, I felt a pair of arms wrapped around me and then a head pressed against my own. "Don't worry, my lady. Everything will be okay."

I froze, unsure how to react to this. I don't think anyone has been willing to do something like this. My breath hitched in my throat as my heart skipped a beat, and I closed my eyes and placed my hand on top of hers. "Alessia."

"Yes, Empress?"

"Thank you." I sat there, relishing the happiness that was threatening to overflow in my heart.

"What are you thanking me for?" She asked as she held me a little more tightly.

"Everything," I replied as I gave her hands a gentle pat. I could feel her hands clench slightly at my words and I couldn't help but grin at it. "Anyway, I'm going to take a nap. Make sure that you focus on the training. I'm going to pull out a few of the veterans and start preparing for the expansion."

She unlaced her arms and gave me a curt bow, one that was deeper than the one that she usually gave me. "Of course, my lady."

I flashed her a smile as she quickly scampered off. The happiness that was in her movement was as clear as day. I'm glad to see that she was happy. I grabbed a pen and started to toy with

it as I sat back and glanced at my map. It was time to do my daily check-ups and send a message to Rikard. It was time to gather a portion of the troops and start the expansion.