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Hyogo Amagasa
illust Kyouichi



LACEY
LONGS FOR
FREEDOM

The Dawn Witch's Low-Key Life

after Defeating the Demon King

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"I want to try
living on my own,
without anyone else
controlling me.
I want to be **just**
Lacey."

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LACEY LONGS FOR FREEDOM

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ALLEN

A local boy who
lives in Plume
Village.

THE BOAR

A monster. Doesn't
have a name yet.

FOTIA (TEE)

A monster living
with Lacey.

LACEY ASTER

The country's greatest
mage. Also called the
Dawn Witch.

WAYNE
CIELANIC

The overly supportive
former hero.





Thunder boomed.

It's going to fall here.

She immediately finished her incantation a second ahead of time.

She raised her staff and shouted from the pit of her stomach toward the sky.

Her whole field of vision turned white.

Lacey's magic and the lightning bolt collided.

Lacey won.

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Chapter 1: Clutching the Aster Staff

A violent wind whipped about. It was midday, and yet not a single ray of light breached the gloomy clouds above. Under this dreary sky, a girl clutched a staff about as tall as she was. The low-hanging hood of her black robe was soon doffed by the raging winds, revealing her flowing black hair.

The face which had been hidden under the hood was younger than one might have expected. Nonetheless, she tautly bit her lip, and her hazel eyes gazed fixedly forward.

An earthshaking voice rumbled. “Foolhardy humans!” Perhaps it was the voice of the storm itself.

Five people confronted the immense cataclysm. The robed girl, the smallest among them, struck her staff into the ground as if dispelling the wind and rain, which had quickly become a downpour. She chanted an incantation, producing a cluster of fireballs that vaporized the water droplets.

At best, the average mage could manage a single spell at a time. But the girl could cast multiple spells simultaneously. The fireballs twirled around to her will, swiftly laying waste to the monsters attacking them.

“Nice job, Dawn Witch!!!” A voice boomed as if in anger, though it was just his normal tone. The robust man to which it belonged roared with laughter, then ran forward with whirlwind speed hardly suggested by his physical appearance.

The girl was not fond of the moniker “Dawn Witch.” Under ordinary circumstances, she might quietly protest under her breath, but now was hardly the time for that.

She sensed an abnormality, and her narrowed eyebrows shot up. “Please get out of the way!” she shouted to the man’s back.

At the same time, she raised her staff. An instant later, lightning struck—a magic formula on such a grand scale that it drove back the headwinds. She

tackled it with a lightning bolt of her own. The man was flung backward by the resulting explosion and hit his back hard, triggering a violent cough.

That wasn't enough force! She clicked her tongue at her mistake. She checked the situation out of the corner of her eye, then overlapped more incantations without even turning around. Nobody could make out the spells that escaped her lips anymore.

With enough practice spellcasting, a single word could hold multiple meanings. These could be further stacked. Calculations, proofs, and estimations, all were repeated until she found the output. She accelerated her thinking pace to mind-fatiguing speeds, formed multiple magic circles, and then activated them.

"Lacey, don't push it!" came a bold voice. "You're a mage! You shouldn't be so far out front!" A blond youth tore through the winds that gusted against his face. Their eyes met.

"For crying out loud, that stupid musclehead picked the worst time...! I'll cast a divine blessing on Brooks!"

"We'll back up Lacey! Wayne, are you ready?"

"Yeah!" Wayne—the young man with blond hair—nodded. In his hand was a sword that gleamed even within the darkness.

And then...

* * *

These were her memories of vanquishing the Demon King.

Within a crowd, Lacey suddenly opened her eyes wide. Apparently she'd been completely zoned out. *That was over a month ago. I must be really out of it.* She gave her head a light knock.

She had thought she'd gotten used to being around so many people. Her oversized staff would get in the way, so she'd shrunk it to half its usual height. This was an elementary feat for her.

She walked on, then teetered, managing to bump into someone. Lacey was fifteen, though short and skinny for her age, which made walking around town

difficult. Upon close observation, she had a sweet face, but her low-hanging hood hid her eyes, and her somber vibe masked any natural charm she possessed.

“Come on down, have a look! We’ve got portraits of the hero’s party that saved the nation! The Steel Warrior, the Saint of Light, the Dawn Witch, and the hero himself, Sir Wayne! Take a close look at this gallant visage. Hang it in your house for good fortune and eye candy! Get it now while you can!”

The proprietor of the store that Lacey was just now passing by was holding up a portrait and hollering. Right on cue, there were impressed oohs and ahhs from people behind her. Startled, Lacey clutched her staff and hunched up.

These were a fad in town. Everyone and anyone stretched their hands toward the dealer. The hero’s portrait in particular was flying off the shelves. After all, he was a blond-haired, green-eyed stud. Young ladies paid meager sums from their wallets and rushed off squealing in delight.

The dealer had already commenced selling his goods. Lacey couldn’t get away, so instead she huddled up so that she wouldn’t obstruct anything. More and more hands stretched past her, and her eyes darted around nervously.

“Gimme one of the Dawn Witch!” one of the customers said. Lacey’s shoulders jerked up.

The person depicted in the transacted picture was a seductive woman with brilliant golden eyes and voluminous red hair done in luxurious waves. Her clothes were extremely revealing, which complemented the woman in the picture well...but Lacey just gripped her staff tighter and became flustered, stammering. The man stretching his hand over Lacey’s head would never have guessed that *she* was the Dawn Witch.

“This is killing me,” she quietly moaned, feeling crushed not only by her present surroundings, but by the events of the past as well.

The real Lacey had ordinary black hair, not red. Her eyes weren’t such a striking shade of gold, but were instead hazel. Somebody had just randomly given her the title “Dawn Witch” on their travels. Each time they passed through a town, they gained new titles, like the Steel Warrior and the Saint of Light. This title in particular had been assigned to Lacey by someone who’d seen

her performing magic.

The way she looked, with her waist-length black hair swaying as she gripped a staff as tall as she was and fired off a series of advanced spells, was like the night giving way to day. That was the intended meaning, at least. Unfortunately, the nickname was rather abstruse. One of the reasons why it was so often misinterpreted was because Lacey always hung the hood of her robe over her head and hid in the shadows of her more conspicuous companions.

The Dawn Witch was always out of sight. There was a common assumption that the “dawn” in her name meant that she must have red hair. Conceptions of her only got further off the mark from there, and eventually, overactive imaginations molded her into an appearance that appealed to the masses.

Her other companions had some minor liberties taken with their portraits, but were still not too far off. Lacey’s was the only one of the bunch that looked like a different person entirely. That was how she could walk around town unbothered, as she was doing now.

“Just one left!” the dealer loudly announced.

When she heard this, Lacey pulled out her wallet, somehow managing to do so without getting squished.

After that, she walked toward her destination, carrying goods that were much too large for her. As she did, she saw a young man with whom she was familiar, crossing his arms and standing in front of the inn. Even at a distance, it was obvious to see how tall he was.

She approached, and before she could call out to him, he noticed her first. He unfolded his arms and lifted his face. “Hey.” He immediately knitted his brows. “Lacey, what have you got there?”

Her arms were laden with the goods, which she’d struggled to keep from slipping out of her grasp on the way over.

“Portraits of everyone,” she told him. The pictures nearly dropped out of her arms again, but the man grabbed them with one hand and effortlessly held them up for her. Lacey wasn’t very good with people, but he was an exception. They’d been travel companions for a whole year, after all. “Thank you, Wayne.”

She gave a very slight smile.

“You’re welcome,” replied the young man. His name was Wayne Cielanic, and he was the hero who’d saved the nation.

Lacey and Wayne sat down on a bench side by side and ate sandwiches. It was simple fare—just ham and cheese stuffed between two pieces of bread. Lacey took small bites with her tiny mouth so as to not get crumbs on the portraits resting on her lap. Wayne looked down at her and watched.

“So about those portraits...”

“Yeah. They were selling these. It doesn’t include quite everyone, but it’s the closest thing to a full set.”

“The two of us, Brooks, and Dana. Haven’t seen the two of them since they left the capital...but that’s beside the point. What are you doing, lugging around those huge things? You might trip! You should just use spatial magic.”

“But there aren’t many people who know spatial magic, and I don’t want to draw attention. The inn was close enough anyway.”

Lacey didn’t hear Wayne sigh in exasperation. She was too busy eating. She glanced at one of the portraits as she did. “Everyone’s likeness besides mine resembles them, but they’re still a little off. You’re more handsome than this, Wayne.”

The youth on the canvas had a resplendent, heroic appearance, but the genuine article was more dignified and had a down-to-earth composure. There was something else about him that a paintbrush couldn’t capture: at present, Wayne was using concealment magic. To a third party, he would just look like a run-of-the-mill youth. Without this enchantment, people would’ve swarmed the plaza around him. Of course, it was elementary for Lacey to see through magic, so to her, he looked no different than he normally did.

“I don’t really care about that.” Wayne was used to compliments on his appearance, so the exasperation on his face remained unchanged. He plucked the portraits off of Lacey’s lap and tucked them under his arm. “I’ll hold on to them, so eat at your own pace.”

“Okay.” She bit in, stuffing her cheeks. Around the plaza, adults were relaxing

and enjoying themselves, and children were catching a cool breeze by the fountain. Lacey was once again struck by how peaceful it was compared to a little over a year ago when they first set off.

That was probably a good thing.

“So why are you here, Wayne?” Lacey bent her head to the side and asked once she’d taken her sweet time to finish eating her sandwich.

“To see you, obviously.” If his arms weren’t full of the portraits right now, he would probably have them folded over his chest like usual as he stared at her.

“Well...”

“I was starting to wonder if you were still alive.”

“...” Lacey couldn’t say anything in response. She had to admit, that made sense.

Over the last month, their party had split and returned to their respective hometowns. Lacey and Wayne were the only ones who were still in the capital, and Lacey hadn’t kept in contact with anyone.

She could spend hours or even an entire day or two at a time training her magic, yet she couldn’t fix her negligent behavior. Actually, one could say that she just wasn’t interested in her own welfare. Her opinion was that skipping a meal or two wouldn’t affect her ability to function. Wayne had been unable to let this kind of attitude slide, and at some point, he’d started to keep a fussy eye on her. In fact, he was the one who’d bought the sandwich she’d just eaten.

Their journey hadn’t made her any slimmer—on the contrary, she’d come back a little more filled out than before. Lacey was about the only person to whom this could happen. Even still, all of her body parts were scrawnier than other girls her age. Wayne bounced his leg each time he caught a glimpse of Lacey’s arm peeking out of her robe. It wasn’t very good manners for a noble, but he’d picked up the bad habit on their travels.

“Well, I’m not dead yet, so it’s okay.” She had thought this response would be good enough, but Wayne still looked displeased.

“So, you moved out of your house? I was surprised to hear you were at an

inn.”

“Yeah. I wanted to get my affairs in order. And besides that, I wanted to experience living on my own.”

She’d stayed overnight in plenty of places on their travels, but she’d always been tagging along with the rest of the party. This was her very first time being on her own, so it felt rather strange.

“Still, you could’ve picked a better place to stay. Didn’t you get reward money?”

“I donated most of it. There isn’t really anything I’d spend it on.”

“Now look here—”

“*Most*, but not all. I still have some on hand, enough to stay at the inn.” She glanced over at the portraits. “Enough to squander some of it too.” Her lips curved into a slight smile. “It’s all over now.”

It felt so strange to say this. All she’d ever done was refine her skills, because that was what she’d been ordered to do in preparation for the time of destiny. She’d lived a wretched existence, and now all that she had left was her own self.

Lacey was an orphan. She had been scouted for her magic talent, acknowledged as the greatest mage in the country, and sent off on a quest. But now that the dreadfully powerful Demon King had been vanquished, Lacey’s own journey was over.

A passing breeze swept through Lacey’s black hair. It was a welcome breath of air, since she was wearing a very stuffy robe. When she shut her eyes, she could hear the crisp peal of children laughing. The sounds echoed melodiously, making her feel warm inside. She took it all in, letting it fill her, and then...she remembered once more.

Her journey and her life’s purpose were all over now.

Lacey quietly watched the children with a gentle gaze. Wayne stayed silent for a while, not knowing what to say, but eventually managed to get something out.

“You still insist that there’s nothing you want?”

After Lacey’s party had defeated the Demon King and concluded their journey, they had been rewarded with money and one wish each. However, Lacey had declined to have a wish granted. Her companions had repeatedly tried to persuade her to not waste the opportunity. But although she’d thought it over, Lacey had no goals or desires. Therefore, she’d answered that she wanted nothing.

Lacey slowly shook her head.

“All right,” Wayne responded simply.

There was an even longer pause. Then he sedately asked, “You wanna come to my house?”

“Huh?”

“Well, not exactly my house, but you’d be a guest at the secondary Cielanic residence. I have to be at the palace a lot, so I don’t think I’d get to see you much. But at the very least, it’d be a lot better than living in a cheap inn.”

Lacey had been a little surprised by Wayne’s suggestion, but his clarification made more sense. Still, she had to shake her head no to that as well.

“I’m not going to stay at the inn forever. I should probably be getting married in another month or two. I told you about it before. I’m engaged to the eldest son of Duke Dejafaim.”

“You did mention that,” Wayne said curtly, turning away from her.

Lacey’s marriage into House Dejafaim had been decided about five years ago. She had already distinguished herself with her exceptional magical prowess, and there were whispers that she would likely be chosen to join the quest to defeat the Demon King. Lacey’s status as an orphan made her conveniently disposable. Her whole life’s purpose was to vanquish the Demon King, so she had no particular objections.

Even if Lacey hadn’t gone on the quest, she would still have held tremendous value just for her body. The engagement had been made not out of desire for Lacey, but for the progeny she might bear when matched with another

individual with a high level of mana.

Ultimately, Lacey had set out on the quest to rout the demons just as everyone had expected and had returned alive after successfully defeating the Demon King. Duke Dejafaim was undoubtedly elated by the additional prestige she would bring to the family.

“This staff...” Lacey began as she glanced over to where it was carefully leaning. It was nothing fancy, but it was made of solid wood, and Lacey’s hands were always tightly closed around it. “He thinks it’s filthy. He didn’t say it outright, though.”

Her fiancé had given her a fake smile and spoken in a roundabout manner, but his meaning had gotten across loud and clear.

Yet Lacey still believed herself to be at fault. When she’d first met her fiancé, she didn’t have a clue what to wear or how to act. The engagement had been made by virtue of her being a mage, so she’d worn what she considered to be her uniform. But in the eyes of a noble, she had probably looked to be no more than a child in a shabby robe.

Her first meeting had ended in failure, so she’d attempted to be more self-aware in future meetings. Regardless, she couldn’t procure the kind of clothing that nobles wore. Even if she tried to change her looks with transformation magic, she was going to be married to this person for life. Applying a temporary cosmetic change would be pointless.

Then a few days ago, when she’d met her fiancé for the first time since returning to the capital, she’d accidentally brought her staff along out of a force of habit. That had led to the aforementioned incident.

That was when it really sank in. Lacey wasn’t being sought after for her prowess as a mage. Her mana alone was what made her attractive. She would be a wife in name only, with the sole purpose of bearing children.

Her quest was over, her life’s goal had been accomplished, and this would be her final destination.

There was an emblem on Lacey’s right hand. She’d been branded with it when she’d been picked up as an orphan so that she would live to serve the country

and never disobey. It had been there since she was very young, so it didn't cause her any distress. Her goal was just a little different this time. That was why Lacey didn't have anything to wish for from the king and money didn't matter to her. She had nothing to spend it on.

"I see," Wayne simply murmured. Still holding the portraits under one arm, he turned away, then crossed his legs and put his chin in his hands.

He was probably worried about her. Wayne had been like that throughout their quest, always keeping a watchful eye over Lacey. He didn't get angry at her—he was just incessantly concerned about whether she was eating enough, if she'd changed clothes lately, if she'd had a bath, et cetera.

At first, she was confused why the second son of a prestigious noble who had never had to take care of anyone else would do this, but the reason was most likely because Lacey was so inattentive to her own needs that he *had* to step up. He wasn't the right age or gender, but to this day, she secretly thought that if she'd ever had a mother, she'd be a lot like him.

"Actually, Wayne, there was something I wanted to see you about. If I'm joining the Dejafaim household, then I'll have to get rid of this staff. But it's got mana in it, so I can't just toss it. I'd have to incinerate it with magic. I can't bring myself to do that... I don't have the courage. So I want you to burn it."

She could secretly keep it, of course, but that would defeat the point. Lacey had to become who they expected her to be.

"I don't know anyone else with good enough magic skills for the job..." Lacey continued in a whisper, her eyes downcast. She appeared pained.

But Wayne kept facing away from her. "Nope. It's important to you. I don't care what you have to do, just keep it safe."

"I thought you'd say that." Lacey couldn't help but smile. Wayne probably wouldn't budge on this. She refrained from commenting and decided to ask again later when the time seemed right.

"So, what kind of person is he?"

"Who?"

“Your fiancé. The duke’s son. Raymond Dejafaim. I know his name, but that’s about it. He’s marrying my friend, so of course I wanna know what he’s like.”

Mother wanted to know every detail, apparently. Lacey blinked.

“What he’s like...? I’m not really sure. I’ve only met him a handful of times.”

She’d often felt a certain prickliness behind his words, but on the surface, Raymond remained cordial. His country had arranged this marriage, so he had to pretend that he welcomed it. Although they’d frequently exchanged letters while Lacey was away, the contents were terse.

Wayne’s question prompted Lacey to search her memory. No adjectives came to mind. Thinking that she could at least describe his appearance, she reflected out loud.

“Well...he has blond hair, but not as light as yours.”

“Okay.”

“His eye color is...a bit like mine, maybe. But I wouldn’t call it hazel; it’s more like a dark orange. The qualities of his mana are kind of similar to mine. That was why he was designated as my fiancé.”

“I see.” While he’d been the one to ask, Wayne didn’t seem too interested. He was staring off in the completely wrong direction, behind the bench.

“Also, he’s...ummm, around ten years older than me.”

“He’s in his mid twenties, then?”

“Right. He should be!” She unintentionally raised her voice, relieved to have another piece of information.

Wayne sighed disinterestedly, still not looking toward Lacey. *What’s with him?* she wondered, picking her staff back up and pouting.

“So basically, he’s like that?”

Apparently, there was someone among the passers-by who’d caught his indifferent attention. Lacey, leaning back against the bench, turned around to look at the person Wayne was pointing at.

“Yeah, like that—” Lacey started, before losing all words. She went silent in

the middle of her sentence.

Wayne gave her a puzzled glance. "Lacey?"

Lacey stared fixedly at the man. Her hazel eyes were wide open, and her tiny mouth was clamped shut. The target of her gaze was conversing with a woman and laughing. They were standing rather close to each other. The woman was liberally dressed, politely speaking. Impolitely speaking, she was *barely* dressed. The man turned in their direction, prompting Lacey to hurriedly hide behind the bench.

"Hey, don't tell me..." Wayne's tone suddenly stiffened.

Lacey shut her eyes along with her mouth. There was nothing more she could say, or so she thought at first, but curiosity won her over. She raised her head again at last. "What's the duke's son doing in a place like this?"

"I think it's safe to say he's on an incognito downtown date," Wayne said with a lackadaisical look.

"She could just be his friend."

The moment she tried to defend him, Raymond—Lacey's fiancé—wrapped his arms around the woman's waist. Wayne's eyes grew even duller. "Rather close friends, from the looks of it."

Lacey stared from behind at Raymond and the woman whose name she didn't know. All she could say in response was, "Yeah."

She kept her head down and watched, but the pair eventually vanished into the streets.

* * *

After parting with Wayne, Lacey curled up into the bed at the inn and thought back on things.

She had known from the time of her betrothal that she would be a wife in name only, so seeing Raymond walking around with another woman didn't shock or wound her much. All she had was a sinking feeling, as if the darkness were swallowing her whole.

A week passed by. Lacey kept herself busy. She had been born and raised in

the royal capital, but had hardly ever seen what it had to offer, so she decided to take a leisurely tour around the city. It was much larger than she'd realized, and even places she'd seen before held new discoveries upon closer inspection. Then she observed already familiar places with exhaustive scrutiny. She did this again and again.

Trying to see the whole city from one side to the other took forever, and she could never finish. It was an enormous undertaking for Lacey's small body. She held tight to her staff and counted down the days until the end.

She'd leaned the portraits she'd purchased against the wall of her room at the inn. Sitting in front of the portraits under the moonlight, Lacey studied the faces of her companions. The picture of the red-haired woman was nothing like Lacey, but she had the same staff and looked both magnificent and dignified. Lacey quietly stretched her hand out to the woman in the picture.

Just then, she heard a clatter, and the twin casement windows flew open. She didn't know *who'd* caused this, but just as she gripped her staff and narrowed her eyes, intent on teaching them a lesson...she realized that she recognized this magic.

A small bird came in. It flew unsteadily, bobbing up and down, and landed on Lacey's finger. Looking closer, this bird emanating Wayne's mana wasn't a living creature. It was made of white paper. He must have folded a letter into the shape of a bird and sent it to her. Wayne occasionally used amusing spells that were beyond Lacey's imagination.

As soon as she read what was written in the letter, Lacey went to sit at the desk. Once she'd written a reply on some paper she had, she contemplated a little. "Is it...some sort of applied wind magic?" Usually, that kind of magic was for tearing through one's enemy or repelling attacks. "Something like this?"

She didn't use her staff, instead just twirling her index finger around. The paper made crinkling sounds as it folded into layers, opened up, and turned into an intricate bird. Lacey snapped her fingers, and with startling speed, the bird flew out the open windows back toward Wayne.

Would he reply to her tomorrow?



She watched as the bird grew smaller over the nighttime city sky, then reread the letter from Wayne. It included a lot of nagging, but all of it was out of concern for Lacey.

That's just like him. A smile naturally formed on her face.

* * *

"Seriously, I thought I was getting attacked by demonkin. Do you have any clue how I felt? It was dreadful!" Wayne continued his rant. "I opened the window in the middle of the night and all of a sudden something came hurtling at me. It streaked right past my cheek and stuck into the wall. You know what it was? Your fault, that's what! I know I'm the one who used magic to send a message first, but you have way more magical talent than me, so if you cast the same spells, they can be disastrous! Understand?!"

"S-Sorry..."

"Anyway, most people wouldn't be able to replicate an original spell they'd seen for the first time right on the spot." Wayne grumbled this last part. Lacey just stood there, shoulders scrunched apologetically.

Lacey had repeated her wish in her response to the letter Wayne had sent. She was hesitant to follow what was written in the reply that came the next day, but she went to the palace anyway per his request. The letter had been accompanied by a writ of permission issued under Wayne's name since the soldiers on guard weren't particularly familiar with Lacey's face.

She'd set foot in the palace a few times before, but its resplendence was her polar opposite. It made her feel like she was going to vanish, but Wayne came to her rescue, and now she was walking next to him.

At the moment, he wasn't using concealment magic like he'd been when they had met up in town. His true face was completely visible to people besides Lacey, and it attracted lots of gazes. While they weren't focused on her, it still made her nervous. She shrank back.

"Lacey?"

"Uwehhh..."

“What are you doing? Anyway, are you really sure you want to burn it?”

He was talking about Lacey’s wish.

Lacey had asked Wayne to burn her staff. He’d turned down the request last time, but she thought that if she asked again, he’d yield—albeit with a heavy sigh. Things were turning out like she’d imagined. Casting a large-scale spell in the middle of town would be frowned upon, so he’d called her out to the palace instead.

Of course, she wanted to answer. She was going to hold out her staff to him and nod...but her head was frozen in place.

She knew it had to be done. But she couldn’t bring herself to say it. She stopped in her tracks and stared at her feet. Wayne was a busy person and had made time just for her, so she felt all the more ashamed.

She had to express herself clearly.

Just as she was about to say *Yes, please*, she heard a voice like the jingling of a bell.

“Oh my.”

There was a pause of a few seconds, during which Wayne swiftly reacted. He placed his fist over his heart and stood up straight.

“I haven’t seen you lately, Wayne. Not since your victory parade, I believe.”

“Indeed. I see you are in good health, princess.”

It was Alicia Castile, first princess of Croix. Her lovely features were framed by lustrous pink-blond hair. Even the slightest gesture from her was beautiful, and she looked dazzling just by standing there. This wasn’t the first time she and Lacey had met. Even so, Lacey involuntarily backed off and stared at the other two.

The nation’s hero, Wayne, and its princess, Alicia, radiated with dignity. Somehow, it made Lacey feel terribly shy and out of place. It was like an entirely different world. She surreptitiously moved back one step at a time, about to beat a quick retreat, when Alicia tilted her sweet head. “And who is this here?”

Wayne was silent for a moment, then answered. “One of my companions on

our quest to slay the Demon King. I'm sure you're familiar with the name 'The Dawn Witch'?"

"Oh! Oh my! Isn't that marvelous?" she said, affecting surprise, but Lacey and Alicia had definitely seen each other before. Thus Lacey was completely befuddled as to why Alicia had placed a hand to her lips and was laughing lightly. All Lacey could do was clutch her staff and make herself smaller. "You look much different than the portraits!"

Wayne narrowed his eyes and gave the princess a skeptical look. "On a different note, Your Highness, what are you doing here without any attendants?" They were on palace grounds, but still, it wasn't appropriate for a member of the royal family to walk around unaccompanied.

Upon hearing Wayne's remark, Alicia's pupils dilated. Then, she gently placed a white-gloved index finger to her lips and smiled.

* * *

"What was that all about?" scowled Wayne after the princess had excused herself and swiftly vanished.

"She's so pretty..." Lacey murmured.

"I beg to differ," Wayne spat. "And what was that gesture supposed to mean? 'It's a secret'? As if I care that much."

"Wayne, she'll hear you! Be careful...!"

"She's long gone. You wouldn't guess it, but that princess is fast on her feet."

It definitely looked like she was used to running away. Lacey nodded. Why was that? "But are you sure it's okay to just let her go?"

"Not my job. More importantly, what do you want done about this?" He returned to the previous subject.

Lacey had come all the way here to have him burn her staff. This time she'd express herself clearly.

"P-Please blurn dit!" she blundered. Her tongue had twisted magnificently. Lacey could feel herself turning red all the way to her ears. She thrust her staff out at Wayne, gripping it with both hands, and shoved her face downward. In a

word, she was thoroughly embarrassed.

Wayne sighed, which startled Lacey. Just as she was about to apologize, he plopped a hand on her head. "I've still got time. Let's take a walk."

Lacey was confused, but gave a slow nod.

* * *

There was an expansive garden which adjoined the palace. Walking amid the bountiful greenery gradually eased Lacey's nerves. They didn't talk to each other, but as she breathed the tranquil air into her lungs, she calmed back down.

"Thank you, Wayne. I'm fine now."

After a beat, he replied. "So you're sure?"

He wasn't going to ask again. After taking a few deep breaths, Lacey gave a clear answer. "Yes."

Suddenly, Wayne grabbed her tight.

Bewildered at what could have provoked this, she tried to raise her voice, but his hand was clamped over her mouth. He pushed her against the trunk of a tree and scanned their surroundings with wide eyes.

Then Lacey noticed what was going on. She made eye contact with Wayne and nodded, prompting him to peel his hand away. Two familiar figures, a man and a woman, were hidden among the trees and talking to each other.

It was Raymond and Alicia. Why were her fiancé and the princess together? She was baffled. The two of them seemed to be on friendly terms, and they were positioned *remarkably* close to each other. In fact, they were very obviously smooching.

"You've *got* to be kidding me," Wayne growled angrily. Lacey clutched the back of his shirt, thinking that he would immediately burst out of hiding otherwise.

Lacey was surprised, of course, but she was surprised the most at how well she was taking this. Spotting Raymond on a date with a strange woman the other day probably had something to do with it. She had suspected something

like this. But if he was in a relationship with the princess, of all people, that changed things. She was of far too high standing to be in an affair with him.

Lacey firmly clutched her staff with both hands. She shot Wayne a look telling him to stay put, which he responded to with a reluctant nod.

She took a slow, deep breath, steeled herself, and then stepped out.

“Excuse me!”

Lacey’s feeble voice traversed better than expected. When the pair heard her, Raymond and Alicia gasped and quickly tore away from each other. They seemed to be wildly searching for the speaker.

Raymond was the first to spot her. He squinted at the small, unassuming figure in the black robe and realized that it was Lacey.

Alicia must have been aware that Lacey was betrothed to Raymond. In hindsight, she had probably laughed earlier *because* she’d known.

“Oh, it’s you, Lacey. What a coincidence. What are you doing here? I just ran into the princess not long ago,” Raymond said, presuming that Lacey either hadn’t seen what they were up to or was pretending she hadn’t. Much like before, he had a good-humored smile plastered on his face. Every time Lacey saw that smile, it seemed bleak. But not even she would let that dissuade her.

“Lord Raymond, I saw everything. I recognize that your companion is the princess. I’m your fiancée, and well, er, what I want to say is, this is cheating...”

She couldn’t form her sentences well.

He was flirting with the princess of the entire nation. He couldn’t get away with claiming that they’d just gotten caught up in the heat of the moment. Lacey wanted to pressure him, to make sure he knew the situation he was in. “You’re cheating!!!”

As soon as he heard Lacey’s accusation, Raymond’s voice unexpectedly switched into a roar, startling her. “CHEATING, you say?! She and I love each other! And yet you have the gall to claim my hand in marriage! You’re just an orphan, not even one of noble descent! All you have is high-level mana. I despaired when my father told me I have to marry you!”

The engagement hadn't been Lacey's idea. She'd heard that Raymond's father, Duke Dejafaim, had pushed for it.

Lacey blinked repeatedly. Raymond had gone red in the face, and spit flew from his mouth. The princess watched him with rapt attention.

"I love Princess Alicia! What point is there marrying someone I don't care about?! Lacey, the very thought of making love to a short, unattractive, emaciated little girl like you disgusts me! I will not marry you, and on my word, I'll get that senile old king's decision reversed!"

Raymond put an arm around Alicia's waist and expressed himself loud and clear. Years of pent-up frustration had just erupted.

Just then, Wayne emerged from behind the tree, his ire undisguised. He must have heard more than he could take. As soon as they saw him, Alicia's and Raymond's eyes bulged. Apparently, they had assumed that Lacey was the only other person there and had thought they could easily tackle one timid mage.

Wayne gave them one contemptuous glance with his green eyes, and in a flash, the pair frantically rushed off. Lacey just stood there dumbfounded, watching them go. Wayne was beside her, his fists shaking with anger, but Lacey was mildly surprised that she didn't feel even a fraction of the emotion he was displaying—or really, any at all.

"Well, I guess he's not wrong...?"

"Every damn thing out of his mouth was wrong!"

Lacey was certainly shorter and scrawnier than other girls her age. No matter how powerful her mana was, Raymond's pride wouldn't stand for marrying an orphan like her. But there was a bigger issue which had Lacey stumped. There was an emblem on her right hand which served as proof of her compact to serve the nation for life. Bearing children with powerful mana was part of the agreement. In other words, no matter how much Raymond loathed the idea of marrying her, there was nothing she could do about it.

Lacey sighed. Meanwhile, Wayne put a finger to his forehead, seemingly pondering something. He spoke after a moment's contemplation. "Hey, Lacey? Would you let me try handling this?"

“Huh?”

“It’s okay, right?”

Lacey yielded to the pressure and nodded. Wayne grinned delightedly in response, like a mischievous child. He was certified nobility, the son of a count, but she couldn’t help but feel like their yearlong quest had been quite a corrupting influence on him.

* * *

After grinning and remarking how much he was looking forward to this, Wayne set the stage with terrifying speed—much quicker than Lacey had anticipated. He’d even gotten the king himself involved, and now Lacey and the other concerned parties were answering a summons to the throne room.

The throne room was filled with a unique air of tension. Lacey had last been here a little over a month ago. She couldn’t guess at all what Wayne had planned. He’d dodged the question when she asked. Wayne was standing next to Lacey, and next to him was Raymond, idly casting his eyes around the room.

His Majesty King Croix sat on the throne in front, overlooking them. He stroked his full white beard with one hand and glared imperiously down at the bunch. Alicia stood demurely behind him with a smile on her lips, but she couldn’t completely mask her disquietude.

“Well now, Wayne. I made time expressly for an important request from our hero, but I see that the eldest son of Dejafaim is here with you. Would you explain what all this is about?”

Raymond’s shoulders jerked up.

“Yes, sire. He’s engaged to be married to Lacey, the Dawn Witch, but it would seem he loves another.”

“What?” The king’s bushy eyebrows twitched. When the king’s gaze fell upon him, Raymond flinched and made himself smaller. “Your father, the duke, asked for a betrothal between the Dejafaims and the Dawn Witch. I gave my approval. And you want to break it off?”

“I’d like to preclude any misunderstandings: I did not ask for this audience in

order to censure Raymond,” Wayne said. “He and his sweetheart are truly in love with each other. I simply hoped to present them an opportunity to come clean and explain themselves.”

Raymond lifted his face in surprise, then spoke loudly. “King Croix! My heart has been stolen by Princess Alicia, who stands there beside you! She and I are in love with one another! Our feelings are pure. My profoundest apologies to Lady Lacey, but I beg of you to break off my engagement to her!”

“Lord Raymond!”

When he saw his daughter was trembling, covering her mouth and holding back tears, the king was likely convinced by Raymond’s words. He raised one eyebrow and gripped the armrest of his throne, letting out a low hum. King Croix was said to be tremendously fond of Alicia, and she was the apple of his eye. He was unendingly willing to appease her every whim.

Lacey finally saw what Wayne was trying to do and nodded understandingly. Alicia and Raymond’s relationship was problematic only because it was an affair. If they were to be formally married, then there would be nothing to object to.

“Father, it’s just as he says. Lord Raymond and I love each other. Please forgive him,” Alicia implored, tears streaming down her face. The king hummed again.

“Quite so,” Wayne, his arms folded, further prodded the king. “A few days ago, Raymond himself had this to say.”

I love Princess Alicia! What point is there marrying someone I don’t care about?!

A wind whistled, and as it did, Raymond’s voice echoed sonorously. This had probably been caused by Wayne’s magic. *He still uses the most peculiar spells*, Lacey thought. He’d used wind magic to memorize the sound and recreate it.

“Certainly...that is a worthy point.” The king was beginning to fold.

Alicia’s and Raymond’s eyes gleamed. If not for the distance between them at the moment, they would have taken each other by the hand.

The wind's echo continued.

Lacey, the very thought of making love to a short, unattractive, emaciated little girl like you disgusts me!

"Oops," Wayne blurted, acting as if he hadn't intended to play that part.

A long silence fell over the room.

"Is this what you have to say to our nation's most valuable mage?" the king said quietly.

Raymond shook his head like a broken toy. But of course, that wasn't the end of it.

I'll get that senile old king's decision reversed!

It was as if a tranquil breeze had come and gone. When the silence broke, the king's face rapidly turned bright red and he bellowed in anger. The guards sprang forth immediately at his call and dragged Raymond away, while Alicia shrieked. The room was embroiled in chaos.

Lacey just stood there, perfectly stupefied, but she still noticed that the hero was clutching his sides and desperately trying to stifle his laughter.

* * *

And so Lacey and Raymond's engagement was called off.

After Raymond got carried off, Wayne dropped the other bomb about him having another very intimate lady friend, which led to the audience being postponed for a later date.

King Croix used every employable means to fully uncover Raymond's dealings within a matter of days. It turned out that he had lots of "playmates," and Alicia was just one of many affairs. The lines he'd used to woo and win over the princess had been practiced over the course of myriad encounters. Lacey could very easily sympathize with how Alicia must have felt upon learning this, and gave a heavy sigh.

"Haaah... So much has happened..."

As she sat in a patch of springy grass and vacantly listened to the sound of

streaming river water, Lacey thought back on the dizzying events of the past few days.

There were all the formalities to take care of after her scrapped engagement, as well as testifying and fact-checking for the investigation against Raymond. His father, Duke Dejafaim, bowed in apology so many times that it practically seemed like he'd break his back. Despite Lacey's own diffidence, she was *that* highly esteemed as the country's greatest mage.

"His own words just came back to bite him. The least he can do is take responsibility for his actions," Wayne grumbled beside her, ruffling his own hair. "I still can't believe he decided to go after the princess. Talk about foolhardy. He's got no style, no grace..." Wayne went on to enumerate what he personally disliked about Raymond, one point after another. "...And you know what, I've never liked his name. What kind of name is 'Dejafaim'? You becoming 'Lacey Dejafaim' wouldn't sound right at all!"

Lacey hadn't been sure if she should be listening to all this, but when Wayne got around to criticizing even Raymond's last name, she couldn't help but laugh out loud.

Then she cried a single tear.

Lacey was surprised at herself. Another plopped down, and then another. She wasn't sniffing or moaning at all. The tears just streaked down her cheeks in silence.

When he saw her like this, Wayne spontaneously panicked. His usual nonchalant facade dropped. "Never mind, that was too mean!" he backtracked, hurriedly waving his hands around. "But my point is, you're too good for him. You're definitely cute, so don't let him make you think otherwise. I doubt he's ever seen your smile anyway."

Wayne was right about that, but even so, Lacey felt like it was her fault for not being able to build a good relationship.

"Don't pay any more attention to what he says than you would damage from a slime, and just forget about it!" Wayne paused, then added, "Although maybe you *are* on the skinny side. You should eat more. Let's get a meal together sometime."

Lacey nodded, turning into a smiling, sobbing mess as she hugged her staff.

Wayne did his best to comfort Lacey. But it pained her to admit that she wasn't shedding unhappy tears over the cruel insults Raymond had hurled at her. She was short and unattractive. That was the plain truth. But more importantly, Lacey was just, just so...

...relieved.

Her body felt so much lighter. She broke down and hugged her staff with the greatest care. It was full of memories of the journey she'd shared with the people she could call friends. She didn't want to burn it. She had lived only for the sake of defeating the Demon King and had thought she'd die for the sake of leaving behind progeny. That was why she'd thought she would just meekly follow whatever path she was ordered to take, without protesting or running away. Now, she wasn't so sure.

She let out a loud wail, crying like a baby, and looked up at the sky. Little by little, she realized her own feelings. As someone who had been ignorant of the ways of the world and whose only talent lay in magic, she had doubted that she'd be able to go on the quest. At the onset of their journey, her party had occasionally butted heads, but in time, they had become her dear companions. They had taught Lacey so many things she didn't know.

In truth, she'd bought the portraits because she was lonely. The red-haired woman in the picture was far different than Lacey, but Lacey didn't care. She was a self-sufficient woman with strikingly vivid red hair, facing straight ahead: the Dawn Witch, Lacey.

How wonderful would it be if she could become like that?

It was true what she'd said to Wayne about moving out of her house so she could get her affairs in order. She had thought she wouldn't be able to bring anything along to the Dejafaim house anyway. Besides, she hadn't acquired the place she'd lived in since she was small by her own means. It was a cage meant to trap Lacey, mage of the country of Croix.

Lacey didn't have any grasp of common sense. She'd lived only to cultivate the magical power she'd been born with. As she traveled with her companions, they'd led her by the hand, bringing her along to experience brand-new things

and learn how vast the world really was. Her fear had gradually changed into astonishment, and then into exhilarating excitement.

So what would it be like if she were on her own? She could at least rent a room at the inn by herself. She didn't know the city well, so she might as well see what it had. She would do what she could with the little time she had remaining. She would see things with her own eyes. She *wanted* to see.

"Ah, hwah, ah, ahhh..."

The tears kept coming without end, blurring her vision.

Her lips trembled and she gasped, still crying like a toddler. She wanted to live. On her own. She wanted to try walking on her own two feet as far as they would take her, without anyone else tying her down.

Was she allowed to think this?

Wayne just watched as she cried and wailed, unable to do anything for her. He understood that she was crying out feelings that she couldn't say, and his first instinct was to hug her. But since he couldn't bring himself to do so, he wanted to at least wipe away her tears. He stretched out a hand. It would've been a small gesture, but he just couldn't.

Wayne tightly balled up the hand that he'd just outstretched and then snapped his fingers instead. A slight breeze puffed gently, caressing the corners of Lacey's eyes. Her fallen tears floated up, becoming globules of water that drifted through the air. Each time she blinked, the tears beaded up, swirled around...



She was so surprised that she stopped crying. She looked over at Wayne, who was wearing his signature mischievous expression.

“Ha ha, I guess it worked.” He smirked. Naturally, Lacey didn’t realize that this was his way of masking his embarrassment. “I wasn’t very good at magic as a kid. I got a bit sore about it and figured that if I couldn’t use any impressive magic, I’d just apply it to some impressive pranks.”

The embarrassment caught back up with him after saying this, so he shut his mouth.

Meanwhile, Lacey felt like she finally understood why he used such unusual spells. Magically gifted nobles tended to have a strong sense of pride and wouldn’t even think of using magic in the manner that Wayne did.

“Pranks like this sound like they’d be a lot of fun.”

“You think?”

“I do. Yeah. Hey, Wayne?”

“What?” Arms folded and face turned away, his voice dropped to a gruff mumble. But since Lacey had known him for a whole year, she didn’t pay it any mind.

“I’ve come up with a wish. Something other than burning my staff, of course.”

Wayne’s eyebrows twitched up.

She took in a breath, then said, “I want to try living on my own, without anyone else controlling me. I want to be just Lacey.”

She was astonished that she’d been able to get the words out so easily.

“I see.” Wayne was satisfied by this. “If that’s what you want, I’ll help out however much I can. You can be proud of yourself. It’s okay. Just face straight ahead.”

This time, Wayne was able to offer his hand without shrinking back. Lacey took it and slowly stood up.

The tiny bit of courage that had formed in her was steadily growing. She just had to face straight ahead and move forward.

* * *

“By your leave, King Croix, I would like to state my wish once more. Would you permit me this?” Although not without some meandering, Lacey expressed herself clearly, her heavy hood lifted.

She was finally having her audience that had been postponed after the mess with Raymond and Alicia. King Croix had begun by apologizing for Raymond’s offensive remarks. His punishment was still being deliberated, but Lacey didn’t really care about that.

Lacey’s voice trembled as she spoke. The king looked her in the face and solemnly gave his permission. “You may speak.”

“Before, I said that as my reward for defeating the Demon King, I wished for...nothing. However, I’ve finally realized what my wish really is. I want to live. On my own, without having to rely on anyone, thriving by my own strength. I wish to be released from my contract emblem!” she exclaimed. She couldn’t look up out of fear. She just clutched her staff and stared down at her quaking feet.

She wasn’t sure how much time passed—it could have been ages, or it could have been only a second—before the king uttered a single word: “Granted.”

“Lacey, the Dawn Witch. You have served us well for fifteen long years. I confer upon you a new name. You shall be Lacey Aster! May the name of the stars that shine between night and daybreak be engraved into you!”

Something cracked, like layers of thin glass shattering. The emblem that had always bound Lacey and weighed her down fluttered up like a butterfly and then vanished with a faint glow.

Her right hand felt bafflingly light. She should’ve been jumping for joy. But instead, she was so terrified that she couldn’t even stand. The thing that had been part of her for so long was *gone*.

Even so, the tears she quietly shed were warm. Beside her, Wayne puffed out his chest with pride and smiled joyfully, as happy for her as he would be for himself.

* * *

It almost doesn't seem real, Lacey thought to herself as she squatted down. Lacey Aster. That was what she would be called now, named after the stars in the sky.

Following her dialogue with the king, Wayne had given Lacey a pat on the back and smiled with satisfaction. She'd taken his cue and smiled as well. Still, she felt some apprehension. Before, all she'd ever had to do was live the way others had told her to. It wouldn't be like that anymore. She had to stand up straight on her own two feet. But what was Lacey capable of? Her only better-than-average skill was magic, and that was a dangerous ability that had no use outside of battling monsters.

As a farewell gift from the king, she'd been given a house that was a little ways off from the capital. It was in a sleepy locale, and she felt like she could relax there. But Lacey had always been introverted and socially awkward. As soon as she got there, she was already crouching down and making herself smaller.

There was a field in front of her, in which there was a boy with a farming hoe hacking away at the ground and working up a tremendous sweat. He seemed to be in the middle of tilling.

He sure is working hard, Lacey thought, pulling down the brim of the large hat she'd chosen to replace the hood of her robe and making herself even smaller. She'd decided that step one would be retiring her head-to-toe black robe. The hat's brim was embroidered with a moderate number of flowers, and she'd put on a dress that reached her knees. Her change of clothes symbolized her desire to change, but despite this, she still felt uneasy without her face being hidden.

She absentmindedly watched the boy from under the shadow of her hat when he suddenly looked up toward her. "Heeeeeey!"

He was waving his hand too. Lacey looked around, thinking that he must be trying to get the attention of someone else.

"You over there! Yeah, you! With the giant hat!" He was clearly talking to Lacey.

"Wh-What is it?" She took off her hat, clutched it to her, and put her best foot forward.

The boy waved both his hands this time and shouted over to her. “You’re a mage, right?! Help me out with this! Magic can do stuff we can’t, right?!”

She timidly walked over to the boy. She took deep breaths and started off with a question. “H-How do you know that I’m a mage?”

“‘Cause you’ve got a weird staff. Mages are supposed to have those, right? We don’t have any professional magic users around here, but I know that much, at least.”

Lacey still had her hands glued to her staff. She smiled self-effacingly. “So what did you want help with?”

“Pretty easy to tell, isn’t it? I’m tilling the field. I want to do it over a wider area, but the trees are in the way. I’ll never be able to handle all this by myself. I’ll be an old man before it’s done.”

“I see,” Lacey said, surveying the area. There was vegetation around the area that the boy was referring to, as well as some enormous trees with broad limbs. Still, magic had its limits. Her first thought was to tell him that it wasn’t possible for her before he got his hopes up. But then as she tilted her head, it occurred to her: maybe she *could* do it.

Lacey’s power was meant to harm people and monsters. That was the very foundation of magic. But that wasn’t the case for Wayne. He had been even more mischievous as a child, and with his unfettered imagination, he’d shown Lacey magic she’d never seen before. Like when he’d wiped away her tears.

“Stand back, okay?”

She deliberated.

Then she inhaled. She raised her staff, about to hum an incantation, but then stopped herself. It would be a bad idea to accidentally unleash *too* powerful of magic. Instead, she pictured it inside her head, like Wayne had done with his wind.

* * *

“Whoa— Oh—” As he witnessed what was happening, the boy just stood there with his mouth agape. “NGYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!” He quaked with fear.

When he was finally able to utter something, he yelled so loudly that his voice cracked.



It was a perfectly natural reaction. After all, the trees had just slowly floated up into the air, groaning and creaking. They had caused the boy so much trouble, and yet here they were, pulled up out of the ground and into the air. The girl took a quick breath and laid the trees on their side.

The rest of the vegetation vanished as if it had gotten up and left on its own will. Before them lay a wide-open plot of land.

The boy had frequently complained to his father about how gravelly the field was. Yet the tiny pebbles readily flew up and were progressively sucked inside the upside-down hat that the girl was holding with one hand.

What had just happened?

The boy crumpled in shock. Immediately afterward, the pebbles which had ignored gravity fell to the ground with a heavy thud, along with the hat they'd been in.

"Urgh!" The mage collapsed in the field as well. The boy hurriedly ran over to her.

"A-Are you okay?!"

"Y-Yeah, I was just startled... I gauged the physical space and combined it with wind to try making a levitation spell, but yeah, I should've expected that it would be that heavy once the magic wore off..."

"I have no clue what any of that means," the boy said. The gist was that she had been surprised by something light suddenly becoming heavy, he supposed.

She was petite and looked just a little older than him. *She seems like a normal girl, but I guess mages really can do fantastic stuff*, he thought in astonishment. She was looking at him...or actually, at something far above him. *What's up there?* He followed her gaze upward. It was the sky.

The girl was gazing at the clear blue sky, which was so bright that she had to squint her eyes a little. "Maybe there *is* something I can do. I thought I couldn't do anything, but it looks like that's not true after all. I was so empty, and I hated myself for it. So I think that now...I want to become someone useful."

This didn't seem like a relevant thing to say when she was lying down in a

field covered in dirt. Besides, if *she* couldn't do anything, then nobody could. This was the first time he'd ever seen a mage, so the boy didn't understand how she could feel this way. But there was one thing he could tell her.

"I dunno about that, but let me say thanks! I really appreciate it! You helped me out a ton!"

When she heard this, the girl made an expression that seemed both happy and sad at the same time. Her hazel eyes creased a little as she smiled, but there were still a few tears there.

Chapter 2: New Beginnings

It had been a little over a week since Lacey Aster, also known as the Dawn Witch, had moved with her few belongings to Plume Village, which was about three days away from the capital by foot. The first thing she'd done upon claiming her freedom was to clear some farmland, as a favor. When she did this, a strange feeling had rushed through her body.

Lacey had thought that she couldn't do anything on her own. She'd lived her whole life following orders, never acting upon her own will. But when she'd joined the party on their quest, it was like drops of water silently trickling into her. They had accumulated little by little and seeped into her body before she'd even realized it, giving her nourishment.

So now, it was Lacey's turn.

Her only asset was her magic expertise. It was dangerous and only useful on the battlefield, or so she'd thought, but maybe it *could* be useful in other ways after all?

"Then why not open up a shop or something?" Wayne suggested while she was in the middle of trying to talk out and make sense of the feelings she herself didn't understand.

Lacey blinked. "A shop?"

"A shop," he repeated with emphasis.

"Who's opening it?"

"You." He pointed a finger, and it suddenly clicked.

"I-I can't do that!" Lacey shouted, which was rare for her, and her voice echoed within the mansion. Dust fell from the ceiling, causing the neat freak hero Wayne to involuntarily pop a forehead vein.

* * *

The mansion that Lacey had been granted by the king was far too big for just

one person to use. It stood by itself at a distance from the village where people resided. It must have been uninhabited for a long time since just walking through the halls could kick up a dust storm. There were a lot of spots that needed to be repaired, and the biggest concern at the moment was the leaky roof.

Lacey had had to sleep in places without a roof many times on their travels. Since she wasn't expecting guests, she hadn't thought it would be a problem, but along came the hero who had traveled together with her for a year. "I brought some housewarming gifts," he'd said with a grin from atop his horse, bearing a generous supply of food and housewares.

If that's what you want, I'll help out however much I can, Wayne had said, giving her the encouragement she needed.

To Lacey, he was one of her precious companions. His portrait, along with those of her other companions who had each gone their separate ways, was displayed in the best spot in the salon right at the entrance of the mansion so that she wouldn't get lonely.

"So...a shop? What makes you suggest that?"

"Do I even need to say why? You want to live independently and make good use of your skills so you can reinvent yourself, right?"

That was more or less it, except for the part about making good use of her skills. It felt embarrassing to actually hear this said out loud too, so Lacey just fidgeted in her seat as she stared at the table, which was the only thing she'd cleaned. "I...guess so, maybe..."

When she heard how timid she sounded, she shook her head. Lacey had been empty before, but she'd decided that there were things that she wanted to treasure. She fiddled with her staff, which she'd shrunk to the size of a twig, in her palms. She could freely manipulate the dimensions of her staff. Now that she was living in Plume Village, she didn't want to do anything to make herself stand out.

"You're right, Wayne." She amended her statement with a big nod. Her long black hair, which Wayne had tied into a braid, moved along with her head.

“Okay,” Wayne replied, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair. He continued. “Listen, Lacey. People need money to survive.”

Wayne was the second son of a count, but he had a commoner-like attitude rarely seen in nobles. The party’s yearlong quest had been an immense influence on him. Despite what Lacey thought, she wasn’t the only one who’d benefited.

“Remember how you told me that you used up most of your reward money already? Well, you may not have to pay rent, but there are other necessities that will gradually deplete your funds. If you want to live by your own means, then you’ll have to start by finding a way to earn money. Are you with me so far?”

Lacey gave a slow nod. She had less attachment to money than the average person. All she’d ever had to do before was practice her magic. That had been enough. But things would be different going forward. She’d have to earn her own crust too now.

“So you want to make use of your magic skills. I don’t have a problem with that, of course. On the contrary, I think it’s a respectable decision. But if you ask me, you’re going to need to make money off of it if you want to survive. Naturally, it’s okay to keep your work and hobbies separate. That’s what most people do. But you’re not flexible enough for that, right?”

Wayne progressively explained his reasoning so that Lacey would understand. She’d shouted earlier that she couldn’t possibly start a shop, but what he was saying was extremely common sense.

Sometimes, Lacey became terribly embarrassed of herself. She’d get fed up with her reclusive, timid, insignificant existence. Whenever this happened, she’d always clutch her staff, look down, and bite her lip. Day in and day out, she had practiced her magic, hardly ever interacting with other people. She would tire herself out every day, which was tough on her body, but it was easy on her mind. She was just acting how other people told her to, without ever thinking about it.

So this time, she’d face straight forward.

Wayne was surprised to see her do this. But as if it had been stretched out by

her mental state, Lacey's staff had gone from palm-sized to half her height. She was holding the staff tight, her whole body quivering.

Lacey's mouth was drawn taut and she kept quaking like a slime caught in the gaze of a liger. Seeing her like this, Wayne could no longer keep his deliberately harsh expression and involuntarily cracked a smile. He quickly covered his mouth and looked away. After a few repeated coughs, he resumed his previous expression and shook his head wearily.

"Well, hey, it's all about money. You haven't used up all of what you got yet, right?"

Lacey gave Wayne a strong affirmative response, but she was regretting her actions. Just as Wayne had mentioned earlier, she'd used up most of her reward money. But since it had been an enormous sum to begin with, she still had plenty to live off of, provided that she didn't splurge. "But that won't solve my problems..."

"You've never taken a break even once in your life. How about you think of it as a paid vacation and take it easy? Anyway..." Wayne slammed the table with his fist.

Incidentally, the table that they were sitting at had come with the house. It had its share of dings and scratches, but Lacey was just grateful to have some functioning furniture.

He quietly folded his arms again. "Have you been eating?" he asked, even graver than before.

The food that Wayne had brought had been stored in the basement pantry already. Wayne himself had done most of the work packing it away. He was good at organizing things.

Lacey had been waiting for him to bring this up. The corners of her mouth curved into a grin, and she stood up without a word. The table that Wayne and Lacey had been chatting over was actually a dining table. There wasn't any other adequate spot for them to hang around. In Wayne's opinion, the lingering dust at the edges of the table marked that it still needed some more cleaning, but since he didn't own the place, he just sat down and tolerated it. He'd kept his arms folded this whole time not because he was being snooty, but because

he was restraining his hands from acting on their own.

“I’ve been eating.”

“Hah. Once every two or three days, I bet.”

“Nope. Twice a day.”

“*You*, eating two times a day, without anyone prodding you?!” Wayne’s green eyes opened as wide as they could go, and he reflexively released his arms, throwing his head back in shock.

Lacey smiled with satisfaction as she rummaged around for something. Yes, this was exactly the reaction she’d wanted to see. Lacey’s primary characteristic was her habit of not eating or sleeping.

When the two of them had first met, Wayne had been much more genteel than he was now. He had been seventeen—no longer a boy, but not quite a man—whereas Lacey had been fourteen. She’d been even more meek back then, never lifting the hood of her black robe, and her voice could only be heard when she was chanting spells. She would always sit hunched up whenever they were in carriages, walk tottering through forests, and practice her magic even during mealtime.

Wayne initially hadn’t known what to make of her and didn’t approve, but that feeling had gradually changed into a fretful sense that she’d probably die if he wasn’t there to look out for her. That was how their relationship had ended up this way.

Those being the circumstances, he praised her unreservedly. “That’s amazing! I’m proud of you.”

Meanwhile, it wasn’t as if Lacey hadn’t taken Wayne’s incessant lecturing to heart. She just had different priorities. But now that she’d resolved to live independently, she understood that there were things she’d have to change, starting with her eating habits.

Lacey reached out to the basket that she’d put in the corner and gently set it atop the table. It was chock-full of carrots.

“What’s with these?” Wayne’s tone dropped softly.

Lacey puffed out her chest, or lack thereof. “I got them from a local boy since I helped him out a little.”

“Oh, that kid you mentioned earlier who was cultivating farmland? You’re mingling with the neighbors already too? I’m impressed.” This was startling. There was more and more for him to compliment her upon.

“I’ve been eating these carrots.”

Her words sounded so distant to Wayne. He almost couldn’t believe they were speaking the same language.

“Have you been boiling them?”

“No. I’ve just been eating them as-is.”

She was just crunching down on them. Without even peeling them. Wayne was speechless. Lacey was in front of him, her eyes sparkling and her hands resting on the basket. She snorted proudly. “Heh heh.”

“What are you, a horse?!”

As he exclaimed that she was going to give herself an upset stomach, his restrained arms came free. Wayne peeled the carrots with a knife, cut them into bite-size pieces, tossed them into a pot, and set them to boil. Following that, he couldn’t stand the room’s disastrous state anymore. Since he had the time, he even started cleaning up the kitchen.

At first, Lacey just watched stupefied as Wayne moved around in a flurry, but then realized that she should be helping him out instead, and the day passed by. The boiled carrots were delicious.

* * *

The next morning, Wayne finished eating his expertly made breakfast and waved a hand. “See you later.”

“You could stay longer, you know.”

“I’d like to, but I wasn’t able to get much time off.” Just as Lacey was still renowned as the Dawn Witch, Wayne was the hero who had defeated the Demon King. He was sought-after everywhere. “There’s a monster that seems like it’s going to give us some trouble. It probably used to be the underling of

some demonkin.”

“Oh... Be careful, then.”

“It’s not that far from here. I’ll finish it up quick.”

Lacey’s voice dropped, whereas Wayne kept an optimistic expression. He certainly had the attitude of a hero. As Lacey looked up at him while tugging on the brim of her hat, he gently set a hand on top of her head.

“Listen, Lacey. You’ve demonstrated that you’ve got a good set of teeth, but you need to eat something besides carrots too. If you’re any thinner than you already are by the time I visit next, I’m going to make it so you won’t be *able* to eat carrots ever again.”

“That would be bad. I’ll do my best.” Lacey liked reddish foods, including carrots and tomatoes.

Wayne exhaustively cautioned her to periodically change out the glacial stone so that the provisions he brought would stay at a low temperature; to extend the shelf life of medicinal herbs by soaking them in mana-infused water; to be meticulous about keeping the kitchen clean... He just went on and on.

“I’m not traveling, so I doubt I’m going to use any medicinal herbs.”

“You never know what might happen. You’re by yourself, so you should err on the side of caution. Got it?”

He sounded a bit like a mother giving strict advice before going on a trip. Lacey kept “mm-hmm”ing and started to zone out.

“One last thing!” Wayne raised his voice, snapping her back to attention. “That’s a cute hat.” He bent down a little to match Lacey’s height.

She used to only change her outfit on the infrequent occasions that she had an interview with her then-fiancé. Otherwise, she’d just wear the same black robe. But she’d decided to change that aspect of herself as well.

Lacey gave a broad smile. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

She gave a gentle thank-you, and he accepted it readily.

Their farewell was brief. When Lacey reentered the mansion after Wayne left, it felt terribly empty. She didn't quite understand why even after thinking it over, so she just decided to go clean the stable outside. Once she'd finished, carrying a bucket in one hand, she inspected the mansion again from top to bottom.

"Hm, it's kind of, well..."

It was in such a sorry state that she had a hard time putting it into words. She'd been able to rationalize it when she'd been by herself. But after someone else had pointed it all out to her, she could now see the reality of things, whether she wanted to or not.

The mansion was so vast that she couldn't even count the number of rooms it had. It was too big for just Lacey, and taking care of it all would be tough. She'd thought that she could get along by limiting her activities to a small area, but...

"There'll be more problems if I neglect it too much."

Thinking about it a little more, Lacey realized that there were other means of cleaning than just with her own tiny hands. She raised her staff. "All right, then," she said, staring at its point.

Her staff was a sort of yardstick. The larger it was, the grander her magic would be. Of course, she could cast without it too, but it helped her get into the mindset. As Lacey increasingly concentrated on her magic, her staff adjusted its size proportionately. Conversely, if she was careful to keep her staff to a certain size, she could moderate the strength of her magic. If it was simple enough, she didn't even need her staff.

"I think...this big should do."

She changed it into the size of a quill pen and stood in the middle of the vestibule, then realized how worn-out the rug under her feet was and meekly stepped aside. She'd wanted to do this up front and center, but had somehow ended up in a corner and was now swishing her staff from side to side.

She had thought that cleaning *had* to be done by one's own hands. That was how everyone else did it. The only thing that she'd ever been expected to do was practice her magic; the bare minimum of her necessities were all taken care

of by housemaids employed by the state. During their quest, each person had to handle whatever chores they could do, so she knew how to do *some* things, albeit not very skillfully.

But thinking back on it, all of her companions had been slovenly, or perhaps “eccentric” was a better way to put it. It was almost a miracle that their jumble of a group had made it to the finish line. Just thinking about it made Lacey sigh.

In any case, magic was meant for attacking her enemies or otherwise inducing their defeat. It wasn’t meant to be used to improve her daily life. For example, transformation magic could let her change her appearance to a monster, thus confusing the enemy and bringing an advantage in battle. Spatial magic let her store inorganic objects, making it easy to carry around multiple weapons. Those were their original purposes.

The village boy who’d asked her for help the other day didn’t know any mages firsthand, which was why he only had a vague understanding of magic. An ordinary mage probably would’ve snorted at him.

Yesterday afternoon, Lacey had closely observed Wayne at work. His magic had developed later than Lacey’s and he had to chant spells, but he’d been able to pour water conjured out of thin air into a bucket. *I see, using magic is definitely a lot faster than having to go back and forth to the well*, Lacey had thought simply. But magic only existed in determined forms.

A fingertip-sized flame and a fist-sized fireball were both fire-type spells, but their formulas were slightly different. If that was all you wanted, you didn’t even have to rely on magic; anyone could generate fire using mana stones that were harvested from the hearts of monsters. Only oddballs would use these spells often enough to memorize their laborious formulas. Wayne, who’d been a prankster in his childhood, was one of these types.

Lacey had tirelessly studied the determined forms in order to stab, sunder, and immolate her enemies. *That* was what magic was. Shaving microseconds off her spellcasting times, reducing her mana consumption to a minimum. Repeated tens of thousands of times, these marginal improvements would add up toward perfection.

There were plenty of mages out there toiling away trying to master forms of

magic they couldn't use. The reason Lacey was known as the country's greatest mage was because she could use more forms of magic than anyone else. And yet for all that, not even she had any concept of a spell to make one's house clean, nor was it likely that any spellbooks contained such knowledge.

That being the case, she'd just have to create it from scratch.

I see how. Lacey nodded again. She devised the formula in her head. She picked out what most closely resembled the vision in her head and revised it. The foundation would be the levitation magic she'd used last time.

Lacey was whirling her staff around like it was no big deal, but the truth was that she could pull off extraordinary things without much effort. Instantly formulating a spell in one's head without writing anything down and then casting it on the spot was an inconceivable feat.

She spun her staff around to point at one of the windows in view. *Whoosh!* The window opened on its own as if it were meant to do so. *Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!* They started off slow, but then picked up speed. One after another, the windows and doors opened, and a cool breeze filled the room. *Ting-a-ling!* The chandelier swayed delicately and mystically overhead. All the furniture in the house started to dance without making a sound. The sheets on the bed and the unfurled rugs on the floor rolled up and stretched out.

They bounced around and dusted themselves off as if saying *Oh, there's dust in this spot! There's a stain in that spot!* The accumulated dirt was picked up by the breeze and carried off. The mansion, which had seemed so dismal and poorly lit, was now infinitely more cheerful.

Lacey let out a tiny chuckle. She was having just a bit of fun. At the same time, she noticed something was slightly off; but ignoring that for the moment, she thrust her staff straight in front of her gaze for the finishing touch. The roaring wind raged at anything in its path and whipped through Lacey's long black hair, but she just hummed blithely.

At her signal, the front door burst open with a loud bang, and a boy who was standing behind it carrying a basketful of potatoes was hit by the full brunt of the breeze. It mussed up his hair, and the vestiges of wind tickled the hem of his clothes. The boy was so flabbergasted, the potatoes tumbled onto the floor. His

jaw was locked into a half-open position.

Lacey and the boy caught sight of each other and froze solid.

* * *

“I-I’m really sorry...”

“No, it’s okay... I mean, yeah, I was really surprised, but...”

She’d been cleaning the whole mansion with levitation and wind magic when a visitor had come around and figuratively gotten his socks knocked off. Despite being inside, Lacey put on her hat and hunched up. If the furniture that had been merrily dancing around with her earlier had faces, they’d be giving blank looks, as they’d forgotten all about what just happened.

The visitor was the boy whom Lacey had previously helped with her magic. His name was Allen, and he appeared to be younger than Lacey. He was probably around twelve or thirteen, and between him being a little tall for his age and Lacey being short, they were at about the same eye level. He also seemed to be under the mistaken impression that Lacey was the same age as him.

“The way that door suddenly opened was magic, right? You’re tiny, but you can pull off some pretty impressive stuff,” he nodded with pursed lips, acting as if he knew what he was talking about. Lacey didn’t care much about her age, nor did she see much need to correct him, so she let it slide.

Allen had a personality as bright as his orange hair. Right after Lacey had helped him last week, he’d brought her a heap of carrots. “I told my dad about you, and he shouted at me for making a respectable mage do my work,” he’d laughed, his freckled cheeks relaxing into a smile.

There were so many vegetables that Lacey couldn’t eat them all, but even when she’d said she would just appreciate the thought, her protests had been casually overridden. Today’s gift was a basketful of potatoes. Allen’s house and Lacey’s mansion were in the same village, but there was still quite a distance between them. He’d traveled all this way to bring them to her. She couldn’t exactly tell him to haul them back home.

“Thank you. But let this be the last of it, okay?” she tried to tell him again.

Allen just folded his arms behind his head and chortled.

From Lacey's perspective, she hadn't done anything major, but the truth of the matter was that even if Allen had spent a whole year clearing the field, he still wouldn't have finished the job. In mere moments, Lacey had done what it would've taken Allen years of labor to accomplish. In his opinion, he hadn't done nearly enough to recompense her yet.

Allen had come up to the mansion's doorstep before, but today was his first time being invited inside. It *was* finally in a presentable state. Lacey felt all the more apologetic toward Wayne, who'd visited just yesterday.

It had been a little over a week since Lacey arrived in the village. Likely due to the differences in topography, Plume Village felt chillier than the capital. Winter would probably begin earlier as well. Lacey decided to take the opportunity to make something warm to drink and commenced a difficult battle in the kitchen. Wayne had even brought her a kettle to use.

"G...grnnk!"

Quivering, she used fire magic to light the well-built stove that was meant to be used with a fire mana stone. At this moment, "Water-Boiling Magic," a grand spell requiring a complex and abstruse formula to maintain the perfect temperature that wouldn't scorch the bottom of the kettle and would automatically go out once the water was boiled, was created. If the world's mages knew about it, they would froth at the mouth and faint. It was a squandering of talent.

Allen, who had no idea that such a marvel was happening under his own nose, sat in a chair in the salon and restlessly surveyed his surroundings. "Hey, Miss Mage? Was the mansion always like this? I'd never been inside before, but from the outside, it looked like it was in really bad shape. Doesn't it seem like the whole place is more pleasant?"

"Really?" Maybe the wind magic had cleared out the stale air in addition to sweeping out the room. "I did clean it a little... Also, I heard your name, but I haven't told you mine yet. Sorry! Instead of 'Miss Mage,' you can call me Lacey."

"Huh, that's the same name as the Dawn Witch. Are you her?"

Lacey made an uncharacteristic miscalculation, and the fire suddenly erupted with a *bwoosh!* At the same time, the kettle made a shrill sound. She squeezed her fist and hurriedly got the fire back under control. She wasn't trying to keep her identity a secret or anything, but that still didn't stop a cold sweat from running down her back. This was the first time anyone had guessed who she was just from hearing her name.

"Just kidding. You don't look like her, plus you're not the right age. But you're both mages, so maybe you're a fan of hers?"

"Um, I..."

"See, you've even got a picture of her." He was alluding to the portraits of her companions that she'd bought in the capital. Allen sat backward in the chair, resting his arms on the backrest. He gave a chuckle. "Ehe heh heh, I get why you'd want to share her name. I'm gonna have a new sibling soon. If it's a girl, she might be named after the Dawn Witch. I hear the Saint of Light is kind and magnificent, but the Dawn Witch is supposed to be all that and super strong too. She's so awesome."

Instead of a verbal response, Lacey just gave a vague nod. Noticing out of the corner of her eye that the kettle was puffing and chugging, Lacey firmly resolved to keep her identity as the Dawn Witch secret after all. The moniker came with more responsibility than she could handle.

Once something that could pass as black tea had finished brewing, Allen and Lacey sat at the table facing each other, raised their cups, and sipped. It probably wasn't very tasty.

The tea that Wayne had brewed this morning had a more subdued, fully steeped flavor. It had been much more palatable. Even so, Allen let out a warm sigh of satisfaction and smiled happily, showing a protruding canine.

Somehow, it felt as if a coin had just jingled and fallen into a pile inside of her. Lacey patted over her heart. There was a tingling sensation of delight. *Next time, I want to make it taste even better*, she swore from the bottom of her heart.

Allen peered into the cup and twitched his nose as he sniffed it. "This stuff has an unusual smell," he said, referring to the tea leaves Wayne had brought. Then

he picked up the cup and examined it from the side. “Looks expensive,” he commented with total candor. The cups had been in the mansion when Lacey arrived, covered in dust and left forgotten on the shelf.

The mansion hadn’t been occupied for a long time. It was a marvel that it hadn’t been robbed. Lacey had seen things like that before on her travels.

“The leaves were a gift, but the cups aren’t mine. They came with the mansion.”

“Oh, then they belonged to the Wellbuyers. No wonder they’re expensive.”

“The Wellbuyers?” Lacey asked, puzzled.

Hearing this, Allen blinked in surprise. “Don’t tell me you don’t know?”

“Know about what?” Lacey had just picked out the place that seemed easiest to live in out of a list of possible candidates.

“That would explain it.” Allen’s mouth clamped into a line as he pondered what to do. In the end, he was forced to surrender to Lacey’s curious stare. He told her the story, piece by piece.

The truth was, the mansion that Lacey was living in had a checkered history.

Rain started to drip outside, quietly tapping on the mansion’s roof. It would soon turn into a downpour.

* * *

It all started three or four years ago. The Wellbuyers were a successful merchant family.

The couple had always been mediocre merchants with little hope of moving up in the world, but one day their fortunes changed dramatically when they brought a single cockatrice feather to the head villager. If it were just any monster feather, it would’ve sold for a pittance, and that would be the end of the story. But extraordinarily enough, the feather shone a lustrous gold.

The cockatrice was a commonplace monster with the body of a chicken and the tail of a snake—a monster that one frequently came across while traveling. However, there were mutant varieties among them. These had no tails, and the feathers that would usually be white were instead colored gold. These golden

feathers were rare and worth magnitudes more than regular cockatrice feathers.

The couple brought not just one, but many dozens of these uncommon feathers. They claimed that they could procure an infinite supply. However, it would be unwise to flood the market. Thus, they suggested the idea of using these feathers to create ornamental goods.

The majority of the profit would go to the couple, who had the means of obtaining the feathers, but the village still reaped benefits. That was around the time the village changed its name to Plume, the feather-decoration village.

The couple built a magnificent mansion with too many rooms to count. But strangely enough, they didn't hire any servants, instead opting to live quietly on the edge of town as if they were hiding.

It wasn't long afterward that they were no longer able to procure cockatrice feathers. The last one they brought was a muddy brown color without a single speckle of gold.

It went without saying that this feather had no value. The couple's downfall came swiftly. They had likely burned a hole in their pockets building their massive mansion. Their luck with money instantly took a turn for the worse, and one day, the couple just vanished. They had run away in the night.

Though the villagers were appalled by the couple, they had established themselves just fine without the ornament business. Village life gradually returned to how it had been before. Only the "Plume" name remained, but nobody paid that any mind.

Amid all this, a curious rumor began to be whispered around the village: The couple hadn't run away from town; they had died.

A creepy voice could occasionally be heard from the mansion they'd lived in. There were still valuables within, so the place had been trespassed on by some folks who were up to no good. But they all trembled and turned heel when they heard that spooky, forbidding voice. It was probably a specter formed by the dead couple's lamentations.

As further evidence, the mansion became bleaker by the day. Not in

appearance—it just felt more eerie. A gloomy aura emanated from the mansion, making everyone hesitate to approach it.

And to this day, the couple roamed the mansion, wailing in agony and searching for the golden feathers.

* * *

“Look, there they are!” Allen pointed behind Lacey and made a frightened face.

There was a flash of light at the window. The sound of booming thunder echoed from far off. The rain was turning into a downpour.

Lacey slowly turned around. There was nobody there, of course. She turned back to face Allen. She’d been convinced that he’d just shouted out to scare her, but apparently, he really *had* seen something. He had his eyes shut tight and looked almost frightened to tears.

“Ahhh, I saw them... They really do exist, I saw them! This black thing just stretched straight out... Oh no, I’m going to be cursed!” He was starting to sob.

“It’s okay, Allen. I’m really sorry, but...” Lacey began by trying to soften the blow, speaking to him softly. “Are you sure that wasn’t just the shadow cast by you standing up?”

There was an awkward pause.

“I’ve really overstayed my welcome!” Allen exclaimed, getting up. “My dad’s gonna yell at me! I’ll see you later!” He waved goodbye and headed back home in the pouring rain before Lacey could stop him. She watched him run off until he was no more than a speck in the distance, then looked up at the dreary overcast sky. The rain showed no sign of letting up.

As elegant as the mansion’s chandelier was, it didn’t have any light mana stones installed, so it was just a big object hanging from the ceiling. In lieu of a candlestick, Lacey lit a flame at the top of her staff to help her navigate the pitch-dark mansion.

She recalled what Allen had told her and finally understood why the mansion had remained unoccupied for so long, and why its lavish furnishings remained

intact. The original owners had run away in a hurry, so they were likely forced to leave behind anything they couldn't carry. Although thieves had come to pilfer the remaining small valuables, the strange rumors and oppressive aura of the house had chased them away.

Had the couple really fled, or had they died in the mansion and become ghosts? Lacey didn't know. There was another flash outside the window, followed by a rumble. Lightning must've fallen somewhere.

Lacey raised her staff with one hand and held the rail with the other, climbing up the stairs. *Creak, creak.* The stair treads groaned with every step she took. When she reached the second floor, Lacey's shadow stretched out, long and dark.

And to this day, the couple roamed the mansion, wailing in agony and searching for the golden feathers. Lacey remembered what Allen had said.

"I'll start by checking over here. I think I can hear a voice." She briskly stepped forward.

It *did* sound like a wail, but frankly, Lacey wasn't scared of ghosts in the slightest. She'd defeated countless undead monsters and demonkin before. Naturally, she'd been cursed by them too, so she was indebted to her famed companion the Saint of Light for those instances.

While suffering from the effects of curses in the past, Lacey had gotten it in her head to kill her enemy before they could kill her. If she just hit them with a full-force fire magic blast before they could place a curse on her, it would all generally work out. For the moment, she just practiced swinging her staff vigorously. If she *did* spot a real ghost, things would be different. She'd probably clasp both hands over her mouth and quake in terror.

Lacey hadn't felt any surprise or fear while listening to Allen's story earlier, but one thing had come to mind. She'd noticed it while cleaning out the mansion with levitation magic earlier. There was a single door that didn't open.

It must have been a secret door. It was inside the room at the end of the second-floor hallway, which had been swept out. The wail was definitely coming from the same spot as well.

She arrived at the site and took a look around the room. It had been cleverly concealed at the back of the bookshelf, but she could tell that there was something else lying deeper. It was a seal made with a magic artifact.

With a quick glance, Lacey checked the magic flow and easily unraveled it with her staff. The artifact instantly lost effectiveness, and with a rattle, the bookshelf slid aside.

A sturdy door was revealed. It clearly had a different design than the rest. When Lacey stood in front of it, the wail that had echoed onerously throughout the mansion came to an abrupt stop. She thought for a little, then stroked the seam between the door and the wall with her fingertips. It unlocked without a hitch.

Lacey knocked lightly on the steel door. There was no answer. Slowly, she opened it. The air inside the dark, windowless room was stagnant.

In the middle was something small and brown.

The thing didn't stir. Its legs were chained. Was it alive or dead? Her footsteps clunked as Lacey entered the room.

With a terribly sluggish motion, it lifted up its head and looked at Lacey. It was like it had lost all its strength to live. But its eyes alone blazed gold, and they stared at Lacey with rage.

A cockatrice? No, not quite... Its feathers should have been white, but instead, they were gold with splotches of brown. In short, this was a mutant cockatrice.

The last feather that the Wellbuyers had brought to the marketplace was said to have been a muddy brown. *This chained-up cockatrice must be the one.* Lacey frowned. She didn't know the exact date when the couple had run off, but Allen had said that three or four years had passed since then. If this were the very same cockatrice, then it had survived for years in confinement. *But that can't be right.*

Still, the one thing that was certain was that the couple had kept their cockatrice in this room. The space was saturated with resentment and anger. All of that had permeated into the mansion, giving it the eerie aura that Allen had spoken of.

Since Lacey had swept the place with her wind magic, the stagnant air had been ventilated as well. It would likely go back to normal in due time now that it was free of the mansion. But she had something else on her mind right now.

“Sorry, excuse me for a moment,” she spoke to the cockatrice, sitting in front of it. It looked like it could die at any second, but when Lacey came close to it, the cockatrice quickly nipped at her with its beak. “O-Ow! That hurts! It’s okay, I’m just, just going to remove your chain!”

Eyes slanted upward, it attacked her relentlessly. Lacey hurriedly waved her staff, but there was less of an effect than she’d expected. Thinking this strange, she took another look and found that it wasn’t any ordinary chain attached to the cockatrice’s skinny leg—it was an anti-magic chain.

“Hmmm, this is going to be tricky... Ow! Sto— Owwww! I didn’t say that I couldn’t do it, okay?!”

The bird was so aggressive that Lacey was reflexively talking to it like it was the boss of her.

“So if it blocks mana...!” Lacey exclaimed as she ran away from the cockatrice, “I just have to cast faster than it can block!” She swung down her staff. Lacey was probably the only living person capable of such a feat.

But Lacey hadn’t realized that once the chain binding the cockatrice had snapped cleanly in half and it was free, there was exactly one thing it would do.

“Ow ow ow ow ow ow owwww!!!”

It jumped up, pecked at, and mercilessly assaulted its enemy.

“Th-That’s enou...!” She was well at her limit. The sad thing was that Lacey *could* stand firm if it wasn’t a human she was dealing with. She was fine with ghosts and the like too. “THAT’S ENOUGH ALREADYYY!!!”

She brandished her staff. The cockatrice fell to the ground.

“How would you like to be roast chicken?!”

By the time she threatened this, her staff was already ablaze. Lacey thrust out the fiery staff and glowered over the creature. The cockatrice wasn’t even twitching. It was dead.

“Hold on, I didn’t even do anything yet!”

Even against a monster, Lacey didn’t like the idea of flaunting her staff and gloating over a weakened opponent. But...

“It’s not dead.” It was breathing shallowly. It was just extremely debilitated. It couldn’t even curl up and was lying sprawled out on the floor with its wings unfurled. Relatively confident that she wouldn’t get pecked this time, Lacey knelt down and observed the cockatrice. Its flight feathers were clipped. Lacey’s eyes quickly narrowed. The feathers were cut in the same shape as if they’d been clipped simultaneously. This had clearly been done by human hands.

Lacey sighed and looked up at the ceiling. She’d thought that the room didn’t have any windows, but there was one small, round skylight overhead. She hadn’t noticed it because of how dark it was outside. The rain was starting to pass, and the drizzling sound was gradually letting up.

* * *

“And...hup!”

Lacey had picked up the armful-sized cockatrice and moved it out of its original spot, placing it onto a blanket she’d taken from the bedroom. Then she checked it over again. Looking at it closer, it was about as big as a regular chicken. This specimen definitely had a lot of vitality. There were still bits of gold left here and there under its brown feathers.

Since it was a mutant, it should have been born with gold feathers, but it had likely changed itself into a brown hue as a result of the Wellbuyers’ exploitation. It lowered its own material value, and just as it had intended, the couple’s business model lost viability and they were forced to leave the mansion. Then, the cockatrice alone remained.

How much suffering has this tiny creature gone through? Lacey wondered, touching a finger to her lips. It was dim inside the mansion, so her surroundings were terribly indistinct. With a snap of her fingers, the ceiling chandelier swayed with a jingle and lit up.

She suddenly recalled Wayne and how, as a way of lightening the mood, he had previously sent her a letter in the shape of a bird.

“Oh, that reminds me.”

She rummaged through the baggage he had left. After that, she boiled water using the kettle he’d given her.

She’d never made the stuff before, but she knew the process. One of her companions had shown her the ropes many times before, rubbing under their nose all the while. She didn’t have many tools, so it would have to be simplified, but she had the necessary ingredients. It would probably work out fine.

She made all kinds of preparations. By the time the cockatrice had woken back up, Lacey was right next to it, holding a mysterious jar.

“Kyew-wee! Kwee kwee kwee!”

“O-Owww! You’re doing surprisingly well! *Very* well! Y’know, y-your cry isn’t what I expected! But anyway, this is a healing potion! It’s a healing potion, I swear!”

From the cockatrice’s point of view, the stuff just looked like syrupy green liquid. It had to question whether she’d come to kill it off once and for all.

Wayne had brought a bundle of medicinal herbs, telling Lacey that she wouldn’t be able to get some quick enough if a disaster happened. She’d responded with annoyance, arguing that since she wasn’t traveling, there wouldn’t be any disaster. But she’d never have imagined that she would be using them this early.

There was no such thing as restorative magic. That was the domain of holy women. The medicinal herbs that Wayne had brought were of good quality and would be effective even if eaten raw, but Lacey doubted that this cockatrice, frothing with hostility, would willingly eat any. Even now, Lacey had to keep wrestling with the cockatrice.

She’d cut her own finger and tested the completed healing potion to adequate effect. With that being established, she loomed over the unconscious cockatrice with intent...just as it woke up. She ignored the fatigued cockatrice’s squirming as she shoved a spoon into the jar. She then hurriedly coated the clipped flight feathers.

The well-prepared potion quickly seeped into the cockatrice’s body. Of

course, it had been successfully applied. But the feathers showed no sign of change.

“B-But why?”

They were just feathers, so in theory, they should have gradually morphed back into their original state. Lacey’s healing potion was just that well-made. Inferring that there must have been some other factor at play, she next checked the flow of mana. Upon doing so, she discovered that the cockatrice’s mana flow was almost entirely severed.

In other words, the feathers that had been clipped weren’t just for flight. They were for magic.

Now that it could only store a minuscule amount of mana in its body, the cockatrice had lost most of its monster abilities. In effect, what she had here was no more than a chicken with an unusual cluck and a vicious streak.

All this ran through Lacey’s head as the cockatrice kicked her around. Her healing potion had been completely ineffective in healing the magic feathers. She’d need to make a potion that contained more mana than the amount that would just get absorbed.

Lacey could make up for her lack of tools with her magic. The issue would be the medicinal herbs. Wayne had brought what would be an excessive amount in normal circumstances, but they wouldn’t be potent enough for the potion she needed.

“Hmmm...”

The rain had let up entirely while she’d been distracted.

Behind her, the cockatrice was pounding its short feet against Lacey in a frenzy, attacking her endlessly. While quaking under its onslaught, Lacey contemplated the dilemma, then moved. The cockatrice followed behind her.

The mansion had been completely neglected until Lacey got there. The same naturally applied to the outside vicinity. Weeds grew thick and rampant, and the trees had grown dense without any trimming. As Lacey stepped across the damp ground, she left footprints. The cockatrice walked along with her, squeaking its “kwee” cry as it moved.

She stopped in her tracks, got kicked, and waved her staff as she was jolted from side to side. In an instant, the grass was mowed and bare earth became visible. It would be too firm to work with as it was, so she used a farming hoe that had been in storage to plow the necessary amount of earth she'd need.

She wasn't sure of what the last steps were, so she dug a hole with her own hands. In it, she planted the root of a medicinal herb she'd gotten from Wayne. The soil was thoroughly moist, so she cast a spell to prevent it from getting too wet and made a cushion of air. The cockatrice continued to relentlessly harass her as if it were demanding to know what the heck she was doing.

The next day, a small bud had sprouted. It had germinated faster than a regular medicinal herb, likely due to the mana that had been kneaded into the soil.

Lacey waited for a few days, then harvested it. But possibly because she'd prioritized speed, the quality of the medicinal herb was exactly the same as what she'd gotten from Wayne. She moved on to the next attempt and plowed more earth. The cockatrice continued its full-body onslaught against Lacey.

Just one herb wouldn't get her results, no matter how long she waited. She broadened her field and increased the number of holes. She had more medicinal herbs now, so she could plant multiple at once. She changed one variable at a time. Kneading lots of mana into the soil, infusing mana into the roots instead of the soil. Increasing water consumption, decreasing water consumption. Soft soil, hard soil, plant spacing. She scattered fallen leaves to act as fertilizer. She took notes. The cockatrice ran around Lacey and charged at her legs.

Snow came, fluttering down lightly. The snowflakes were round and wet.

The sky was white, and Lacey's breath turned white too. The field was flourishing bright green. Lacey dug holes, and her fingernails were filled with dirt. The cockatrice slept belly-up at the edge of the field.

* * *

The sound of crackling sparks came from the fireplace.

Lacey could keep a fire burning with just her magic, but that would require

her to pay constant attention. It was more efficient to just start a fire with magic and kindle it with firewood.

She was using the kettle to make the healing potion, so she'd acquired a small pot in the village. The water had come to a gentle boil, at which point she put potatoes in. She replaced the lid, extinguished the fire, and covered it with a cloth. After some time had passed and the potatoes finished boiling, she peeled them and took a bite into the soft and warm center.

As she stuffed her cheeks, Lacey became aware of a gaze she'd gotten wholly accustomed to, coming from near her feet.

"You want some?"

The cockatrice glared fixedly at Lacey.

Lacey set a plate on the floor and put a potato in it. She'd been setting out meals so that they were easy to steal, and had pretended not to notice what was going on. This was the first time it had asked her directly.

"Kwee," it chirped its same unusual call.

The pair, human and bird alike, ate the soft and warm potatoes. A quiet winter came and went.

* * *

A satisfactory medicinal herb was produced. Lacey boiled it down and stuffed it into a jar with deft movements.

Without fail, whenever it rained, the cockatrice would become unable to move. It was like its life force was gradually ebbing away. Even so, it was desperately trying to stagger on short legs toward its room. Lacey picked up the cockatrice, bringing the jar along with her, and reached the hidden room which only had a skylight inside.

It was a dilapidated room that had been exclusively intended as a cell. Of course, she'd cleaned it and it had significantly improved since then, but the melancholy remained. The cockatrice kept coming back to the spot where the sunlight fell, so she regularly had a blanket laid out there.

The cockatrice stirred in Lacey's arms. It was probably communicating that it

wanted to be put down. Once its legs were on the floor, it walked falteringly over to the blanket, where it then roosted. It probably wanted to see the sky. Even though the sun was hidden by the rain, and not a single ray of light was coming in.

Usually it was a menace, running around like it was full of energy. But whenever it rained, the life slipped out of its tiny body. It had likely used up most of its strength during its long years of captivity.

At this rate, the creature would die.

“Scuse me, okay?”

Instead of the spoon she’d used before, Lacey used a brush to evenly coat the cockatrice’s feathers. In the blink of an eye, the potion seeped in, and in its place, new feathers slowly grew. Its body, which had the flow of mana blocked, was beginning to return to normal. But the cockatrice simply panted in anguish. Even though its body was restored, its lost mana would not return.

Thunder boomed.

There were two brief flashes of light from the window, then it turned dark again. Raindrops pelted heavily against the roof. It should have been completely healed physically, but the cockatrice would lose its life before this storm passed.

“But you finally got better...”

She quietly lifted up the cockatrice and cradled it. Its mottled brown body was soft, and its breath was faint. But as it nestled against her chest, there was warmth.

It was murmuring something.

“You don’t like the rain?”

It had been raining when Lacey and the cockatrice first met too. It let out an anguished cry and moaned. This was what the villagers had mistaken for the wailings of a ghost.

“You don’t, huh?” Lacey nodded. “All right.”

She let the cockatrice back down into the blanket and gripped her staff with one hand. It was as tall as she was. As the sound of large raindrops falling

against the roof echoed, she announced clearly:

“I’ll stop the rain for you.”

When the king had granted the name “Aster” to Lacey, Wayne had told her that it was very fitting. Aster meant “star” in one of the old languages.

It was true that there was probably no better name for the Dawn Witch, but the *real* Lacey was a teeny-tiny, black-haired, melancholy girl, as gloomy as an overcast day. She’d asked him why he thought this. She wasn’t dispirited or offended by the remark—she’d just spontaneously asked out of curiosity.

Wayne had looked at her with a twinkle in his green eyes. Then he burst out laughing. His expression as he looked at Lacey was immensely gentle.

You’ll understand one day. Eventually.

She didn’t know when “eventually” would come.

Lacey drew her staff close to her, shut her eyes, and began to chant. Multiple tiers of magic circles expanded around her at her feet. With each phrase, the circles were altered and precisely reconstructed. Her usually slow tongue imbued numerous meanings into individual words at daunting speeds, enhancing the magic formula.

If anyone was there to see her, they would probably be paralyzed in fright—all the more so if they were a master mage with years of experience. They would know they were no match. She was the Dawn Witch. In her hand she held the staff of stars, which pierced through the sky and ended the night.

Thunder boomed.

It’s going to fall here.

She immediately finished her incantation a second ahead of time. She raised her staff and shouted from the pit of her stomach toward the sky. Her whole field of view turned white. Lacey’s magic and the lightning bolt collided. Lacey won. The lightning split apart, the rain and clouds dispersed, and beyond the decimated roof lay a beautiful night sky.

She hadn’t been able to blow away all of the rain, but it wasn’t precipitating

over the mansion anymore. It had been power-consuming, even for her. Lacey's shoulders heaved as she gasped for breath and she wiped sweat from her forehead. Starlight glittered down.

Then the cockatrice looked up at the sky. It gradually raised its slender yellow beak and let out a single plaintive cry. It soaked up Lacey's mana, which suffused the area, then spread its wings.

"Huh...?"

Little by little, fire enveloped it. Each and every brown feather ignited, and as they flickered, it changed form.

A mutant cockatrice. No, that wasn't right.

The mystery that had tugged at the back of her mind came unraveled. How did this creature possess such tremendous vitality that it had been able to survive years of confinement in that tiny room even with its mana sealed?

"It's a *phoenix*..." Lacey whispered the name of what she'd only ever heard of before.

Excruciated, the firebird lifted itself up. Lacey gasped with realization and gripped her staff tighter. It must have been a long time since it had returned to its original form.

"Y-You can do it."

Its chubby body burned down to a slender outline within the flames. The firebird beat its wings again and again. Only the gold of its eyes remained unchanged.

"You can do it!" Lacey's voice trembled with desperation. As if in response to her cheer, the bird flapped its spread wings and took flight.

A pillar of flame rose straight up into the cloudless night sky.

Lacey bit down tight on her lip and squeezed her eyes shut. But strangely enough, it didn't feel hot. When she timorously opened her eyes again, the bird was miming pecking at Lacey. It was almost like it was teasing her.

It flew through the air. Like a shooting star going backward into the heavens, the crimson bird rose into the sky and vanished.

When she was conscious of her surroundings again, Lacey was standing by herself, looking up at the punctured roof.

“It’s gone...”

It was a weird feeling. She felt lonely, but also relieved. There was a gaping hole somewhere in her heart. “Well, this is for the best,” she told herself with a forced smile. But then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something incredible.

“Huh?”

She rubbed her eyes. She wasn’t hallucinating it. Carefully, she peered over at it. Lying there was an egg, big enough that Lacey would have to hold it in cupped hands.

The egg wobbled.

“Eek!” Lacey yelped, drew back, then approached again. The egg remained motionless.

“Did I just imagine that?”

She heard a tapping sound. It was coming from inside the egg.

Crick! A line ran down the middle of the white egg.

* * *

“So that’s what happened.”

In front of her was Wayne, with his arms folded and expression stiff, same as usual. Wayne was visiting the mansion for the first time in a while, and Lacey had just given him the basic gist of events. There’d been an injured cockatrice, so she used a healing potion on it, and afterward it had flown away, leaving an egg behind.

“It’s like, blatantly obvious that it’s a phoenix,” the hero said matter-of-factly.

“Kwee kwee!” The monster, which was much more amicable than its parent of uncertain gender, spread its wings and danced atop Lacey’s shoulder. It had grown a little larger since its birth, but only to the size of Wayne’s two palms put together. It was still a juvenile.

“I avoided telling you to see if you’d recognize what it is, but is it really *that* obvious?”

“Call it a mutant all you want, but there’s no kind of cockatrice that’s red all over. Hmmm, well, an adventurer would never believe it, but regular townsfolk who don’t venture out much probably wouldn’t know the difference.”

If phoenixes could be described in broad terms as extremely rare monsters, they would be basically the same as cockatrices. If they were properly tamed, they wouldn’t pose much of an issue in towns—again, with the exception being their extreme rarity. They possessed the vitality to survive full-body combustion within scorching-hot flames. Even among monsters, this was unique.

The Wellbuyers, who had formerly owned the mansion, probably had no idea that the cockatrice they’d captured was actually a phoenix. If they’d known, they’d have exploited the creature even worse, so changing its form was probably the right idea. Still, the phoenix definitely wouldn’t have expected to be trapped in a hidden room for such a long time.

“Anyway, I can’t believe you grew these herbs from what I originally brought you.”

Lacey had cultivated the medicinal herbs to heal what she had thought was a cockatrice. It had taken a whole winter to complete, but Lacey felt that she’d come up with something satisfactory through haphazard experimentation.

“I think my mana had good compatibility with the soil. I figured that instead of refining the potion’s recipe, it would be more efficient to start with better ingredients. That turned out to be the right move.”

“You’re a monstrosity, I swear.”

“Huh?”

He unfolded his arms and held up a scrap of herb. Before Wayne was a hero, he was a noble. He had a better eye for quality than most people. “If you sold just this little piece at the market, you could make a fortune. Every alchemist in the trade would want to get their hands on it.”

“Really?”

“What do you wanna do? I know somebody. Want me to float the idea by them while keeping the manufacturer secret?”

“Um, well, I...” Lacey put her hands together, and the phoenix on her shoulders tilted its head in confusion as it chirped.

After observing them for a while, Wayne gave a thin smile. “That’s fair. It’s precious stuff, so you shouldn’t make a snap decision. For now, I’d recommend storing it away.”

“That’s not it. Um, Wayne? I planted a lot of that herb. It’s growing like wild in the backyard...”

Even Wayne couldn’t help but be stunned silent. He was once again astounded by the prodigious anomaly that was his party’s former mage.

“If you say it’s worth a fortune, then I’m even less sure of what to do. I’ll think about it sometime later. But if you’d like, you can take some along with you, to keep you safe.”

“I guess I’ll take you up on that...” He would’ve had to turn down the offer if the herb was as rare as he had thought. But after hearing that the stuff was growing like wild, there was no need for modesty. Wayne took out his own storage jar from his nearby luggage and dipped the medicinal herb in it.

“So what are you gonna do about that thing?”

“Kwee?”

Wayne had no point of comparison, but unlike its parent, the phoenix had big, round, adorable eyes. Lacey recalled how much it had hurt when the parent was mercilessly pecking at her at first.

“I don’t know how to answer that. I was the first thing it saw when it came out of its shell, and it hasn’t left me in peace since. I don’t know why the parent left this hatchling.”

The phoenix kept popping up in places and surprising her. It liked to perch not just on her shoulders, but on her head as well, so recently she’d had to keep her hat on indoors. Lacey sighed.

“Only one explanation for that,” Wayne said with a knowing smile. “It was

paying you for your services. The offspring of phoenixes aren't really descendants; they're more like another self. Pretty gracious of it to pay with its body. So that makes the first person to buy from your business...actually, since it's not human, I guess 'first bird' would be more appropriate."

"A buyer?! At what business?! How did you get to that conclusion?!"

"You sold a healing potion, so you're like a general store...but you stopped the rain too, so that doesn't cover all of it. I guess you're an anything shop?"

"Hold on, but the payment—!"

"Kyewww-weeeeeee!"

"And you! Don't act so snappy! Don't get excited about it!"

As they clamored, Wayne suddenly lifted his head. "Wait, you stopped the rain, right? You mentioned that you broke the roof. What's going on with it now?"

Lacey's magic could easily demolish a mansion like this a million times over. She puffed out with pride. "I left it that way, of course."

"You IDIOT!!!!!!!" He was plain *mad*. "Tell me that earlier!!! It's completely exposed to the elements! At least put a cover over it or something! Argh!"

At this moment, Lacey learned that Wayne could be a "father" as well as a "mother."

Even while quaking with anger, Wayne acted quickly. After turning the mansion upside down for tools he could use, he went up on the roof and got right to work. This hammer-wielding hero was much more flexible than Lacey.

"Ummm, Wayne? Is there anything I can help with? Should I think up a spell that can repair the hole in the roof?"

"That'd be asking the impossible from someone who doesn't think there's anything wrong with leaving the interior exposed. Go play somewhere."

"Okay..." Needless to say, she wasn't going to play, but Lacey glumly retreated regardless.

For the moment, she used magic to regulate the air temperature around

Wayne, since it was still a little cold out. Then she headed to the kitchen, intent on showing off the tea-brewing skills she'd slightly improved lately. From atop her shoulder came a delighted cry of "kwee kwee."

"All right, then."

Where was the monster she'd thought was a cockatrice now? Perhaps it was flying in the sky where nobody could bother it. Soaring straight ahead as far as it could go, its body enveloped in gentle flames.

Chapter 3: Welcome to Plume Village

“Wayne, think it’s time for a break?” Lacey called out to the hammer-swinging hero up on the roof.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m at a good stopping point,” Wayne said, then jumped down with force. He absorbed the shock from landing with his calves. He made it look easy, but he had incredible physical reflexes. *If I tried to do the same thing...* Lacey imagined it. She could do something similar if she used her magic, but if she didn’t, she’d be confined to a sickbed for a few months.

Lacey had gone on the quest to vanquish the Demon King simply because she was the country’s greatest mage, but Wayne had been chosen by the Holy Sword. In other words, Lacey could have easily been replaced by anyone, but not so for Wayne. However, after their quest had been accomplished, the Holy Sword had been sealed away again. Now Wayne was carrying a plank of wood under one arm and had a hammer in the other. These fit him scarily well.

Thinking about it, the whole party had their own specializations...

Nobles and commoners alike, Lacey included, had been assembled purely based on ability with no regard to class, so she was stating the obvious. The drawback was that personalities hadn’t been taken into account, so they’d all been eccentrics. Just remembering it made her grimace. Wayne had done the tough job of bringing them all together, but Lacey wasn’t aware that she’d *also* been adding to his workload.

“I brewed some black tea. Would you like some?”

“You did? That’s impressive!”

“I practiced, but don’t get your hopes up,” she made sure to caution him.

Wayne had a discriminating palate, but he was still excited. “You’ve come a long way from eating carrots raw.” He sounded like a dad.

Wayne suggested that, since they had the opportunity, they could have tea while observing the field that Lacey had planted. He made a simple table and

chairs, then sat down, warming his palms with the teacup.

In front of them was a bountiful five-square-meter field teeming with medicinal herbs. Winter was almost at a close and spring would arrive soon, but there was little color in the landscape and heavy leaden sky. In front of this backdrop was an eye-poppingly vibrant green. It was practically *too* vibrant.

“Uh, Lacey? These are a lot taller than the medicinal herbs I’m familiar with.”

“Yeah. There’s no limit to how big they can get if they’re in the right conditions. I didn’t know that before.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re the *first* ones to know.”

The medicinal herbs that Wayne had brought were palm-sized, but the ones in Lacey’s field were as tall as she was, rustling and swaying in the wind. Any chemist would undoubtedly swoon at the sight.

“Was the piece you gave me earlier not from these?”

“That was just a sprout I plucked. A whole plant would be too much for you, right?”

“I’m happy you thought of me. You’re so considerate, I could cry.” Wayne continued in a murmur, “I would’ve had to carry it around tied to my back.” Lacey wondered if he would’ve used a baby sling.

“I know I said you could sell this for a fortune, but you should think hard about who to sell this to. You can’t just give it out to anyone,” Wayne said seriously. He was contemplating the matter harder than Lacey was. All she could do was apologetically hunch her shoulders over her teacup.

Just then, a bird came bounding out from the undergrowth.

“Kwee! Kwee kwee!”

It was treating the plants as a snack. Not only was Lacey’s strain of medicinal herb resilient, it also grew like mad. She was thankful to have something nipping away at its growth and so didn’t discourage the bird’s behavior, but she did admittedly wonder if that was actually okay.

“It’s eating them, y’know.”

“I know.”

“Phoenixes have high enough regenerative capability as it is. Are you sure it’s not gonna morph into something more monstrous?”

“I’m sure,” she said after a beat. The phoenix could plausibly change into something entirely new. That was a scary concept.

Wayne groaned. “Well, it probably won’t get up to any trouble.” He decided not to pursue this further. Wayne was worried about Lacey getting along in the world and had decided to check up on her every so often, but now he was wondering what kind of strange metamorphosis might have taken place by the time he next visited. He’d have to brace himself starting now.

“Kweeeeeee, kwee-eeeeee...”

“The phoenix looks like it’s really enjoying the taste. Uh, does this thing have a name?”

“Phoenix” was the species name. While some people who tamed multiple monsters at once wouldn’t give them individual names, there was no downside to doing so.

“Well...” Lacey started, a little distressed. She’d been meaning to say something, but was having trouble bringing it up. “Um, there’s something I haven’t told you yet, Wayne...”

“All right.” Deep wrinkles formed between Wayne’s eyebrows. He shut his eyes and took a sip of the tea that Lacey had brewed. “Go on, I’m ready. It’s gonna be something beyond my wildest imagination anyway, right?”

“N-Not necessarily. It’s just, well...it has something to do with this little bird’s name and what you were talking about earlier.”

Wayne tilted his head in puzzlement. He’d noticed that Lacey had been shrinking even more than usual, but he didn’t have the slightest idea why.

Lacey was flapping her tiny mouth open and shut. The cup that she’d been holding had been set on the table, and she was tightly clutching her staff, which had gotten bigger when he wasn’t paying attention. Lacey had a habit of making her staff bigger and clutching it whenever something made her nervous.

“It’s not like I’m gonna get mad at whatever you say. Well, actually, I might get mad, but it’s a moot point now. I’ll restrain myself, so relax.”

If Lacey was going to say something like “I actually haven’t eaten for the past few days,” Wayne would immediately grab her by the scruff of the neck and toss her into the kitchen, so it really depended.

“Er, well...” As Lacey hemmed and hawed, she rested her staff on her knees and pulled down the brim of her large hat, hiding her face. The phoenix, looking confused, came up next to her feet, and then suddenly nudged its head against Lacey’s leg. “That tickles!” she exclaimed.

Thus loosened up, she launched into her explanation.

“You said earlier that this hatchling’s parent was my first client, but supposing that I *do* have a business, there’s actually been, well, a second client...”

Wayne’s eyes widened a little in surprise. Apparently Lacey’s life in Plume Village hadn’t been as quiet as he’d expected.

With her hazel eyes, hidden by her hat, turned downward, Lacey continued. “It happened the day after the phoenix’s parent flew off during the storm...”

* * *

On that stormy night, the phoenix had streaked through the starry sky and flown away.

Lacey stared dumbfounded at the slightly cracked egg it had left. She’d opened a hole in the roof overhead with her magic, so although it offered a fantastic view, the wind whistled through it.

She watched as the crack gradually grew larger, jolting back in surprise each time. *So is this*— Before she had time to think, the egg wobbled again. In a panic, Lacey stretched her arms toward it.

Just as she’d approached without thinking, there was a conspicuously loud *ka-krick!* The first thing that poked out of the split shell was a fluffy butt. Its feathers were a blazing red, just like those of its parent.

With a big piece of eggshell still stuck to its head, the hatchling flapped its wings out and slowly turned its head. Just born, it was small enough to fit in

one's palms.

"Kwee," came a tiny chirp. Its gold eyes spun around, and it stared at Lacey. The phoenix chick didn't mind that she was stupefied and on her knees. Despite being fresh out of the egg, it happily chirped, "Kwee kwee" and walked unsteadily toward Lacey, its head bobbing.

Wh-What am I supposed to do here?

Her short-term housemate had left behind a much-too-large package. Lacey held her head in her hands, bewildered. As for the phoenix, it was contentedly making that same "kwee kwee" chirp.



* * *

After the night was over, Lacey took a rare trip down to the village. She was probably going to live around here for a long while to come, so it would be advisable to drop in more frequently, but she seldom found herself headed there.

About the only villager she knew by name was Allen. When she absolutely had to go shopping, she'd hide her face with her large hat, quickly list what she needed, and then run back to the mansion. She was making progress while also taking steps backward, but still, Lacey was changing little by little.

The phoenix chick had taken a liking to the hat she always wore, so around this time, it was probably using the inverted hat as bedding.

Her lips drawn tight and back stooped over, Lacey frantically moved her legs. She missed the hood of her robe already.

What do phoenixes eat?

The monster she'd thought was a cockatrice was an adult, so she could leave it to its own devices to eat and steal whatever it liked. Lacey was pretty sure that it was an omnivore, but didn't know whether it was safe to assume. After all, the chick was a newborn. It was sleeping soundly at the moment, but she had to get some meat or other foodstuffs to line up in front of it and try. She thought of how unbalanced the mansion's kitchen pantry was. If Wayne saw it, he'd have a fit.

She was flustered, so her legs kept moving faster. She ran down the path from the mansion to the village. The ravages of yesterday's storm were visible everywhere. With a twirl of her finger, Lacey moved the felled trees aside, checked her surroundings, and hopped her way through.

When she reached the village, it looked significantly different than usual.

There were a number of wrecked houses, giving her new insight into how fierce the passing storm had really been. The agitated villagers paid no heed to Lacey and seemed to be discussing something in loud voices. Something about water and a river. All she knew was that she'd seem to have come at the wrong time, so the general store she'd been hoping to go to probably wasn't open.

Lacey took a deep breath and thought it over. She decided to run back home glumly, but just as she turned around, she heard a scream. One of the villagers had been crushed by a collapsing house. He'd unfortunately been under the eaves, and only his top half was visible. A handful of grown adults managed to pull his feet out, but they were in disastrous shape. The place got even more clamorous.

"Excuse me, coming through."

After a short pause, Lacey ran to the scene. Surprised by the small girl who'd just burst in, the villagers stepped aside for her without argument. Lacey bowed down, sat in front of the fallen man, and checked him over.

The man whose breathing was faint looked familiar. He had prominent freckles and laugh lines on his face. But there was no time to pore through her memory.

Conveniently enough, Lacey had some of her top-notch healing potion in the bag at her hip. She'd made it for the phoenix and tucked the remainder away. She took a look at the man's color-drained face and judged that it would be difficult for him to swallow.

"This is going to hurt. Please bear with it."

She ripped his clothes and applied the potion directly to his wounds. If he'd ingested the stuff orally, it would've gently helped him recover without excess strain, but there was no choice given the circumstances. For cases of extreme external injuries and dismemberment, the potion had to be applied topically. Monsters had more endurance than humans and could withstand this. However, humans had soft skin and would immediately bleed if cut with a blade. Rapid changes could be very painful for them.

Szzz. There was a sound like sizzling flesh, along with a garbled scream.

"What did you do to him?!"

The surrounding villagers grabbed her by the shoulders. Lacey remained calm and observed her patient. As excruciating as the pain was, the treatment was potent.

"This is a healing potion. It's too big of an external wound, so I had to apply it

directly.” She raised the empty jar and dangled it.

The villagers blinked at her in bewilderment. “Are you a doctor or a chemist?”

“No, I’m just a mage,” Lacey stated clearly.

The villagers gave a confused response. “Uh-huh...”

Lacey tended to clam up in front of other people no matter what, but when it came to casting magic or saving lives, things were different. Over the course of her party’s quest, she’d become painfully aware that every second counted.

Lacey confirmed that the wounds were swiftly healing, then gave a quiet sigh. “Watch over him, please.”

Though the damage had healed, the body wouldn’t recover the shed blood. The man wasn’t in mortal danger anymore, but he would probably be lightheaded for a while. She patted off the hem of her clothes and was about to stand up when an arm firmly grabbed her.

Surprisingly, the one who was pulling Lacey was the man who’d been on the verge of passing out just moments ago. The laugh lines at the outer corners of his eyes were presently contorted in pain. It must have hurt just to move. Nonetheless, he was somehow squeezing Lacey’s thin arm. It looked as if he had something to say to the young girl, but at the same time, he seemed to be wavering.

“Um...”

“Are you...by any chance...the witch who lives in that...mansion on the outskirts...?”

Lacey nodded nervously.

“Aha,” the man replied, then gave a groan.

“Um, you shouldn’t exert yourself yet.”

“Thank you for saving me... I’m sorry to request more from you, but if you have any more...of that potion you used on me... I’ll pay you back, of course, but please. I know it’s valuable stuff, but I’m begging you...” At this point, the man lost consciousness for a moment.

“Kargo!” One of the surrounding villagers shouted the man’s name. Lacey had thought she recognized him somehow, but the name was unfamiliar.

The man called Kargo, who was past thirty and very suntanned, soon faintly came to again. He was desperately struggling to keep his eyes, which must have looked very kind normally, slanted open. He was taking shallow breaths, unable to even stand up.

She didn’t know his circumstances, but...

Lacey lowered her head apologetically. “I’m sorry, that was the last of the healing potion I had prepared.”

Kargo gave a heavy sigh before she could continue. He weakly released his grip on Lacey, then covered his face with one hand, still lying down.

“Oh, so you did. Of course. It must’ve been precious. And you wasted it on me. This is a disaster...”

“Um, but—” Lacey tried to speak again.

“Dad!” The orange-haired, ever-lively boy suddenly sprang in. “The lady across the street told me that you got really hurt! What were you thinking, getting yourself in danger too at a time like this?!”

Allen leaped at him with tears in his eyes, and Kargo slowly embraced him. Then Allen noticed the contradiction. His father’s clothes were ripped and there was blood all over him, but his wounds were closed. Allen must have sensed the confusion from the crowd as well. He spun his head around and examined the surroundings.

“...Lacey?”

“So he’s your father, Allen?”

That explained why he looked so familiar when she’d never met him before. Looking at them side by side, there was a strong resemblance between father and son. Now that she’d finished the emergency administration of the healing potion, Lacey was just going to slowly lose confidence and make herself smaller like usual, but things were different with Allen around. He’d been kind enough to carry heavy vegetables to her outlying mansion time and time again.

“Did something happen?” Allen asked, biting his lip tight as he still clung to Kargo. The tears which had stopped when he’d noticed that Kargo’s wounds were closed were starting to spill again. Actually, he must have been crying the entire time. Kargo quietly hugged his sobbing son.

It had been the day when she’d met the phoenix, so it must have been two or three months ago. Allen had said that he was going to have a baby sibling soon, though they didn’t know the gender yet. Lacey remembered that day well. Allen had been sitting in a chair, with his elbows set on the table and cheeks resting in his hands, and his postpubescent voice had rung happily.

Lacey was told the general circumstances. She and Allen supported Kargo, who had to drag himself along due to the ongoing pain from healing, as they quickly made their way to the family’s house.

“Mom!”

When they burst in the door, there was an orange-haired woman lying on a bed, moaning in agony.

* * *

When she saw the woman’s swollen stomach, Lacey took a sharp breath.

She’d witnessed the instant when life slipped away more times than she could count. But on the other hand, this was only the second time she’d seen life come into the world, the first time being yesterday. It made her flinch. But when she saw Kargo and Allen burst in too, she quickly shook her head. There was no time for those thoughts.

“Sh-She won’t stop bleeding. That’s why dad went to find a medicinal herb.”

Lacey had almost no knowledge about childbirth. However, she was aware that there were medicinal herbs that grew wild in the forest and could be bought at a low price. If these were boiled and consumed, it would promote stamina recovery. It was a known folk remedy.

The people inside the house probably weren’t all family members. Besides children, there were a lot of adults showing up in turns, talking to each other and wiping the sweat off their foreheads. Screams of pain, bellows of anger, and the wails of children. It was like a unique kind of battlefield.

There was already a heap of medicinal herbs at Allen's mother's bedside, but her husband Kargo had been running around looking for the highest-quality stuff he could get. He'd been unlucky enough to get in an accident while searching. But on the other hand, Lacey's presence there had been a huge stroke of luck.

Lacey took another look at the medicinal herbs by the bedside. There was no way an ordinary household would have this many herbs on hand unless they'd been prepared in advance. Medicinal herbs would keep for a long time if they were immersed in mana-infused water and stored in a special jar. But if they weren't preserved, they would lose potency with each passing day.

She understood the situation—and then promptly dashed out of the house. Allen called her name in surprise. “Lacey?!”

“I don't have any potion, but I've got lots of herbs! Just boil lots of water and be on standby!”

* * *

Lacey returned to the mansion, headed toward the abundant field, and gathered as many medicinal herbs as she could hold.

The phoenix was fully awake now and was tilting its head with a “kwee kwee” at her, so she brought along her still-inverted hat while she was at it. It didn't seem right to just leave it alone in the mansion, so she stuffed the phoenix and the medicinal herbs in the hat and sprang out the door, heading straight back to Allen's house.

She herself didn't understand why she was so desperate. People lived, and they died. That was just how nature worked. Everyone experienced it. But when Lacey considered that her actions might make a difference, she was galvanized down to her fingertips. She was doing it not because she'd been ordered to, but because she herself wanted to help.

She tied her long black hair up into a ponytail so it wouldn't get in the way. There wasn't enough time to make the healing potion. Instead, she brewed multiple pots of plain herb water in parallel.

“I've never seen a mage, but...” somebody whispered in blank amazement.

“Are they all this incredible?”

The villagers all gulped tensely and watched as Lacey carried out multiple tasks simultaneously. Each time she waved her finger, the medicinal herbs changed states. They were steeped in boiling water, squeezed dry, ground to a fine powder, and kept at just the right heat. She was just a petite girl, but her work was progressing at an astonishing speed.

But the villagers soon remembered that there was no time to gawk. They promptly looked for something they could each do to help. It was a small village. Everyone was like family.

Lacey handed the suitably ready herb water to Allen. He anxiously stirred the hot water with a wooden spoon and poured it into his mother’s mouth. Very slowly, just a bit of color returned to her cheeks. A good number of people breathed a sigh of relief.

“Mr. Kargo, I’ve placed a spell on the pot that’s making the healing potion so that the heat will automatically adjust. Keep steeping it for about an hour and it’ll be done. Please keep her stable with herb water until then.”

“Th-Thank you. I really can’t thank you enough.”

“You should thank this cockatrice instead.”

The phoenix, as if it knew that it were being talked about, got up on top of Lacey’s head and spread its wings wide. “Kwee!”

If not for the phoenix parent, she’d probably never have made the healing potion. Her many failed attempts at trying and failing to make it had been valuable experience.

Kargo blinked repeatedly, then left the room as if he’d just thought of something. When he came back, he was grasping a cloth bag in one hand.

“I’m sorry. This is all the money we have at the moment. I doubt it’s enough, but...”

Lacey was startled. She was about to say she didn’t need any payment, but then Wayne’s words crossed her mind.

If you want to live by your own means, then you’ll have to start by finding a

way to earn money.

Lacey was acting out of her own desire to help, but charity alone would get her nowhere. She thought for a moment, then took a few coins out of the bag he'd handed her. Figuring in the cost of materials and labor, this seemed like an appropriate amount.

"Allen has been helping me regularly, so this is enough."

"But—"

"I'm basically pushing my services onto you because this is an emergency, so it'd hurt my conscience to demand more. If you need me again, we can talk prices then."

After some back-and-forth, Lacey's fee ended up being twice the amount she'd picked out, but Kargo still seemed ashamed. He was crumpling up the cloth bag. It was probably their well-kept savings. She was flattered that he wanted to hand it over, but at the same time, it felt like a weirdly heavy burden.

Still, this was the most Lacey could do. It was now up to his wife whether she had the endurance to pull through.

Kargo's face contorted into a pained expression as he tried to mask his frustration. "We knew the baby would be born today because the oracle told us. That was why we'd prepared lots of medicinal herbs in advance so that she'd be okay in case something happened before the doctor arrived."

"You have an oracle?"

"There wasn't one where you lived before, Miss Lacey? The oracle picks a name for the child to be born that reflects how they'll grow up, and divines when the child will first come into the world. There's no doctor in our village. That's why we schedule for a doctor to come over from the neighboring village on the day that the child will be born."

Lacey had no parents, so she didn't know how she'd been given her name. She'd never thought about the meaning behind why she was Lacey.

"Kwee?" The phoenix on top of Lacey tilted its head and moved down to her shoulder. If there was a name that would reflect how the child would grow up

to be, it meant that they were praying for a healthy delivery. She scratched the phoenix's neck a little, and it trilled contentedly.

"Then why isn't there a doctor here?"

"Because of the storm."

Lacey blinked. Kargo's fists trembled as he explained the situation that was making him feel so helpless.

"Yesterday's storm swept away the only bridge connecting our villages. It was a big storm, but it passed through faster than we'd expected, so we had hope that something could be done. But it's still no good. The water current's too quick. We can't build a new bridge or send out any boats."

The storm had quickly cleared out as a result of Lacey's magic. The sky had been pierced through only around the vicinity of the mansion, but she'd still bored through the middle of it. It made sense that the bad weather would dissipate faster than normal. Nonetheless, it had left its mark.

"He's so close, and yet...!"

"Can you have him come by a different route?"

"We don't know how far out the storm damage is. There's a chance that the path is blocked. I can't ask him to endanger himself, and we don't have any way to contact him in the first place."

"I see." Each party had their own circumstances, she observed.

At some point, the phoenix had started pecking at the medicinal herbs that Lacey had brought. Surprised, she grabbed and scolded it. Then she placed it back on her shoulder. It was small and cute.

"Mr. Kargo, if it's acceptable, can I do one more service for you? It's nothing special, just a bonus."

"A service?"

"Yes. I won't ask for much. How about a name?"

No wonder, Lacey inhaled as she looked at the turbulent river water. *One*

false move and you could die. I'm glad nobody tried to cross anyway. She readjusted her hat.

The water raged as if it were threatening to swallow up little Lacey. Flotsam from the collapsed bridge bobbed, sticking sharply out of the water. To make things worse, there were thick clouds. Rain was starting to drip down heavily, making white streaks as it fell.

"Are you okay, Miss Lacey?!" Kargo yelled to her.

She looked over her shoulder and responded. "Of course. Please get farther back, Mr. Kargo!"

She held her staff. Next to her, the phoenix flapped both wings and fidgeted, letting out a discomforted "kwee kwee." The chick's parent was weak to rain, so she had assumed that it would have a tough time staying with her. But when she'd told it to go and stay back as well, the phoenix had ruffled up its tiny body and screeched with all its might.

"Krrr kweeeh!"

Right then, a flame ignited with a *bwoosh!* A barrier of fire enveloped Lacey and the phoenix. The droplets that had just been pouring on them were now evaporating before they even touched the barrier.

"Wow!" she marveled. "For a newborn, you can do some pretty amazing things."

"Nkwee!" The phoenix proudly puffed out its chest from its spot on top of Lacey's head. Its parent had its mana feathers clipped and was bound by an anti-magic chain, so it had been severely weakened. If that hadn't happened, it might've been able to do the same things. Or perhaps there would be some individual differences. In any case, it would definitely have been capable of wonders.

"This might let me do something a little more spectacular," Lacey said, not cognizant of the fact that she was *always* performing spectacles.

"All right." She stepped forward. Her surroundings were encased by a sphere of fire. The flames would likely repel any water. Lacey reinforced it with wind magic. She stepped over the turbulent water.

“W-Watch where you’re—!” Kargo shouted from behind her.

There was a group of men on the opposite shore, staring stupefied at the broken bridge. The doctor was probably among them. They squinted to see what was going on, and their eyes all focused on Lacey.

Holding her staff with both hands and keeping it level with the water, Lacey gradually moved forward. She was walking on top of the water. Each time she stepped, calm ripples spread across the water’s surface.

The men on the other shore were baffled, and Kargo kept rubbing his eyes in disbelief as well. As they realized that their eyes weren’t deceiving them, there was a commotion among them. A tiny girl was walking atop the tempestuous river. The sight was enough to make them question if they were dreaming.

When she reached the center of the river, a huge wave of water surged up, threatening to swallow Lacey. There was a scream. But Lacey just calmly chanted a spell and swung her staff.

The result was a wave-turned-ice-sculpture. She then swiftly thrust her staff downward.

At that exact moment, all the water stood still.

Bit by bit, with Lacey’s staff at the origin point, it changed state. The waves that reached the shore had completely changed into ice. Naturally, this provoked *more* screams, borne of relief rather than despair.

“Phew.” Lacey took a deep breath with her cheeks inflated, then slowly let it out. She turned back around toward Kargo and broke into a smile.

“This’ll hold for a while! I think you’ll be able to walk across it!”

“O-Okay...”



* * *

Lacey hadn't noticed from where she was standing in the middle of the river and waving her hand to him, but Kargo had completely fallen down from shock. What he was seeing was just too unrealistic. Kargo recalled the girl's name. "She's got the same name as the Dawn Witch," his son Allen had told him with a laugh. "And she's an incredible witch."

Kargo had thought that this was just childish nonsense, but his son had the right idea all along.

She has the same name as the Dawn Witch... No, it can't be her.

Her appearance was totally different than what the rumors said about the witch, and even if she *was* the real deal, there was no way she'd be living out here in the middle of nowhere.

He'd gotten distracted while looking at Lacey wave her hand with a smile on her face. "No time to be thinking about that," said Kargo, getting back on his feet. The medicinal herb had been frighteningly effective. He wasn't feeling any pain anymore.

"Ghh, unh, wargh!"

Whooping a loud cry from his belly, he slid onto the ice. *Never done this before in my life*, he thought. *And it'll probably never happen again as long as I live.*

* * *

"So that's what happened."

"O-Oh..."

Lacey walked alongside Wayne and told him on impulse about what had happened just a week ago. She'd wondered how much would be okay to say, but she'd ended up blurting out the whole story. If she covered up one part, it'd cause a contradiction elsewhere. Rather than invent a poor fabrication, she'd compulsively just told the truth.

In light of what he'd said about not giving out the medicinal herbs to just anyone, it was difficult to confess what she'd done with the plants. But if the

same thing ever happened again, Lacey would most likely keep doing the same thing.

“Well, you did it to save people. It couldn’t really be helped,” Wayne murmured with his arms folded, having seen through Lacey’s reasoning.

He *was* the hero, as hard as it was to believe sometimes. He’d gone on a quest to save the common people. Even though it had been a result of his political obligations as a noble, he was still kindhearted by nature.

When she heard what Wayne had to say, Lacey inhaled softly. Still, she’d really been imprudent this time. *I know it was an emergency, but there was probably a smarter way to go about it*, she thought to herself as she kept pace with Wayne.

“So, where exactly are we headed?”

“Well, I thought we could go receive my compensation.”

She’d been desperate at the time, and having Allen nearby had helped, but voluntarily going to crowded places made her nervous. So when she’d told Wayne that she’d be okay if he was there with her, he’d made an extremely inscrutable expression and patted the top of Lacey’s head with a troubled sigh.

“What’s our destination? That kid Allen’s house?”

“No, not there... I think it’s that way. That’s what I was told.”

At the edge of the village beyond Allen’s house, in the opposite direction of Lacey’s mansion, there stood a somewhat aged house. Lacey called for the phoenix sitting on top of her head to come down and then took off her hat.

“Excuse me...”

The house looked dim and timeworn at first glance, but when they entered, they unexpectedly found it filled with a cheerful assembly of villagers. Of course, Allen and his father, Kargo, were among them. They were both seated and having a good time, but Allen immediately noticed Lacey come in. His father was a moment behind him.

“Lacey! And...who’s that?”

Wayne gave a sunny smile and waved one hand. If he had to respond with a

lie, he'd rather not say anything at all. That was Wayne's style. It was all well and good that Lacey had brought him along, but she hadn't thought about how she'd explain who he was.

"Er..." She put a hand to her mouth and thought.

Allen clapped his hands together, interrupting her. "I know! He's your boyfriend!"

"No..."

"C'mon, don't be shy. Your escort's pretty handsome."

"Heh heh, you bet." Wayne smirked and puffed out his chest. As a matter of fact, Wayne presently had concealment magic cast on himself to disguise his identity. By nature, he was unforgettably handsome even at a glance, but at the moment, he appeared to look totally unremarkable. Allen's remark earlier had been a bit of a joke. Fully aware of this, Wayne took the compliment anyway.

The two of them made eye contact, then simultaneously burst out laughing. It was good to know that they were getting along.

"Anyway, Lacey... I see a bunch of people here, but what is this place?"

"It's the oracle's house. I don't know why there are so many people, though. Remember how I told you how I asked for a name as compensation? Names have meaning. It wouldn't feel right to never give this chick a name of its own."

The villagers were under the impression that it was a cockatrice, so she skipped over saying that it was a phoenix.

A week had passed since it had come to stay with Lacey. The unnamed phoenix chick tilted its head and chirped, "Kwee kwee."

"You could just give it one yourself, Lacey."

"I don't want to. It's not something I can do. I want it to have a name that'll suit it as a grown person, if such a one exists. If I named it myself, it'd end up being something unoriginal. Like Fotia, because it's all red."

"That sounds good enough to me. Also, rather than 'grown person,' wouldn't it technically be 'grown bird'?"

“That’s enough nitpicking.” Lacey stretched up and placed her index finger against Wayne’s mouth, shutting him right up.

Wayne’s mouth stayed tightly closed after that, but it wasn’t because Lacey’s retort had been effective. Nobody else noticed, but the back of Wayne’s ears had turned bright red. He surveyed the room, and Lacey joined him in looking for the oracle.

At the back of the room, they spotted an old woman. She was chubby and sweet. The kindly wrinkles at the corners of her eyes suggested that she smiled often.

“Granny,” Kargo addressed her as he approached. “This is Miss Lacey. She’s the one who saved my daughter and wife. She wants a name for the bird that’s with her.”

“Uh-hummm,” the old woman answered cryptically. It wasn’t clear whether she’d meant to say that or not.

She waved a hand, beckoning for Lacey and Wayne to come over.

“You can call me Granny. I serve as the head villager, just by dint of living long enough. At some point, everyone ended up inviting themselves over to my house.”

Just as her initial remark had suggested, she was slurring her syllables. It didn’t seem to be intentional, though. When she smiled cheerfully, the wrinkles on her face buried her eyes. *What a wonderful way to age*, Lacey thought to herself.

Lacey would have to contemplate how she was going to live from now on. She had to choose for herself what path she would pursue to the very end. It had been so simple to walk down a path that someone else had chosen for her, but now it was like she was traversing through a pitch-black night. It was scary. She had no idea what direction to go in.

“So, you want a name for that chick? Oh dear...isn’t Fotia perfectly fine?”

“Oh no no no!”

She had probably been listening to Lacey and Wayne’s conversation. “Fotia

sounds fine to me. It means 'fire,' doesn't it? It's fitting for such a fiery little thing," she said with a pleasant laugh.

"Um, I heard that you would be able to choose a name that suited the chick. So please, I want you to give it the best name you can." When Lacey thought of how a name could change how one lived, it felt like far too great of a responsibility for her.

She took the phoenix in her arms and held it out to Granny. She wanted a proper name with real meaning behind it. Lacey couldn't trust herself to do anything.

Sitting in her small chair, Granny gave a chuckle. "Little Lacey. I don't just come up with names out of nowhere. All I do is ask, 'How does this name sound?' to the unborn baby and listen for an answer. But that chick is already here with us."

The phoenix, which had grown remarkably since it hatched, was already spilling out of Lacey's hands. It tilted its head, looking at Lacey and Granny, and gave a "kwee."

"First I ask the parents what kind of name they've picked, and then I check with the unborn child. However, there are sometimes kids whose families are undecided and still can't make up their minds even after the child is born. Those ones just tell me the day when they'll come into the world."

Granny glanced to the side at Allen and Kargo, who were saying some familiar names back and forth. "Lacey!" "Dana." "Lane!" "Dana!"

So it's a baby girl. But have they not decided on a name yet? Whatever they choose, I sort of wish they wouldn't pick "Lacey," she thought for a second.

"Like that," Granny smiled. "It's an important decision to make, so I understand why they're having a tough time."

It really was important. That was why it felt scary when she didn't have any confidence, and why the responsibility felt like a heavy burden. She wanted it to be an excellent name.

"But how the person decides to live their life is just as important as the meaning behind their name. How will they move forward with the name

they've been given? *Can* they move forward? Say, if you're that nervous, how about you ask? I'm sure that chick will tell you."

A pair of cute, round, golden eyes looked up at Lacey. It rested snugly against her chest, tilting its head and singing, "Kwee kwee." It looked like it was enjoying itself, and it was adorable.

"Fotia?" Lacey was so nervous that her voice came out in a hesitant whisper.

Fotia spread its wings wide. "Nkweeeeeee!"

It was like a huge wave had just crashed into her. She felt so giddy, she couldn't tell left from right. At this very moment, she held a living being in her hands. The very thought made her tremble. She staggered, and Wayne put up a hand to support her. When she was aware of her surroundings again, she was softly embracing Fotia. Its down was soft and warm.

It was like a beacon in the dark night. It made her feel inexplicably warm inside.

"Lacey! You've decided on a name?"

But as soon as Allen called out to her, Lacey's face snapped back up. She blinked once, took a deep breath in and out, and then slowly looked back down at what was nestled in her arms.

"Yeah. Fotia. It's a bit hard to pronounce, so I guess it'll be Tee for short."

"Kwee kwee!"

"It seems to like it, so that's good. We haven't decided yet, but no matter how much me and dad argue, I have a feeling mom's going to have the final word."

Lacey let out a quiet laugh. Given all that had happened, Allen's mother was probably still recovering.

"Oh yeah, dad. Since this guy is here, now's the perfect chance. Let's bring the stuff from the house!"

"Good idea," Kargo nodded in response. "Excuse me, but please wait here for a little while," he said before leaving.

"Just a name doesn't seem like a good enough payment. Besides, it's not like

Granny makes a firm decision for you.”

“I suppose it wasn’t exactly what I expected. But still, the name’s settled now, so...”

“Nah, it wouldn’t sit well with us. Okay, dad, go ahead!”

Allen’s house was comparatively close to Granny’s. They must have had the goods already prepared. Kargo returned carrying a huge box full of vegetables. Allen was already regularly delivering vegetables to her, so when Kargo set the box down with a thud, Lacey was struck dumb.

“Th-This is awesome!” Wayne clapped his hands together in glee. He was set on getting Lacey to eat, one way or another. “I’m trusting you to take care of Lacey while I’m away.”

“Consider it done!”

Disregarding Lacey for the moment, Wayne and Allen exchanged a firm handshake.

“Just one thing, Allen. I don’t think she’ll mention it, so I’m just saying this for the record, but Lacey is actually fifteen. I think you’re probably younger than her.”

“It’s okay, really. You don’t have to bring that up,” Lacey wearily commented when she heard Wayne’s follow-up.

Still gripping Wayne’s hand, Allen’s mouth hung open. “What?!” Then he looked from Wayne to Lacey, and then back again, repeating this several times. Was it really that surprising? Judging by the way he was acting, yes. “So I should be calling you big sis Lacey instead of just Lacey?!” He shouted in astonishment, and there were murmurs all around.

“Really, it’s okay,” she answered, right before another lively voice came from the doorway.

“Is the chief in? Well, I figured it was about time for me to head back home, but I wanted to drop by and give my respects first. All right, coming through, coming through... HWHAAA?!”

The new arrival, who Lacey had never before met, was pointing a shaky finger

at her for some reason. At a glance, he was a fox-like man. His slanted eyes were squinted almost shut, and he was wholeheartedly shocked. “You’re that girl who was walking on water!”

She was wondering if she’d met him before, but that explained it.

“Hello there! I come to this town on a regular basis to peddle my wares. I was in a real tight spot back there. Almost thought my cargo would go to waste!” he said, taking Lacey’s hands in his own and shaking them vigorously.

Wayne calmly cut in between them. He stood in front of Lacey, letting her draw back, and silently looked down at the merchant.

“Who’s this scary guy?”

“He’s usually a lot more friendly.”

Sometimes Wayne would emanate a very imposing aura.

“Well, in any case, thanks a bunch!” The man gave a fox-like smile. “I’ll come by again! See you later!” He paid his respects to Granny and the villagers, then left.

Lacey had become entangled in the lives of many people before she knew it.

It had been pure coincidence that she came to Plume Village. Even so, it was the first path that Lacey had ever chosen for her own self.

She was blindly plunging onward through the darkness, unsure of where to go, and that was plain scary. But it was by no means a meaningless journey. When she turned around, she could clearly see the steps she’d taken. That slightly eased her fear.

The changes were really only minor, but to Lacey, they were enormous. The anxiety of new experiences turned to joy. The eased fear turned into just a little bit of anticipation.

Bit by bit, she was changing.

* * *

And so, irrespective of Lacey’s own wishes, she’d left her mark in the memories of Plume Village’s people.

“The person who moved into that big old Wellbuyer mansion is a mage from the capital. Don’t be fooled by her short stature. Apparently, she’s really skilled...” So went the rumors that were spreading. Lacey was ignorant of these, but the tiny village of Plume was far too small for her to reside in without drawing any attention to herself.

However, since mages were rarely seen anywhere but the capital, the villagers had scanty knowledge of magic. The majority of them barely even knew the definition, and their awareness only extended to the “Dawn Witch” being super strong, in a nutshell. So when they saw petite little Lacey, most people were mystified, thinking that mages must come in all types. They would never imagine that *she* was the Dawn Witch. That showed just how much the notion of the resolved, red-haired witch had taken root in the public mind.

Completely oblivious to this, Lacey went down from her mansion down to the village. Perched on her head was the phoenix chick Tee. It was rustling its bright red feathers and making its presence known.

“S-So heavy...”

“Kwee?”

It had been palm-sized just after hatching, but was steadily growing and was now big enough to be carried in both arms. Monsters had their biggest growth spurts during infancy, so it was practically changing every day.

Thus it was starting to hurt Lacey’s neck, and she wished it’d stop sitting on her head. “Tee, can you...” Lacey murmured, gripping the brim of her hat. She then slowly inclined her neck.

Flap flap... Tee flew up a bit. Then it landed back on top of Lacey’s head with a *pwumf*. She tried inclining her neck to the opposite side. *Flap flap...*

“Y-You’re *that* unwilling to move?!”

Each time she inclined to the right and left and back again, Tee found just the right spot to hop back on. By the end of it, it was puffing up its fluffy body with air to make itself lighter and adjusting its weight distribution. It was even spreading out its wings and making a “ta-da!” pose. It was admittedly less of a burden now that it was lighter, but it was still getting too big to ride around on

top of her head.

“How did it end up like this...? Come to think of it, Wayne said that the phoenix might’ve meant to pay for my services with its body... Is that why you won’t give me any space? That can’t be it, right?”

“Kwuh phwee!!!”

“D-Don’t give such a positive response with a chirp I’ve never even heard before! And don’t make a fuss on top of my head! Don’t flap your wings, please!”

A set of eyes watched quizzically at Lacey, who was pulling at her hat feverishly, rocking her head, and generally making a scene by her lonesome.

“What are you doing there, big sis Lacey?”

Lacey had given up on getting Tee off her head and now turned around to face the person who’d spoken to her. A boy with freckles and orange hair stared at her, perplexed. It was Allen.

Meanwhile, Lacey froze up, still pulling at her hat. A strange “hwehhh” noise escaped her throat.

Allen wasn’t the only one there. His father, Kargo, was there as well, along with one other person. A man she’d never seen before with a sharp look in his eyes glared at her.

“It’s pretty rare for you to come down to the village by yourself, big sis Lacey.”

“Eh, ah, yes, yeah. I had something to do...”

Ever since Wayne had told him that Lacey was fifteen years old, Allen had changed how he addressed Lacey. Lacey herself didn’t really care about her perceived age, but Allen did, so there wasn’t much she could do about it. She’d decided not to make a big deal out of it. That wasn’t what was bothering her. She made a slight bow to Kargo, who was standing next to the smiling Allen. They really did look alike.

She then shifted her gaze even more. “I was thinking about ordering some tableware...”

The third man was staring rigidly at Lacey, so she involuntarily tightened her

lips. Her heart was beating fast. Lacey's shyness was incorrigible. She'd thought she'd gotten a little more used to it, but in situations that weren't related to magic or battles—such as the completely ordinary one she found herself in right now—whenever people stared at her, she could feel her clenched palms bead with sweat.

Strangely, her body was even quaking. But a moment later, she realized that it was just the vibrations from Tee rustling up and down on top of her head. It was making things worse, so she really wished it would stop already.

She asked it to come down for a moment, and it obliged. It really was a smart chick. In a complete attitude change from moments ago, it speedily flitted down to the ground and fluffed up at her feet. Tee was a phoenix that was mistaken for a cockatrice, but any which way, it was still a monster. Only tamed monsters were able to freely go in and out of villages.

“Um, well...”

There was an awkward silence. Lacey had been spoken to, so she'd answered. That was all there was to it, and yet now she was nervous that she'd messed up somehow. Lacey was always like this. She didn't know the right things to say to people. It felt like there was a prickle in the back of her throat.

“I really appreciate what you've done for us, Miss Lacey. My wife wants to tell you thanks as well, but I'm sorry to say, things haven't totally calmed yet...”

“O-Of course! Of course!”

Kargo was the first to read the situation. Lacey herself didn't really understand what was so “of course,” but all she could do right now was make some kind of positive response. *I really didn't have to say it twice, though...* She was already regretting it. Kargo was already giving her plenty of vegetables and monetary compensation, so now she was feeling belatedly uncertain about the whole thing.

“Um, I appre—”

“And this here is Cedric. He runs the best restaurant in town.”

“Hello.”

Lacey had been about to say “I appreciate the thought, but I’m okay” before Kargo had spoken over her and changed the subject. She felt as if a moody wind had just blown past.

The man who had been introduced as Cedric greeted her in a rather unsociable tone. He was skinny and wore thin-rimmed glasses, and his combed-back hair had a few streaks of white. He must have been around his forties, but since Lacey had no knack for discerning ages, all she could tell was that he was probably older than Kargo. Although he had a slender build, he had the typical bony fingers of a chef.

“You remember that recent storm? And well...how I got crushed under a collapsed roof?” Kargo made a bitter expression, probably recalling the pain and despair of the experience. “Right after that, all the men in the village went around to check if there were any other places that might collapse. But we don’t know when another storm like that might come, so right now, we’re in the middle of splitting into groups and double-checking everywhere.”

“So that’s what’s going on.”

There was a chance they might have overlooked something on the first check. For that reason, they were going around inspecting other places with different sets of eyes.

While Kargo was explaining this, Cedric had his eyes narrowed and arms folded. His body language suggested that he had no intention to move even an inch from where he was standing.

“I’m Kargo’s friend. We get along very well. That’s why we put together this nice three-person group with his son Allen.”

“...”

“I’m determined to make a thorough report and not miss any problems, even with my old cloudy eyes.”

Despite appearances, Cedric seemed to be much more motivated than Lacey would have expected. He spoke detachedly in a monotonous voice, and his expression didn’t show a trace of emotion. She couldn’t glean much about him, but Kargo and Allen appeared to be used to it.

Allen reacted only with a light retort. “But you’re not old yet, Cedric.”

“Er, well...”

“Sorry to distract you, sis. You wanted tableware, right? In that case, you want old man Theobald’s shop. He sells everything there.” Allen waved his hand. “See ya!”

Kargo finished scribbling some sort of note on the paper he was holding. They were probably headed to the next place on the list now. Lacey bowed her head instead of saying goodbye and then turned her back. Then...

“Please wait!”

Just who had made such a loud, surprising shout?

Lacey turned back around to face Allen, Kargo, and also Cedric, whose eyes had widened just a little. It hadn’t been one of them who’d shouted. It had been Lacey. Her heart was making a total ruckus. It was beating fast, and she was totally scared.

“W-Would you let me help?”

“You want to join us, Miss Lacey? Oh no, we couldn’t trouble you for more.”

“Th-The work you’re doing right now is being split up by all of Plume’s residents! So please, let me, um!”

Is it okay for me to say this? I don’t know. Even so...

“Let me help, as a fellow resident!”



When she shouted this, the first emotion that Lacey felt was shyness. She didn't know if she was allowed to call herself a part of the village. She was inclined to think that they might get annoyed and think she was presumptuous.

Lacey was trembling and her face was flushed. The group in front of her exchanged glances. And ultimately, they accepted Lacey's proposition.

Kargo gave a broad smile and bowed his head. "Glad to have you with us." Lacey repeatedly bowed in response as if she were a drinking bird.

"It's just the men who don't have other work to do going around, so it's not like you were being left out on purpose, sis." Allen grinned. Hearing this from him made her ears go red, but she was still glad she'd called out to them. She was totally nervous when she'd first made up her mind, but now that it was past her, it didn't seem like a big deal anymore.

As they inspected the village, unexpectedly enough, the most helpful member of the group turned out to be Tee. After all, Tee had wings and could go look at areas that were obscured from view for the rest of them. Lacey used her magic as a stop-gap repair on any spots that seemed hazardous. She'd been secretly developing spells to get back at Wayne, who'd been bristling with anger at her when she'd left gaping holes in the roof.

Thus by the time the sun set, they'd finished checking more places than planned. Bathed in orange light, the group of four people and one bird took a breather.

"Great work out there, little birdie."

Same as ever, Cedric spoke in a detached tone that made it impossible to tell what his feelings were, but he rubbed Tee's head with such swift movements that they were hardly visible. Tee's red body blended in with the sunset, which made it difficult to spot, but the chick didn't seem dissatisfied.

"Nkwoo kyew-wee kyew-kyew-kyew!" it chirped happily, flapping its wings. Lacey was glad to see that it was having fun.

"It's that late already?! Thank you so much for your help today, Miss Lacey. Allen, I've got to go home first and see how your mom and sister are doing. Sorry, but could you give this note to Granny? I wrote down details about

where we checked today. Sorry to you too, Cedric.”

“Okay, got it.”

“Tell your wife to take care of herself.”

“Ah, goodbye...!” No sooner than the words were out of Lacey’s mouth, Kargo had zipped away as fast as the wind. He had an infant child at home, so he was naturally worried.

As he checked over the note from Kargo, Allen suddenly looked up. “Oh yeah, big sis Lacey, didn’t you say that you came down to buy some tableware? You were a big help, but are you sure it was the right decision?”

“Yeah, I’m not in a hurry, or more like, it’s a little late anyway... I was just thinking that I wanted to get a food dish for Tee.”

Tee’s diet mainly consisted of vegetables and medicinal herbs from the field. Its appetite had increased as it grew in size, so it was getting to be a little tough to keep using the same dish. The Wellbuyer mansion had plenty of fine china, but there was very little that was appropriate for everyday use. Lacey didn’t have kitchen tools of her own either.

She didn’t need it immediately, so she decided to try again tomorrow. But then Cedric told her to wait for a moment and then ran off somewhere. She was surprised and didn’t know what to make of this, but he came back heaving a basket. He showed some of the contents to Lacey. Inside there was a colorful array of plates.

“My restaurant happens to be close by. There’s a lot of plates we aren’t using. I was thinking you could take some if you spotted any that you like. How about it?”

Come to think of it, Kargo *had* mentioned that Cedric owned a restaurant. There was everything from big, deep, and durable platters to complete sets of small dishes. He must’ve rushed to head there and pick them out before he kept Lacey and Allen waiting too long, which was why he’d run off so brusquely.

Lacey imagined it, and a second or two later, she burst into a laugh. She quickly straightened her face back, but Allen, who was more used to Cedric, likewise covered his mouth with a hand and shook. The man who was being

laughed at slowly blinked behind his glasses. This was probably his expression of confusion.

“Something the matter?”

“N-No, I’m sorry. How do I put this? I’m just really grateful. Are you sure I can take these?”

“Go right ahead. I can deliver them to your mansion if you’d like.”

“Thank you, so much.”

Strangely enough, she was able to convey her gratitude without stumbling. Perhaps she was riding an emotional high from going around the whole village all day together.

But Cedric knit his eyebrows a little. “Hm? Wait a second. She was initially going to buy a plate, so if I just handed some over, would that be interfering with Theobald’s business? What do you think, Allen?”

“I’m not the right person to ask.”

“I-I’ll visit his shop later if I get a chance.”

“All good, then.” Cedric smiled broadly. She’d thought he was a weirdly tense person, but that impression had gone away completely.

Lacey thanked Cedric again and took him up on his offer. She let Tee pick the dish; after all, it would be the one using it. Tee happily pecked at one that had a cute yellow flower design on the inside with its beak. If this dish were filled with its favorite medicinal herbs, it’d look like the herbs were sprouting buds here and there. It would certainly be lovely. The chick had made a tasteful choice.

They headed straight back to the mansion, and Lacey heaped a pile of herbs on the dish she’d been given. Watching Tee eat, she was reminded of someone. Someone who’d ravenously spooned food into his mouth while laughing loudly about how good it tasted. She wondered how he was getting along.

Tee burped, exposed its full belly, and finally flopped onto the floor. “Kwuffuh” came a satisfied warble. Lacey had her cheeks in her hands as she watched it act cute, and her lips automatically curved into a smile. She never knew life could be like this.

That was exactly it. Lacey didn't know anything, not about herself, and not about her environment. That was why she wanted to learn. It would be necessary so that she could stand on her own two feet and live independently.

The blond hero suddenly popped into her mind. He was kindhearted, caring like a mother, and half of Lacey's heart belonged to him already.

So she made a wish. One besides her wish to live freely, which the king had granted.

And she could already see one step she could take along the path.

Chapter 4: Opening an Anything Shop

Most people who saw him would think he was practically a wild beast.

He was very lightly armored despite being on a trip, and the strangest part was, he didn't even have a single weapon. He had an untidy, lionlike mane of hair, and had such a massive physique that he could intimidate anyone with his mere presence.

He ran. He moved forward. He charged through.

The man balled his fists. He took the full brunt of the howl from the monster about to attack him and thrust his arm out. A wolflike monster bit into his arm, but...

"NOOO PROBLEM!!!!!" He laughed it off. The wolf's fangs had shattered.

People said that he had a steel body. He tore across the wastelands, trouncing all kinds of monsters. But on his cheek, he had one very deep scar.

"I can't believe it! After all we've been through together!!!!!"

Although he wasn't trying to shout, his voice certainly sounded like it.

"LACEEEY!!! And while I'm at it, WAAAAAYNE!!!!!"

Ayne, ayne, ayne... His voice echoed through the forest. Alarmed, critters ran out in droves.

He was getting close to his destination. "Almost there!" He firmly slapped his own thighs and exhaled a burst of air from his mouth.

* * *

"Nkwee?" Tee, who had been asleep in Lacey's inverted hat, abruptly lifted its head. It looked all around the room and tilted its head.

"What's up, Tee?" Lacey had thought that it was just shaking off drowsiness, but it didn't seem that way.

The mansion was much more cheerful than before. The eerie aura that had

frightened the villagers for so long had been seeping out from the room where Tee's parent had been trapped. Lacey had discovered it with her magic and cleaned the entire mansion, so it was like a whole new place now.

Gleaming light spilled in through the huge clerestory windows, and it was like the whole mansion was sparkling. Long years of neglect had caused some damage here and there to the walls and floorboards, but the furniture was well-constructed and had some lovely details on the molding. If they were mended and taken care of, they would last for a long time to come.

"I wonder what startled it."

"You sure it wasn't dreaming?" Putting aside the question of whether monsters had dreams, Wayne's voice came from behind her. He was fussing around with Lacey's hair, tilting his head in indecision. "This way or that?"

"Ummm... Wayne?"

"What?"

"Do you have nothing else to do?" She'd been wondering for a while whether it would be okay to ask this and finally took the plunge.

He'd completed his mission as the hero, but he still had a role to fulfill as a noble and as an important figure to the country. But Wayne continued to periodically visit Lacey. He'd started by inspecting the whole house, then moved on to making sure she had enough daily necessities, pulling on her cheeks, checking up on her growth and even her weight that day, and ultimately he'd started to fuss with Lacey's grown-out hair and had ended up braiding it. He'd done the same kind of things during their quest, so it wasn't particularly abnormal, but those days were over now.

It didn't take too much time to go between the capital and Plume Village on horse, but they still weren't close enough to make frequent visits.

"I know what you're trying to say," Wayne replied with unexpected calm as he fiddled with Lacey's black hair. "But that's not what's going on. I don't come here because I've got a lot of free time. I've been saving up my free time and spending all of it here."

She couldn't tell because he was messing with her hair, but Wayne probably

had a serious look on his face. He'd been visiting from the capital about once a month. When he was busy, the intervals were longer. Reflecting on it, he'd been using up all of his days off since Lacey left the capital.

It was a feeling akin to being forced to drink a beverage with a weird taste and then not knowing how to describe it. Lacey breathed in, breathed out, and spontaneously tightened her fingers around her miniaturized staff, which she'd put in the bag at her waist.

"This."

"This?"

"This is killing me. Sorry..."

She could hear Wayne give an amused laugh.

When he'd come to check up on her once before, he'd told her, "I was starting to wonder if you were still alive." Lacey, the girl who was so ignorant of the wider world, had impulsively moved out of her house without telling anyone from her old party and had just wandered aimlessly. Wayne was caring toward others, so he must've been concerned.

You don't have anything?

Back when they were on their quest and he'd acted much more like a noble youth, Wayne had asked Lacey this with an astounded look. It was a scene that she remembered at random sometimes. Overhead, tiny stars shot across the sky.

That was the turning point when Wayne had started to care for Lacey.

Lacey wanted to set Wayne free from that one day. The embarrassment of needing so much special treatment was building up little by little, to the point that it had permeated through her entirely. After all, the hero's obligation toward his party members was long absolved.

"Hey, don't die on me. Although, it seems you've been eating meals lately, so that's a relief."

"It almost slips my mind sometimes, but yeah."

"You *do* forget?"

“Also, I’m going to earn a living. I’ll try starting an anything shop.”

“Sounds good. You’ve got Tee with you too.”

“I can’t give you more to worry about, Wayne.”

“Sure. I’m rooting for you.”

She could hear the rustling sound of her hair being pulled and twisted.

I...

When she closed her eyes, she could feel his gentle fingertips. It was a quiet, relaxing time with no words exchanged. She slowly processed her feelings.

I want to put some distance between Wayne and myself.

This was Lacey’s other wish, besides wanting to be free.

It would make her a bit sad, but it was necessary. For it to happen, she had to become able to stand on her own feet. She couldn’t be a burden at Wayne’s ankles forever.

She pumped herself up. She tightly bit her lip, snapped her eyes open, and faced forward.

It was then that Wayne burst out laughing, unable to hold it in anymore. He gripped his sides and guffawed. This was the face he made when he’d pulled off a bit of mischief.

“What’s so funny?” she wondered, looking around without a clue, before realizing that her head was strangely heavy. Two strange masses were bulging out on either side of her head. She quickly searched for a mirror. “Wayne, what *is* this?! There’s something weird on my head!”

“I call it the Rat’s Nest. Wow, you look cute!”

“Y-You bundled up my hair and stacked it on top of my head...?! A-Ack, I can’t get it off! It’s not coming undone! How did you do this?! I don’t know how to fix it!”

“It doesn’t hurt to change your hairstyle once in a while.”

“It does hurt! I can’t wear my hat like this! At least let me hide my face!”

“I think you’re okay like that, though. Right, Tee?”

“Nkweeeeeeeee!”

“It’s not okay!” Red-faced, Lacey snatched her hat from Tee in the hopes of covering up the irreversible tangle of hair. The buns on her head got in the way and prevented her from wearing the hat low like usual, causing her to flail. Wayne suppressed a smile as he watched her.

“ANYONE HOOOME?!!!”

In the middle of their squabble, every window in the mansion rattled violently. Both of them looked up. Lacey reached for her staff, and Wayne clenched his fists with a sharp look.

“Anyone hooome?! Anyone home, anyone home?! IS NOBODY HEEERE?!”

The voice was so massive, it was like a weapon in and of itself.

It had been such a long while, they were late to realize that they knew this voice. Lacey made eye contact with Wayne and slowly opened the door of the room.

She stuck her head over the second-floor overlook and saw that a man had come in the entrance and was now looking all around the surrounding area.

“Brooks?”

“Oh, whoa! Lacey! It’s been forever!” Straightening his huge, gray lionlike physique, the man raised a hand in greeting.

The man’s name was Brooks Garginey. She’d met him a year and some months ago, and he’d been one of her companions on the quest to take down the Demon King. *He* was the Steel Warrior.

* * *

In a word, Brooks was a stifling man. He was hot-blooded, and he was warmhearted. As for his breadth, he seemed to be nearly three times the size of Lacey.

Figuring that it would be rude to keep looking at him from above, Lacey hurriedly ran down the stairs. Wayne followed at a slower pace, and Tee

waddled over as well, chirping “Kwee kwee” as it went.

“You’re here too, Wayne?”

“Y-Yeah. Long time no see, Brooks...”

“This is perfect! I brought a gift for us to eat!!!”

She’d noticed that he was carrying something on his back. It turned out to be a very plump wild boar.

“I-I don’t...” Lacey was about to impulsively speak her true feelings and tell him she didn’t want it, but then calmly shook her head. *I shouldn’t. That’s not a good thing to do. Brooks thought this through in his own way.*

Just like when I got the dish from Cedric, I should start by accepting his goodwill. She raised her head. “Thank you, Br—”

“GRR-OIIIIIIIIINK!”

“I accidentally forgot to kill it!!!”

“How do you accidentally forget that?!”

“—ooks,” Lacey finished. Her focus had slipped for a moment. *Oh right.* It had been a few months, so she’d totally forgotten—or more like, she’d actively tried to forget. Brooks was just *too* massive.

The wild boar got up and shook with rage. It oinked loudly as if snorting “You bastard!” and struck its four legs against the floor. Then it faced Brooks.

Brooks had called it a wild boar, but its excessively long tusks clearly indicated that it was a monster. It must have been a cut above any ordinary boar in terms of strength.

“Hm?” But Brooks just stared down at the boar, his arms folded.

“S-Squee...”

Lacey felt sorry for the poor thing. The scary thing was, Brooks was always this daunting.

With its options limited, the wild boar searched around for the weakest member of the party to target.

It caught sight of Lacey. She was pulling down the brim of her big hat and swaying, and when the boar looked her in the eye, she blinked in surprise. It would start by taking down the weakest link. That was the wild boar's preferred approach, which had led it to triumph in many tight situations. Unfortunately, the boar hadn't realized that this party didn't *have* any weak links.

The second it grunted, "Grr-oink!" and tensed up its forelegs in preparation to lunge, the boar sensed extreme murderous intent. It was cold-blooded to the point of ruthlessness. It came not from the girl, but from the man standing beside her. He'd looked like just some blond-haired pretty boy, but he cast a shadow of death. The wild boar was prepared for the worst. It reversed itself mid-jump and made a stupendous getaway.

"GRR-OINNNNNNK!!!" It was probably grunting some parting shot.

"That boar had an alarmingly good sense of when to run from danger."

"I hope it doesn't attack the village."

"It went off in the opposite direction, and the village has monster wards anyway. It should be fine."

"My gift's gone!!!"

That was beside the point.

Just then, Tee slowly walked over to Lacey's feet since it had just woken up and was too drowsy to fly. Brooks took notice. He deftly extended an arm, swiftly grabbed Tee by the head, and leered at it as he sat.

"This might not be enough to fill your stomach, but..."

"NKWEEEEEEEEEE?!"

"Cut it out! Anything but that!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

* * *

She hadn't realized that she was capable of shouting so loud. Lacey sank down to the floor and watched as Brooks devoured a mountain of food.

"I haven't eaten your cooking in a long while, Wayne! Still tastes great!!!"

"Yeah? Good to hear..."

A full-course dinner with a generous amount of vegetables was laid out on the table. Food disappeared off the edges of the plates. Although the chair that Brooks was sitting in was normal-size, it practically looked like he'd mistakenly sat down in a child-size chair.

When Lacey had seen Tee's appetite before, she'd been reminded of Brooks. But seeing him in person, she remembered that he was on a completely different scale.

With one hand, Wayne took off the kerchief covering his hair—who knows where he'd gotten that from. The apron tied around his waist looked strangely good on him. In fact, it looked *too* good on him.

To begin with, Wayne was a child of nobility. The only reason he was so adept at household chores was because the people assembled to vanquish the Demon King were all hacks.

Every last one of them was only interested in themselves. Training was the only thing Brooks ever had on his mind. Of course, when his turn to cook came around, he'd strike his chest and say, "Just leave it to me!", but the resulting dish was always monsters barbecued whole. Even he was puzzled by the flavor, but he never improved. He *couldn't* improve.

Wayne's old companions had been an assortment of clumsy oafs disguised as competent experts. Depending on the task, they could produce astonishing outcomes. But when it came to the traveling side of things, there was no bigger bunch of good-for-nothings. Lacey, being who she was, could use grander magic than anyone else, but was otherwise so extremely passive that Wayne spent every day worrying that she'd quietly die in a corner when he wasn't looking.

In any case, Wayne was the most flexible and competent person among them.

At first, he'd taken over responsibilities just because he didn't have a choice, but he'd gradually discovered that it rather suited him. Even now, he was quite thrilled about putting on an apron and getting to work, but he was trying not to let it show on his face. Brooks was a bigger eater than Lacey, so it was all the more worth cooking for him.

Meanwhile, Lacey carefully eyed Brooks with apprehension.

They'd traveled together for a year, so she knew that he wasn't a bad person. He had a loud voice, to be sure, but on the inside, he was a blithe and courageous man. Even still, she shrank back.

The whole party was precious to Lacey, and she held the memories of them dear, but Wayne was the only one among them with whom she could relax around while interacting.

"Um...it's been a while, Brooks."

"Yeah!!! Good to see you!!!" Huge breadcrumbs flew out of his mouth.

Lacey quietly increased her distance.

"Brooks, use your inside voice," said Wayne, sitting backward in his chair and setting his arms on the backrest.

"Oh right. Sorry about that."

His voice would crescendo without him even realizing it, but if he paid some attention, he could moderate it better than most people. Even then, he was loud enough to make people turn around in surprise.

"And sorry to you too, little bird. You looked like a tasty morsel."

"Kwee kwee kwee kwee kwee!"

"It's quivering. Please don't do that."

"Hm? Oh, okay. Huh?! Lacey, there's something funny going on with your head. You've got two big lumps growing out of it!!!"

Lacey quickly patted her own head in alarm. It was still done up in the hairstyle that Wayne had invented. She'd hidden it with her hat, but then had given her hat to the cowering Tee, so it was now completely exposed. Hearing her hair be compared to lumps made Lacey quietly go red.

She trembled and bit her lip. "Wayne, please, undo it. I wanna die... I wanna disappear..."

"Come on, don't die. Brooks, pick your words better. Of *course* they're not lumps. These are *cute*."

"They're cute! Yeah, they looked tasty, so that's what I thought. Looking

cute!”

“I can’t take this anymore...”

Brooks was like this all the time, so Lacey still didn’t feel very comfortable dealing with him.

To tell the truth, Wayne had dressed up Lacey’s hair in the hopes of getting her to be a little more style-savvy, but his timing couldn’t have been worse. He heaved a sigh. He undid Lacey’s hairstyle as she sniffled and made herself smaller, then made a wry smile at how rowdy the mansion had gotten. It was like they were back traveling together again.

“So, what brings you here?”

“Sorry about not having a gift for you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t get what makes you so hung up on gifts anyway.”

“Well, you know how you two stayed in the capital? It’s been a while, so I was curious about how my old companions were doing. But Lacey wasn’t at home, and I heard that Wayne had disappeared to who-knows-where.”

“I didn’t disappear. I’m on leave.”

“So I decided to follow Wayne’s scent!”

“That’s so scary, I could die.”

Brooks bared his white teeth and heartily smacked his own strapping chest, but Wayne sunk his head into his hand.

“So you wanted to know if we were okay? Sorry to worry you. But y’know, you should send a letter before visiting someone. Although, Lacey didn’t tell anyone about moving out. That was a bad move.”

He addressed the first half to Brooks, and the second half to Lacey.

While checking over her hair now that Wayne had let it down and it was back to its normal weight, Lacey drooped. “I’m sorry, Brooks.”

“Nah, it’s my bad! Wayne’s right. I thought about it for a second, but then figured it’d take too long. But people have really gotta do things in order!”

In other words, he thought it'd be faster to run than to write a letter. *That's so like Brooks*, Lacey thought with a smidgen of cheer.

Lacey believed that nobody had any interest in her. Wayne was a much bigger softy and busybody than other people, so he'd been coming all the way out to Plume Village to make sure she was still alive. But she wasn't sure about her other companions.

Although, on second thought, if Lacey sent letters to them, they would all be certain to answer her. But there was a nagging anxiety in the recesses of her heart. *What if they don't care?* That was why when she'd sat in front of a piece of paper, she'd only been able to write the first letter of the recipient's name before being unable to continue. Before she knew it, the ink on her pen dried up.

But she felt that it was rude of her to have believed this. She should've realized that disappearing while they weren't looking would make them worry more.

"I knew about it too. Sorry for not being considerate enough to you."

"Y-You don't have to apologize, Wayne."

"Yeah, Wayne! If I had known, I'd have brought a housewarming gift that wouldn't run away! Damn, you guys are cold!" Brooks then gave a roar of laughter. "Since neither of you were in the capital, I figured you'd gone off together somewhere!"

"I'm really sorry. Come to think of it, I'll write a letter to everyone. It'll be a bit late, though." She did have a stationery set stowed away in the desk in the study.

"That'll be good." Wayne smiled softly and patted Lacey's head. This was a normal occurrence, so she let it happen—until she noticed Brooks's blue eyes staring. She suddenly got embarrassed, shook her head, and lightly smacked Wayne's hand off for good measure before retreating.

The plates on the dining table were eaten clean before they knew it. Seeming to think that the lion wasn't a bad guy after all, Tee hopped across the table and wagged its red-with-tinges-of-gold tail in front of Brooks, asserting itself. Lacey

scolded it for its poor manners, and it dejectedly jumped up onto her shoulders.

Brooks, being who he was, rubbed his belly in satisfaction. However, Lacey and Wayne's experience traveling with him told him that this amount of food was hardly enough to fill his stomach.

"So then, Brooks. You didn't have any special reason for coming?"

Brooks had said he was curious about how his companions were going. He was the most lively and sociable member of the party. Brooks grinned broadly and gave an affirmative answer. "Pretty much!"

Lacey and Wayne exchanged glances, then broke out into smiles. It had only been a few months since the three of them had seen each other, but it felt like it'd been much longer.

They moved aside the plates from the main course and next laid out tea and snacks. The group conversed enthusiastically while munching on yummy treats. At the time of the party's disbandment, Lacey had told her companions about her pending marriage, so when she informed Brooks that the engagement had been canceled, Brooks's naturally wide eyes grew even wider in astonishment.

Receiving the name Aster. The reason she'd come to Plume Village. And lastly, the events that had happened since...

Brooks was a surprisingly good listener.

He made emphatic interjections, nodded deeply, and expressed surprise. It even made her feel good to talk.

It hadn't been that long, not even a year, but she was newly reminded of how chaotic it had all been. Lacey spoke clumsily, but she was still frenetically stringing words together. Wayne watched her with a gentle gaze.

All right, then.

It didn't take that long, but expressing herself was very nerve-racking. Lacey's cheeks had gone red, and she was slowly sucking in air and blowing it out. Her throat was completely parched, so she took a long sip of the black tea that Wayne had brewed. The taste was lighter than usual—he must have adjusted it to Lacey's preferences. Although she was aware that it was poor manners, she

drank it all in one go. It was delicious.

The following silence was mortifying. The embarrassment of talking only about herself had caught up with her as well.

“Good for you, really.” Brooks’s lionlike face wrinkled into an open-mouthed smile that made even the scar on his cheek look pleasant. “When we disbanded and you told us that you were getting married, I was curious what kind of guy you’d be getting with. It seemed like Wayne knew, but Dana and Rosie looked shocked out of their wits.”

Lacey wasn’t sure how to respond, so she made an expression halfway between an awkward smile and a grimace. This was weirdly embarrassing. Wayne pretended not to notice.

“Th-That’s enough about me. How have you been, Brooks?” she asked, recalling what he’d asked the king for. As far as she knew, Brooks had gone back to his hometown by the ocean with the intention of adding to his list of martial accomplishments.

Before answering Lacey’s question, Brooks made a deep hum. He set his large, bulky hands under his chin, straightened his mouth, and lowered his eyebrows.

“Lacey, you started an anything shop, right?”

“Y-Yes...” Her voice dropped a little. “Though I haven’t had enough customers to say I’ve really gotten off the ground...”

“All right.” Brooks assertively slapped his knee. “I’ve got a problem that’s been giving me a bit of a headache. I’ll pay you three gold coins. How about it? Wanna try getting me out of this jam?”

Brooks stuck out three fingers. Lacey just blinked at him.



The first response was a sigh from Wayne. “Brooks, the fact that you’re offering gold coins means it’s coming straight out of your reward money.”

“That obvious, huh?”

“And let me guess, you just chose the amount of money you’ve got in your wallet right now.”

“Wa ha ha, guilty on both counts!”

Naturally, they’d received much more reward money than that for defeating the Demon King, but it was rare to see *silver* coins used for payment, let alone *gold*.

He’d probably decided that taking all the money he’d gotten was a bit excessive and had instead shoved a handful of coins into his wallet because he couldn’t be bothered to count. It certainly sounded like the kind of crude estimation that Brooks would do.

“Er, gold coins? Gold coins...”

With that much money, Lacey could have a room at the inn she’d been staying at in the capital for six whole months, board not included. Lacey reflexively gave Brooks a doubtful look.

“...aren’t really something you should spend so easily, I think...”

“Really? I’m in a real tight spot, though. I think it’s a reasonable amount.”

Of course, Lacey had no right to object when she’d donated magnitudes more of her reward money to the church without a second thought.

As for the problem that Brooks was referring to, that remained a mystery.

Mulling over whether to accept his request or not, Lacey absentmindedly clutched the miniaturized staff in her bag. But she quickly shook her head. Lacey had a bad habit of letting her immediate urge to refuse take over. She’d been so motivated to try her best just minutes ago.

This would be the third person...technically, the second person plus the phoenix, to commission her. Since he was a former companion she trusted, this was an excellent opportunity to gain experience. Lacey unconsciously slanted

her unconfident, drooping eyebrows into a focused angle and stiffened her lips.

“Please tell me the details of the job you’d like done.”

“Ooh, now you’re sounding professional!”

Wayne placed another serving of snacks onto the table and slapped Brooks’s back as if scolding him for making fun of her. But of course, he didn’t even flinch.

“Hrmmm.” Brooks folded his burly arms and thought. “So it’s like this. I’ve got a big problem.”

“So I understand.”

“Where do I start...”

Brooks’s nose wrinkled in thought. Then he pounded his fist into his hand. Lacey had a bad feeling about this.

* * *

Lacey would soon come to regret her decision.

“I-Isn’t Brooks *too* fast?! Is he really human?!”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Lacey rode behind Wayne on his faithful steed and watched as Brooks dashed off and became a speck in the distance. She could even hear him laughing boisterously, “Dah hah hah hah hah!”

They were on a horse, and he was going on foot. But frighteningly enough, he was faster.

After gulping down all his tea and stuffing his face with snacks, Brooks had exclaimed, “Instead of explaining, it’ll be faster for you to just see for yourself! So let’s head out!!!” and forcefully stood up from his chair. It had almost sounded like the chair made a screech of relief once it had finally been released from its agony.

Since she’d already decided to take up his request, whatever it was, Lacey had been unable to go back on her word. Before she knew it, she was making preparations to travel. She’d completely zoned out, but she was so used to

going on journeys that she could pack without even paying attention. It was startling.

Wayne had watched as Lacey hurriedly got ready, folding his arms and looking sullen for a while. It wasn't because he was displeased by the idea of traveling with Brooks—in the back of his head, he was counting the number of vacation days he had. "All right." He'd nodded. "Brooks, I'm going too. But I'll only be able to spend two days at most."

"Of course! That won't be a problem!" Brooks had instantly responded and heartily smacked his own chest. One might say that he was literally and figuratively broad-minded.

Tee had been loitering on top of Lacey's head and by her feet. It had slanted its brows sharply and spread its wings. "NkwEEEEEEH!!!"

Lacey had thought it would be coming along, but apparently, it was insisting upon staying and protecting the mansion. She had some reservations about it, but monsters matured at a far quicker rate than humans. It could hardly be called a newborn anymore.

Tee had seemed to be extremely eager. "All right. Do a good job," Lacey had said, delicately poking Tee's beak. This would be its first mission. "If you're hungry, you can eat all the herbs you want," she'd told Tee as she waved goodbye.

Tee had chirped, "Kwee kwee" and danced in response. But at the time, nobody had noticed the shadowy figure that was glaring intently from afar with bated breath.

* * *

They had set off in no time flat.

Just as Lacey and Wayne had forgotten how loud Brooks was despite having gotten used to it on their quest, Brooks had forgotten how superhumanly strong he was. At first, he'd relentlessly pummeled attacking monsters, but eventually, the monsters seemed to sense his freakish aura and didn't come anywhere near.

Now that the Demon King was gone, no more demonkin would come into

being. They had more intelligence and tremendously greater strength than regular monsters. However, monsters that had no relationship to the Demon King, such as Tee, still existed here and there. While journeying, one would have to first be cautious of these creatures.

It was peaceful and all not having monsters attack, and the journey was more relaxing when they didn't have to fight...or so it should have been, if not for having to keep sight of Brooks.

Wayne's steed was well-trained and one of the top five horses in the whole of Croix, but it wasn't up against another horse. It was up against a *monstrosity*. Neither horse nor rider could ever best Brooks in a race.

"Wayne, I'm going to use magic, so I think the balance will be thrown off temporarily!"

"Got it!"

Lacey took her staff out of her bag. The situation was changing every second, so she swiftly chanted a spell. The next moment, Lacey's and Wayne's bodies became slightly lighter.

"Whoa!" She'd had to let both hands go and now flailed them. She hurriedly grabbed onto Wayne.

"Nicely done," Wayne looked back at her and murmured.

She could've eliminated the effects of gravity entirely, but if she did that, there was a possibility of just getting blown away, and the horse wouldn't know that anyone was riding it. It required a careful balance. No ordinary mage would be able to learn how to control it overnight.

"Hold on tight, Lacey!"

Instead of replying, Lacey tightened her grip on Wayne's waist.

Feeling the touch of her arms, Wayne didn't turn around and firmly gripped the reins. The horse took off like a shot, dashing against the wind. It left an endlessly lush and green prairie landscape behind in the dust.

* * *

"Whoa! Only about half a day away from Plume Village! We got here a lot

faster than I expected!” Brooks announced mirthfully. Wayne and Lacey stood behind him with very thin faces.

Lacey was feeding medicinal herbs to the horse they had been riding, as if to commend it for making it this far. The horse blew out its nose with a triumphant look.

They couldn’t force the horse to run nonstop, so they’d needed to take breaks about once an hour. Brooks had been understanding when they called to him to pause during these instances. Still, it was somewhat distressing to see a human who could keep pace with a horse over an extended period.

Brooks had always been far-fetched, but Lacey felt that the person she remembered wasn’t *quite* this superhuman. Maybe he’d trained an excessive amount over the last few months. Or perhaps without the rest of the party besides Lacey and Wayne around, his brakes were going even more haywire than before.

Lacey finished feeding and watering the horse with Wayne and clutched her staff as she stared dubiously at Brooks. Unaware of her gaze, Brooks looked around for the prairie shrine—and found it.

The shrine was large enough to fit a few people inside and stood alone by itself, seeming forgotten by all. Green moss grew in clumps on its outer wall.

“This is it.” Brooks gave it a light thump. “Though I don’t use it much myself.”

All across the world, there were magic ruins of unknown origins. Among these were magic formulas that only certain individuals were allowed to use, which would transport people to specific locations.

Shrines like this were scattered everywhere, but not even Lacey could replicate teleportation magic. As a rule, only people of influence could use them, but town cornerstones like Brooks were permitted in some cases as well. However, they were not permitted to go just anywhere and had a limit to where they could visit. Brooks could probably use the shrines that were closest to Thalattadini and Plume Village.

“Okay, go on in.”

There were three of them plus one horse. When Brooks came in with his

oversized body, they were crammed tight.

Inside the shrine, Lacey was stuck to Wayne like glue. Her cheek was flat against his chest, which felt rather awkward. Then, noticing that Wayne's hand was wrapped around her back in a protective fashion, she reflexively hunched her tiny body even smaller and went stiff.

Lacey closed her eyes tight, and by the time she opened them again, the smell of ocean water tickled her nose.

It was considerably brighter than moments ago.

Light had streamed past her closed eyelids. She slowly opened her eyes in the once-dark shrine, with Wayne's hand still around her, and looked at the scenery outside. There was a sound.

"Ah..."

Waves were crashing in their direction. Beyond a cliff, there was an endless expanse of blue ocean, which reflected the sun's rays like glitter.

Lacey had seen the ocean plenty of times before on their quest, but she'd never gotten used to it. It was vast, way too big, and seemed like it would swallow her up whole.

"Great view, right?!"

Brooks had bounded out of the shrine and waved his arms toward them from the top of the cliff. Behind him, they could see a town with multicolored roofs looking out upon the ocean.

"That's the ocean town, Thalattadini! My home turf!!!"

* * *

The town was filled with *noise*.

Someone would shout something, and another person would shout back. The stalls along the streets were bustling. There were places to get simple meals, tool shops, and even florists. Under the scorching sun, all kinds of people—old and young, men and women alike—jumbled together, passed by, and then more came along to take their place.

At a distance, the colorful roofs had made an impression. But surprisingly, even the walls of the buildings were decorated with red and green, blue and yellow, each boasting their individuality.

“This is amazing.” Wayne led his horse by the reins, casting his eyes around as he walked. Lacey nodded in agreement.

“Bwugh!” She’d been distracted by her surroundings and wasn’t looking where she was going, and had accidentally bumped into someone. Lacey wasn’t good at walking in crowds. There was a whole swarm of people around them.

“There’s a lot of tourists here too. Be careful.”

“All ri— Gwuh!”

“Lacey, you okay?”

“I’m okay-ay.”

“...”

Naturally, this wasn’t her first time going to a brand-new city, but it was rare to come across such a unique place. The smell of seawater and blazing sunlight came on strong. Perhaps people were acting so lively in order to beat the heat.

A townspeople who was well-tanned like Brooks chortled loudly right next to Lacey. She jumped up in surprise.

Seeing this, Wayne wondered whether he should hold her hand and look out for her, but then managed to turn away. *She’s not that much of a child.* He himself knew that he was babying Lacey too much.

But then again... Wayne mulled as he led his horse by the reins.

Ignorant of Wayne’s inner turmoil, Lacey’s mouth hung open. It was like there were tons of Brooks all around her. *So is Brooks’s voice so loud because of the place where he grew up?* Her big eyes grew even wider as she fixedly stared up like a cat. The recipient of her gaze had, for some reason, laughed heartily and flung off his upper layer the moment they got to town. Now he was showing off his rippling muscles.

Is it because of the heat? Lacey and Wayne could get by with wind magic, but Brooks couldn’t use magic at all. *But is that any reason to suddenly go around*

half-naked?

Lacey had a feeling that she'd get sucked into a rabbit hole if she thought about it too hard, so she quietly diverted her attention as well as her gaze. Still, it was true that Thalattadini and Plume had completely different climates. Lacey had learned on their quest that as the landscape changed, so did its climate and the kinds of people that lived there.

"Huh? It's pretty quiet over there."

"Hm? Well, there's stuff going on."

As Lacey's group proceeded down the main street, they could see the ocean through the gaps in the buildings since the town was built on multiple elevations. It had seemed like a bustling city, but strangely enough, only a quiet wind blew through the port. All they could see was a few small fishing boats chugging out steam as they set off.

However, since it was a given that people would gather where others were, Lacey didn't really think anything was wrong. She'd just found it unusual for there to be so few people at the harbor despite it being an ocean town and had mused aloud, but Brooks's response was rather evasive.

While she felt like something was off, Lacey and her group arrived at the center of town. A giant bronze statue towered there. It was Brooks.

"..."

"..."

Under the Brooks statue, the real Brooks made the same pose and smiled, showing white teeth. Lacey was bewildered, and deep wrinkles formed between Wayne's brows.

"Um, Wayne, how am I supposed to react?"

"Even I don't know this time."

"I guess not..."

This was a dilemma. Even Wayne, her last resort, was stumped.

"Ooh! Welcome back, mighty Brooks!"

But fortunately for them, one of the townsfolk immediately noticed his presence. A crowd of people quickly formed. Lacey was squeezed in tight, as was Wayne, who was using concealment magic to change his appearance. Before he even had a moment to decide whether to hold her hand, Wayne and Lacey were both swept into the throng. Wayne's horse whinnied and ran.

Instead of hollering for an explanation, Lacey pitifully squealed, "Eek!" and clutched her staff with both hands.

* * *

"Darn, sorry about that!" Brooks scratched his head and apologized.

Lacey and Wayne gave him a tepid response as they headed toward their destination. They were climbing up a long cliffside staircase. They weren't able to bring along Wayne's horse, so they had stopped by Brooks's residence first. Around now, the horse was probably eating hay in the stable with an exhausted look on its face.

"You're really popular, Brooks." Lacey meant exactly what she'd murmured. She didn't mean it derisively at all. Lacey couldn't even imagine being openly welcomed by townspeople like that.

"Yeah. It's my hometown, after all. That bronze statue had been raised before I'd even gotten back from our quest. I was pretty stumped too at first, but now whenever I get back, I make the same pose. They all love it when I do that!"

Ignoring what had happened with his gift for Lacey, he was a very generous individual. In any case, the place they were going through now was at the summit of the colorful city, and his problem reportedly lay there.

He'd told them *where* the problem was, but he still hadn't said *what* it was. Figuring that they'd find out anyway when they arrived, Lacey stretched out her short legs with a huff of effort and climbed up the stairs carved from stone.

They arrived at a startlingly tranquil place. It was like all that noise earlier was an illusion. There was a sweeping view of the city from the spot. It was shudderingly high up, but she didn't mind that.

The blustery wind was just a bit sticky. It felt strange—in a good way, if she had to say.

There was a lone building in the hollowed cliff face. In contrast with the vibrant town, the building in front of them was reinforced with plain timber.

“Seems like a calming place.” Wayne’s murmured remark was easily heard here.

“Right?” Brooks cheerfully puffed with pride. “This is my dojo! Go ahead, step inside!!!!”

* * *

This was the first time Lacey had heard the word “dojo,” but it appeared to mean a “training ground.”

Brooks was a warrior, and he had a special training method. His martial art, dubbed “qigong,” was unlike either Lacey’s magic or Dana’s miracles. His source of power was the soul within his very own body. All people had souls, and apparently by expanding one’s own and turning it steely, one could toughen their body’s offense and defense. This was why Brooks could run faster than a horse.

He’d explained it multiple times in the past during their quest, but Lacey just couldn’t get a sense of it at all.

Magic was a technique that rewrote things outside one’s body with formulas, and what Brooks did was the opposite. It was likely that the more one was versed in magic, the less compatible they would be with the martial art.

Apparently in the dojo, one had to take off one’s shoes and go barefoot. Savoring the strange sensation of walking directly on wood, Lacey peered around. Wayne was keeping his calm better than Lacey, but his eyes betrayed a deep fascination. He seemed to be enjoying this.

In the dojo, there were a number of posts with straw wrapped around them, likely meant to resemble people. Pupils wearing steel gauntlets punched the straw posts again and again, letting out a *kiai* each time. It had been quiet outside the dojo, but inside, it was full of energy. Battle cries of “SEI! SEI!” rang all around.

“Brooks, the wish that you were granted was to establish your own school of martial arts, right?”

“Yup, you got it,” Brooks confirmed Wayne’s question. The pupils had noticed Lacey there, but Brooks continued to explain. “I’m pretty sure you know this, but in Croix, you need authorization from the state to establish a school. Can’t let just anyone invent their own cheap art. Ordinarily, they’d never give permission to a guy as young as me, even though I *did* help take down the Demon King as part of the hero’s party.”

However, his wish had been approved. Lacey recalled each of her companions’s wishes. Just as she’d wished to become free, the others had likewise supplicated the king to grant their desires.

Huh...? A question suddenly formed in her mind.

“Anyway, Lacey, what I wanted to ask you for is...”

But when Brooks continued to speak, Lacey tensed her brow. She could think about that later. For now, she had to focus on what was right in front of her.

Brooks’s usually cheerful countenance turned serious for once. “Not sure how to say this... Well, it’ll be faster if you just have a look.” Even his voice dropped.

Lacey made eye contact with Wayne. Brooks was acting so different than usual, it was making *them* nervous too. He was making the same expression as he had when Lacey commented that the harbor wasn’t very populated.

Brooks called over a pupil. “Is it still like that?”

The young pupil gave a meek nod. The fact that he knew what simply “it” referred to showed that there was a common understanding between them.

“Bring it over. You can stuff it in a cloth for now.”

“Yes,” the pupil responded briefly, nodded again, and quickly went out.

He returned carrying a large cloth bundle, although not so large that Lacey wouldn’t be able to hold it. It was making some kind of clunking sound.

“All right.” Brooks waved one arm, then plumped down on the floor. Lacey and Wayne followed his example. Brooks received the cloth bundle with his large open palms, then set it on the floor with a serious look. “Just brace yourselves.”

That sounded foreboding. Lacey took a deep gulp.

And when the string slowly came untied, what she saw was...

“B-Blech...!”

Lacey wept.

Tears pooled in the outer corners of her eyes, and she desperately covered her mouth with both hands.

What hit her was an intense *smell*.

Not just any smell, but a stench.

Inside the bag was a plain gauntlet. It was the same kind as what all the pupils were using. Wayne didn't react as strongly as Lacey, but he was shutting his eyes and scrunching his brow. Once Brooks saw their reactions, he quietly wrapped the cloth back up.

“It's just like you see,” Brooks said, then shook his head. “Or smell, actually.”

That wasn't a proper turn of phrase, but they could see what Brooks was getting at. Well, not exactly *see*.

“My martial art lets you change your body to steel, well, permanently. Once you change, you can toss the gauntlets. But that's not the case for new learners. If they get injured, they're screwed. So first, they have to get used to these gauntlets and mentally picture their bodies changing.”

The party had always known Brooks as being a bare-handed combat specialist, but he'd probably honed his technique by the time he joined them.

“Like you saw in town, I'm pretty popular around here. So thankfully, I get a constant stream of newcomers. But this smell is slowly drifting into the town.”

“Despite the good ventilation and distance from downtown?”

“You make some good points, Wayne, but the wind in this town is kinda unique. At night, the wind blows down from the shore toward the water. It's called a land breeze. But in Thalattadini, the wind picks up the city scents and blows it all into the ocean. Then during the day, the opposite happens. The wind blows from the water to the shore and brings all the scents that accumulated overnight with it. So the town's smell gets mixed in there too, ultimately.”

Lacey knew that this was called “sea breeze” during the day and “land breeze” during the night, but she hadn’t heard much about the smells getting carried along.

“We know why it happens. There’s a humongous kraken that’s nested in the ocean near Thalattadini. It sucks up the wind and smell through its skinny beak and then blows it back out... I guess it’s like it’s yawning?”

“Do krakens yawn?”

These were a species of giant octopus monster. Their bodies were covered with suckers, and at first look, they looked huge and terrifying, but about the only thing they did was stick to fishing boats that accidentally came too close. They were a relatively harmless kind of monster.

“Sorry, I’m speaking broadly.” Brooks scratched his head and continued his explanation. “In any case, the kraken’s the source of the stench that’s drifting through the town, but we can’t exterminate it. It’s been there for a long time, and it’s like the guardian deity of Thalattadini. Its presence keeps the weaker monsters away.”

It was like a give-and-take relationship. Brooks ruffled his hair and made a stressed face. He wasn’t used to explaining things.

“The stench has stayed around the harbor so far, so we’ve been managing. You saw it yourself, Lacey. Remember how there was barely anyone in the harbor compared to the main street?”

“Y-Yes.”

“They *can* go, but they just *won’t* go. The townspeople are being considerate and say they don’t mind it, but the tourist industry is pretty big here. I really want to avoid the town losing its good reputation. The kraken is mostly dormant for half the year, and active for the other half. It seems like it’s still asleep right now, but once it enters its active period, the winds will get even stronger.”

“Which means that the entire town is going to reek.”

“The shops near the harbor are already taking a hit to business. It wasn’t too bad when it was just me, but the more pupils I get, the worse of an effect it has.

Normally this would never happen, but I guess the kraken and my school are a bad combination.”

Brooks sat cross-legged and hung his head as he groaned. The steel gauntlet, still lying on the floor wrapped in cloth, was by no means an isolated case.

Lacey had involuntarily teared up earlier, but now felt ashamed at acting so terribly rudely. After all, this was a symbol of the pupils’ hard work. Besides, none of them *wanted* to wear it. Even now, they were drilling themselves with the goal of removing the gauntlet.

Behind Brooks, youths in martial arts uniforms were diligently hitting the straw posts.

“It’s been my dream for years to open up a dojo in this town. I’m not about to give up that easily. But it’s not a matter of determination... Dawn Witch, Lacey. Or actually, I guess you’re Lacey Aster now. My request is that you get rid of the stench on this gauntlet. How ’bout it? Will you accept?”

* * *

“So what’s the word?”

“U-urghhh...”

Lacey gripped the railing with both hands and looked down at the azure ocean. A long sigh unconsciously escaped her mouth as she watched the waves crash forward and recede. Wayne’s blond hair rustled in the sea breeze.

Of course I’ll accept! You can leave it to me!

Lacey had responded to Brooks’s request without a moment’s hesitation for once. It still hurt where she’d assertively smacked her chest.

She’d been surprised at herself. Brooks, and in fact, the entire town was in trouble. She wanted to do something about it—*had* to do something about it. She was bursting with motivation. But when the pupils had suddenly gathered and showered her with attention and loud cheers, she had jolted up.

I don’t know who she is, but the mighty Brooks has brought someone who will teach us how to resolve this situation!

“Will you guys get back to training?!” Annoyed, Brooks had admonished

them. But their excitement couldn't be quelled. Amid the teeming crowd, Lacey had clutched her instantly enlarged staff and trembled violently. She couldn't stop jittering up and down. The tremendous weight of their expectations was threatening to crush her immediately.

But after Wayne had patted her back and told her to calm down, she'd finally become able to breathe again. Wayne's palm made her feel relaxed.

She'd taken a deep breath, and then yelled, "I'll do my best!" as loud as she could. That had been a little under an hour ago.

"I didn't accept without having a strategy in mind," Lacey whispered so quietly that she could barely be heard over the sound of the wind.

"Okay," Wayne responded, prompting her to continue.

"I really do want to help Brooks out of the trouble he's having, and I came up with a few ideas based on what he'd told us. So I had thought I could work something out."

What had happened at Plume Village had given Lacey some encouragement. Had Brooks come any earlier, she wouldn't have been able to accept so confidently.

With a softer look on his face, Brooks had gotten the pupils to settle down and then promptly given Lacey more details. The more she heard, the more her face went blank. Brooks hadn't just been wringing his hands doing nothing. He'd done thorough cleaning to get rid of the stench and removed the gauntlets at night since the kraken built up its stink during the day...

Ultimately, Lacey had suppressed every trace of emotion on her face and sweat was dripping down her back. Unable to keep watching her like this, Wayne had brought her outside to take a break, and now she was staring at the ocean despairingly.

"B-Brooks already did everything I thought ooof!"

Thought of, thought of, thought of...

In front of them, seagulls flew along and squawked as if they were laughing at Lacey's echoing voice. It was probably okay for Lacey to cry. In fact, she was

tearing up a little already.

“And I thought about using wind magic to blow the stench so far away that the kraken won’t even matter! But it’s pointless if there’s nobody around who can perform that kind of spell! It’s too far for me to keep coming here every time!”

“True...”

“So I thought about teaching the spell to one of the pupils who might have the aptitude for it, but Brooks’s martial arts and my magic are just too incompatible! If I carelessly teach a pupil, they might not be able to master qigong! And if that happened, I’d never be able to make up for it!”

“Y-Yeah...”

“And in the first place, it’s bizarre for the stench from gauntlets to cause this much trouble!” Lacey shouted, ramming her forehead into the handrail.

At this point, the only thing Wayne could do was watch over her.

“I think the reason lies with the incompatibility between magic and qigong. Brooks said that the kraken was yawning. But I think that it might be sucking up the magic that spreads through the air and circulating it through its body during the day, and then it spits it back out at night. So maybe the qigong and magic, which aren’t supposed to interact, are getting warped inside the kraken’s body.”

All Lacey could do was use magic to solve things. However, every possible method had been sealed off. There was absolutely nothing she could do. Lacey had felt that magic was all she had, but she hadn’t realized how useless she was when magic wasn’t an option.

“So then why not try making a magic artifact?”

An *artifact*.

The frustrating gap between what she wanted to do and what she was actually capable of was suffocating her, so Wayne’s suggestion was like a ray of hope. But she quickly shook her head.

“Yes, there are ways of imbuing a mana stone with wind magic, but the power

and range would be unavoidably reduced...”

Magic artifacts were tools that allowed anyone to use magic, created from mana stones produced in the bodies of monsters. However, since magic stones could only be imbued with simple formulas, they were inferior to an actual mage’s arts.

A warm breeze blew across Lacey’s cheeks.

“Sounds like you’re at a standstill.”

“Yeah...”

She unconsciously yanked down the brim of her hat with both hands. Ideas kept coming to mind, but each time, there would be some catch. It was hopelessly frustrating.

She wasn’t in it for the proposed reward, nor was she bothered by the idea of her anything shop getting a poor review so soon after its inception. She just wanted to assist Brooks’s wish, which was important enough that he’d asked the king to grant it. Besides that, she wanted his pupils to be able to train in peace without anything hanging over their heads.

She just wasn’t powerful enough.

Lacey couldn’t speak any longer. Wayne leaned back against the rail and stared up in the opposite direction at the colorful city streets.

“It’s tough. I know how amazing you are, Lacey. And I think you undervalue yourself too much. But I don’t think that me saying this will resonate at all with you.”

Lacey couldn’t give him a positive or negative response. All she could do was bite down on her lip.

“Your standards are just too high. Just ’cause you can’t do one thing, you end up thinking that you can’t do anything.”

“That’s not true...”

“Oh yeah? Then I’ll keep saying it. Listen to me. You’re amazing. You really are.”

“I’m not! I’m a magic maniac who can’t hold a decent conversation with anyone besides you and could easily die if you take your eyes off me! How is that amazing?!”

“Good point!”

He agreed with her more firmly than she’d expected. That did sting a little.

“W-Wahhh...”

“D-Don’t cry! You’ve got your ups and downs, but add them together and they balance out! And y’know what, nobody is all good or all bad. Sometimes a shortcoming can turn out to be an advantage.”

Wayne’s words always soothed Lacey. But she felt as if she couldn’t let herself be coddled. What was right, and what was mistaken? It was hard to express the feelings that had built up deep within her. Even so, Lacey desperately lifted her face to say *something*...

...and then a massive growl came from her stomach.

“...” She had wished the sound would get drowned out, but it had come across loud and clear.

“I see how it is,” Wayne gave a delayed acknowledgment and softly straightened his posture.

Then he vehemently grabbed the top of Lacey’s head with one hand. “You’re! Hungry!!! Aren’t you?!”

“AAAAAAH, you’re wrong! This is no time for me to sit down and EAAAAAAT! I would’ve been fine without eating a bite before, but over the last few days you’ve been making me meals, so my stomach just remembered the time and made a weird noise!”

“Oh, shut up. I wasn’t thinking hard enough. It’s way past noon! You wanted to think, so you skipped lunch? Yeah, I definitely couldn’t have seen *that* one coming. Fill your stomach and *then* think! Stuff yourself with all the seafood you can eat!”

“D-Don’t tug on my haaaaaat!”

And so she filled her stomach.

The town, which had stalls like those at festivals up the whole year round, reminded her a lot of Brooks.

“The kraken’s like their guardian deity, but they still eat octopus?! Is that allowed?!”

“I hear it freely offers the tips of its arms. Pretty generous of it.”

Lacey crammed her cheeks with peculiar balls that had a crunchy exterior and melty interior. Her face turned bright red from the extreme heat.

“And the grilled squid...isn’t squid supposed to be tougher? This is light and soft...”

“Apparently the trick is to heat it a certain way.”

Just watching the smoke sizzle off the iron plate made her feel like bursting out into a sweat. A delectable scent wafted across.

“I-I’ve never had this before! It’s lumpy and glossy... It’s beautiful and it’s delicious too, but I-I can’t eat all this!”

“Just eat as much as you want. I’ll finish off whatever you don’t.”

* * *

After Lacey had finished with a rice bowl featuring a red, jewellike seafood called ikura, Wayne carried her weighed-down body back to Brooks’s residence.

Satisfied in both heart and stomach, Lacey slept soundly on a borrowed bed. *But once she wakes up, she’ll probably start stressing out over Brooks’s request again,* Wayne thought, looking down at her with a soft expression.

Brooks’s residence faced the cliff that the dojo was on. Most buildings in Thalattadini were built on slopes that overlooked the ocean. So that the fishermen wouldn’t get lost, the town was marked by its variegated colors during the day. During the night, small mana stones placed throughout the town lit up.

Wayne noticed that the whole sky was turning dark outside the room’s window. He gently patted Lacey’s sleeping head, then made a bittersweet sigh and exited the room. As he did...

“Hey, Wayne. Is she asleep?” Brooks called out to him. He’d been restraining his volume as best he could since Wayne had told him to use an inside voice. Besides, Lacey had just fallen asleep on the other side of the wall.

Wayne nodded as he closed the door behind him. But Brooks kept standing in front of him, blocking his way.

“What?” he asked puzzledly.

Brooks held the neck of a bottle in one hand and two glasses in the other. “How about it? Wanna join me for once?” he grinned.

* * *

“We’ve never drunk together like this, have we?”

“True. You weren’t legal while we were on the quest.”

Wayne had still been seventeen a year ago. He couldn’t say it publicly, but he’d been a light drinker before turning of age. However, since the hero who was going to save the world couldn’t go around openly breaking the law, he’d made do with nonalcoholic beverages during their quest. It wasn’t a big deal for him to abstain.

Thus it was a strange feeling to be drinking with Brooks like this.

“This is a good opportunity! In celebration of Wayne’s adulthood and Lacey’s new life, I’m gonna get hammered!”

“Keep it in moderation. Besides, my birthday was months ago.”

“Cheers,” they both said. Their glasses made a pleasant clink when bumped together. They reclined in chairs on the balcony and looked up at the sky. The kraken was probably yawning around now. A calm breeze, the byproduct of the wind blowing from the land down to the shore, stroked Wayne’s cheek. It was warm, but not in an unpleasant way.

Chilled glasses and light appetizers. Some of life’s simple pleasures.

“How’s Lacey doing?”

“Still racking her head. I’m pretty sure she’s even dreaming about it. I heard her mumbling something.”

“Well darn, now I feel bad.”

“It’s fine. On the contrary, you had perfect timing. Lacey’s shyness is incorrigible.”

“I think Lacey probably doesn’t feel comfortable around me. You sure it wouldn’t have been better to get someone else?”

“All the more reason.”

Lacey had started her anything shop, but finding clients probably already had her stumped. That was where Brooks came in. As companions, she knew his general nature. At the same time, she wasn’t as relaxed around him as she was with Wayne. He wasn’t exactly like a client, but he was one nonetheless.

Depending on how one interpreted it, this could have been taken as an insult. But Brooks kept his glass raised and laughed raucously, taking no offense. The wine inside his glass splashed up.

“You really haven’t changed.”

Haven’t changed.

Wayne understood what Brooks was getting at and chose to hold his tongue. His actions were too meddlesome. He knew that Lacey wasn’t a child, but still treated her that way. He had figured that one of the party members would poke at him eventually for it, but hadn’t expected that Brooks would be the one.

Brooks was older than Wayne, more prudent than he looked, and was the cornerstone of the party. That was probably why he’d chosen not to say anything about it during their quest.

“Wayne, you love Lacey, don’t you?”

He wasn’t expecting that.

The wine he had been drinking caught in his throat. Wayne frowned and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He swallowed the feelings he couldn’t say out loud along with the wine and made an even more sullen face. He slowly set his glass back on the table.

“You’re mistaken.”

“Really?”

“Well, not exactly. I’ll admit that I feel a special way toward Lacey.”

But not even Wayne himself knew the name of what he was feeling.

Lacey was someone who needed his protection. It didn’t matter how much power she had, or that she was the country’s mage. Lacey was Lacey, and that was why.

The alcohol must have been hitting harder than usual. His face was terribly red as he simply muttered, “I’m not sure” and looked away. However, he quickly noticed how hot his cheeks were getting and wiped his face with one hand.

This aloof guy was red to the tips of his ears. Seeing him like this, Brooks made no attempt to tease him and simply nodded understandingly. “It happens.”

That was all. The subject of conversation quickly changed. They enjoyed the wine and each other’s company.

But that night, Wayne dreamed a little of the day he first met Lacey. It was a memory he really didn’t like to revisit.

* * *

She slept much more soundly than she’d expected. Lacey stretched in the morning light, bending to the right, and then left. She was feeling great. She could sleep anywhere, so crashing on a bed that wasn’t her own was no problem.

On the other hand, Wayne didn’t seem to be feeling too well. It was a stark contrast to Brooks, who’d energetically bounded out of the room while dragging Wayne by the collar.

“Wayne, were you drinking? That’s rare.”

“Yeah,” was all Wayne could muster.

When she saw how sleepy-eyed Wayne looked, Lacey decided to take charge and make breakfast. It was a chance to show her growth. She overcooked the fried eggs a little, but they were still passable.

After that, she headed back to the dojo and experimented.

She had wanted to stay and think for a while longer, but she was worried about the homestead back in Plume Village. She couldn't leave it unattended for too long. By the time evening fell, Lacey had packed her things back up. Wayne, who'd likewise packed up, had said he was headed on an expedition. Apparently there were some areas where monsters were becoming more active. When she'd asked if he'd be okay, he'd laughed and said that it was way better than fighting demonkin.

Brooks would be escorting Lacey back to Plume Village. She would've been fine on her own, but decided to accept his kind gesture.

Lacey and Wayne gazed at the town bathed in evening glow, reluctant to part from it. Brooks was out giving his pupils some last instructions, so they were waiting for him at the town's entrance. They'd been overwhelmed when they first arrived, but as they stood with their luggage on the ground next to them, they had a new appreciation for what a cheerful town it was.

"Lacey, the expedition might be pretty drawn out this time. I don't think I'll be able to visit you for a while."

"All right. Be careful." She only saw Wayne about once a month anyway, and there had been stretches when they didn't meet for whole months at a time. He had his own life to attend to.

"Don't burn yourself out."

"Okay..." She nodded.

"Seriously, don't burn yourself out," he repeated in a graver tone, making Lacey jerk up. How had he known that her mind was completely preoccupied by Brooks's request already? "Lacey, give yourself some time. Take breaks and *eat* during them. Your homework is to grow some flowers and appreciate your garden, and learn at least one thing about being stylish."

"Yes, mom..."

"I'm not your mom! At least say dad!"

He actually let it slide.

They still had some time until Brooks was due to meet them. Lacey spent it looking for a souvenir for Tee. After all, this was its first time staying home alone. It might have been wailing, “Kwee kwee” at this very moment. She was thinking of getting something it could eat, but she still wasn’t familiar with Tee’s tastes. She consulted with Wayne as she went around to the different shops, and afterward, Lacey left Thalattadini. The goodbyes she exchanged with Wayne were as brief as always.

She’d come on horseback and went back on foot.

Fortunately, Brooks had the good sense to not leave Lacey in the dust to walk by herself. It was a time-consuming but peaceful journey.

She hadn’t been back to her house in days. After parting with Brooks, Lacey headed to her mansion by herself. When she arrived, something sauntered out of the shadows. It was Tee.

“Nkweeeeeee!!!”

“Tee, I’m...back?”

She’d thought this would be an emotional reunion, but then noticed that Tee was riding something.

“Grr-oink.”

It was the wild boar.

For some reason, Tee was sitting on top of the wild boar that Brooks had presented to Lacey. It had its wings spread open, moving them to the left and right in the direction that the pair wanted to go. What had brought this on?



In point of fact, on the day that Lacey's group had departed, there had been a set of eyes intently glaring at them. These had belonged to the wild boar.

Lacey looked down at the two wordlessly, with no idea what to even say. In front of her, Tee and the wild boar commenced a skit.

The wild boar that had gotten scared and run away from Wayne and Brooks was a veteran, and its pride wouldn't stand for retreating in disgrace. The village had monster wards, so it couldn't go near. But the mansion was out of the effective range. It glared at Lacey's group as they left and jumped out to wreak havoc. Its target was the medicinal herb garden.

However, Tee stopped it in its tracks. It loudly squawked, "Kwee!" and unleashed a kick, making the wild boar stagger. The boar charged. Tee spread its wings in an intimidating gesture. The boar shook its head and bellowed, "Grr-oink!" They fought, and as the sun went down, a bond of friendship formed.

"I see." She nodded. "I don't really understand it, but oh well."

Lacey was quicker than most to accept things she didn't understand. She'd always lived according to someone else's directions, so if she was told something, she'd end up saying "oh well" and just going along with it. This was also the reason she was frankly thinking *Whatever, I guess*, in response to this development.

* * *

And so Lacey and her two pets began living together, and Lacey set to work trying to create an artifact.

It was much like when she'd cultivated the medicinal herbs for the phoenix.

Wayne's hint lingered in her mind. Mana stones could only learn simple magic, so she'd rejected the idea, citing the difficulty in inventing an artifact that could resolve this kind of situation all by itself. But was that really the case?

The only way to find out was through experimenting. This one didn't work. That one didn't work either. Magic could create any number of new things, but imbuing it into a mana stone was a different story.

Time just passed by.

* * *

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Tee riding the wild boar, gallivanting around the mansion.

It would be inconvenient if it got footprints everywhere, so she asked it to wipe off its feet at the entrance. Starting the next day, the boar's feet were clean. Thus she let it have free roam through the house. She was just glad that Tee had another friend.

* * *

She sat in front of a stack of paper and tried to write.

"I don't know!" She crumpled up a sheet of paper and tossed it aside. But the boar caught it. Tee gathered the other wads. They handed the paper back to her as if saying "Go ahead." She couldn't run away. Her expression automatically tensed up.

* * *

The boar ate loads of vegetables.

There were heaps of vegetables she'd received from Allen and Kargo all over the mansion. As if to say "This one's tasty!" Tee waved its short tail, then taught the boar "This stuff's good too!" The two pets gorged themselves on medicinal herbs. Thinking that she'd better increase the yield a bit more, Lacey widened the field.

* * *

"Urghhh, I can't think of anything!!!"

Lacey sprawled herself out on the field and stamped her feet. She was thinking so much, it felt like she was going to go crazy. She was glad she wasn't alone. She was thankful the two critters were with her. If not for them, Lacey would have gone completely nuts.

Lying on top of the field she'd widened for Tee and the boar, she looked up at the sky. The herbs hadn't sprouted yet, so she was covered in dirt from head to toe.

Lacey considered just emptying her head for a change. She felt like she could hear Wayne's voice echoing inside, telling her not to burn herself out.

"I'm okay," she whispered unknown to anyone, and stretched her arm straight up.

"Wayne..."

"Grr-oiiiiink!!!"

"Kweeeeeeeeh!!!"

She promptly came back to reality.

"What are you doing over there? Yeek, that's the flower bed..."

Tee had been riding the boar and running amok before crashing right into it. They seemed to be having fun, so she didn't mind, but she just wished they'd watch their speed.

They'd run right into the newly planted flower bed. Huge petals were blooming in full glory. Just looking at the many vivid colors cheered her up.

She had bought the seeds in Thalattadini as a souvenir for Tee and planted them. Wayne had told her to "grow some flowers and appreciate your garden." Growing flowers seemed doable, so she'd expanded her garden and was caring for them alongside the herbs.

Plume Village had a different climate, but she'd compensated for that with her magical alterations to the soil.

After some trial and error, she'd cultivated flowers that grew just as tall and fast as the medicinal herbs. Tee and the boar were happy with them too. Whenever she watered the flowers, Lacey remembered Wayne. She would suddenly recall him telling her to eat meals, and would then set the table for herself and the two pets.

Wayne wasn't there, but he'd had such a profound impact on Lacey.

"Aaah, not the blossoms..."

Some of the petals had fallen due to the pair's charge. The boar's and Tee's eyes were spiraling at first, but they loved the flower bed as well. They

dejectedly apologized to Lacey and bowed to the flowers as well.

“There’s no use crying over spilled milk. Just be more careful next time. You’re both covered in petals.”

“Grr-oink...”

“Kwuh kwee...”

They each checked each other and shook their coats. But their bewilderment at the flower scent that still clung to them showed on their faces. Lacey sat down to meet them at their eye level and laughed.

The flowers she’d bought in Thalattadini were so fragrant that the seawater’s scent couldn’t overpower them. Strangely enough, they didn’t have an unpleasant smell. She picked up the fallen petals and took a whiff.

Then inspiration struck.

Lacey hurriedly collected the fallen petals and boiled the flowers with the same technique she used to make healing potions. After a handful of tweaked attempts, it was complete.

She created a bird letter with magic and sent it flying to Brooks. She’d put a mark on Brooks when she saw him, so this method would be far faster than sending by post. She stuffed the completed item in the envelope.

A few days later, Brooks himself knocked directly on the door of Lacey’s mansion.

There couldn’t have been enough time for him to receive the letter and use the item that came with it, but apparently he’d surpassed his speed limit coming there. Brooks, his cheeks flushed red with excitement, gripped Lacey’s hand and bowed again and again, thanking her repeatedly.

Her whole body was getting shaken and she didn’t know what to say in response, so Lacey just gave a vague smile. She’d given him a magic artifact, but it really wasn’t anything that impressive. On the contrary, she wondered how she hadn’t thought of it right away.

She’d created a sachet—a small bag filled with scented flowers.

But while it seemed only a little bit special to her, her definition of “little”

was, like usual, off the charts.

* * *

“LACEY, THANK YOU SO MUCH!!! I owe you!!!”

“No, um, yes, well, okay...”

It seemed that Wayne’s warning about using his inside voice had completely vanished from Brooks’s mind. He gripped Lacey’s arm and shook it vigorously.

She understood that she was being thanked, but it was thoroughly embarrassing. From her perspective, it was really nothing major.

“Brooks, I made it so that it would potently exude the scent of Thalattadini’s native flowers. I thought that if we couldn’t get rid of the smell, then we could overpower it instead. And everyone’s already more than familiar with those flowers, right?”

“You mean the rakka flowers? Sounds logical, but ‘familiar’ is an understatement!!!”

“O-Okay...”

The energy in his voice was overwhelming.

At that moment, the boar seemed to be conflicted. It was hiding in the corner of the room, panting and oinking. She wished it would calm down.

Lacey took a few steps away from Brooks and quietly put up both her hands in a pose of surrender.

“Whoops.” Seeing this, Brooks quieted down and gave her some space.

“In any case, I wanted to give this to you as soon as I could.”

He handed over a cloth bag containing five gold coins. Lacey tilted her head and pondered this. Then she remembered the compensation.

“This is too much!”

She’d forgotten all about it, but he’d initially promised three coins. Regardless of Brooks’s predisposition to only make crude estimations, she couldn’t accept this. This was too big of a mistake.

“This is a fair amount. Honestly, I want to pay you more.” The lionlike man smiled all the way to the scar across his cheek. “You might think it’s gauche to express gratitude through money, but you need something that’s easy to understand too. Please, take it.”

Lacey’s tiny hand looked like a child’s next to Brooks’s hand. He folded the gold coins into her hand, moving her fingers gently so as not to hurt her.

This was what Lacey had been chasing after: a decent way to earn money by her own power. The ability to independently support herself.

“Th-Thank you very much...”

The weight in her palm gave her a little confidence. Lacey firmly grasped the gold coins.

“Hey, Lacey.” Brooks carefully chose his words. “I know you don’t like me much, and we aren’t companions anymore. So I’m gonna preface this by saying that you don’t have to force yourself to get along with me, but hear me out.”

She was surprised. Lacey didn’t dislike Brooks at all. She knew that he was a good person, but she just hadn’t been able to open up to him during their quest. Even so, Lacey considered him a companion. They’d shared good times and bad together, and he was important to her.

That was why she was stunned to hear him say that they weren’t companions anymore. Nonetheless, it was the truth. Their quest was long over.

She was unable to disguise her shock, but even still, she decided to listen to what he had to say. She was unbearably scared, but felt that this wasn’t something she should run away from.

“Wh-What is it?!”

“Well...you don’t have to say yes, but...can we be friends? I’ll come visit you here sometimes like Wayne does, or you could even visit my town instead.”

“I figured you might not like the idea, so I didn’t ask while we were traveling together, but what do you think? And also, if you wanna be friends, I’d prefer it if you could just talk casually to me. Makes my butt feel itchy otherwise,” Brooks said, scratching his rear.

She had no words.

With a jingle, the gold coins fell out of Lacey's palm.

The two of them hurriedly picked up the coins, stood back up, faced each other, and Lacey nodded again and again.

She'd be lying if she said she was crying a little. She was crying a *lot*.

And so Lacey and Brooks became friends.

"Tell me next time you move!" he laughed and waved his hand as he departed.

"I'm not planning on moving, but of course!" she responded spiritedly. Lacey's third job was complete.

* * *

And so, as her heart swelled with satisfaction, the days passed by with little change...and eventually, Lacey reverted to her normal self.

Successful experiences build character, but she was hopelessly introverted and gloomier than most people.

"I should be busy, but I've got so much time... What should I do with myself?"

"Big sis Lacey, what happened to your boyfriend? Did he dump you?"

Allen came over while she was staring at the wide river flowing at the village and grumbling. By "boyfriend," he probably meant Wayne. She didn't really care, though, and ignored his remark.

"Y'know, that blond guy." Allen stuck up his index finger, trying to picture what Wayne looked like.

His father, Kargo, behind him countered, "Huh? He wasn't blond. His hair color wasn't that bright. It was definitely brown."

"Hm? Didn't he have black hair?" commented another villager passing by.

Wayne had come into town more than once, and Lacey had gotten fully settled into Plume Village. She sat hugging her knees, watching indifferently from the sidelines. The villagers talked among themselves, arguing on and on about who was right and who was wrong. More villagers joined the mix.

They each described what Wayne looked like, but other than his age and gender, none of their stories matched. Of course they didn't. Wayne had used concealment magic, so his appearance was transformed into the beholder's idea of the plainest-looking man possible. The villagers would probably never come to an agreement.

Things started to get heated, with everyone talking all at once. The first to drop out of the discussion was Allen.

"So what's going on, big sis Lacey?"

"Nothing, I guess. I'm looking for jobs to take on...since I'm running an anything shop, sort of. But I can't find any clients."

"Aha."

She claimed she was looking, but this just amounted to covertly walking around the village each day. Lacey herself knew that this was pointless, but she couldn't bring herself to take a step forward.

"Want me to commission you? It's nearly sowing season. I'll pay you in vegetables."

"I think I'm getting too many vegetables already..."

Besides, Allen's "commission" was probably just out of sympathy.

"Hmmm..." Allen murmured as he sat down next to Lacey. There was the sound of running water. The river was terrifyingly rough when storms came, but on any other day, it was a well-appreciated feature that protected the villagers.

When Lacey saw Allen's profile, she recalled his little sister. The newborn baby's name had been settled as Lane. Lacey had briefly been allowed to say hi to her. She was an adorable girl who was always squealing happily.

"What kind of jobs have you taken so far, big sis Lacey?" Allen asked for reference.

Lacey gave it some prolonged thought and counted them on her fingers.

The first time had been with the phoenix. That would be too hard to explain, so she decided to skip over that one. The second time had been with Allen and Kargo themselves, so she set that aside as well. If there was any case she could

actually explain, it would've been the third one with Brooks. There was only one thing she could talk about.

Only one thing, despite half a year passing since her first job.

Lacey herself wasn't sure whether she was feeling pathetic or embarrassed. It would be awkward to explain in full detail, so she just took a sachet out of her bag and made it brief.

"I made this," she proclaimed.

"What is it?"

"A sachet. Give it a sniff. It smells like flowers."

"Oh. Ohoooooooooooo!"

This last exclamation didn't come from Allen, nor from Lacey. Behind the sitting pair, there was a man with his arms stretched out and twitching covetously.

His eyes were slanted, and at a glance, he looked like a fox. It was the merchant that Lacey had met once before.

"A sachet, you say? Fascinating. Excuse me, may I? Hmwagh!!!" He bent backward in astonishment.

"Are you okay?" Lacey asked, looking at him with a worried expression.

"You call this a sachet? No, that's not what this is. It's a magic artifact!" It used a fragment of mana stone, so that was technically correct. The man sniffed and sniffed again, twitching his nose restlessly. "Do you have any more of these, or can you make more?!"

He was overwhelmingly eager. Lacey nodded under pressure. "I do have a few more made... If you want me to make more, I can certainly do that."

"Please do! I'll buy as many as you can make!"

He didn't go so far as to let her name the price. He stuck out a finger to show how much he was willing to pay. As far as she could tell, he was suggesting two silver coins per unit.

"What?!" Lacey sprang up in surprise. This was obviously too much. These

were so simple that she could make an endless supply.

While Lacey was dumbfounded, Kargo suddenly came up behind the merchant. He plucked the sachet out of the merchant's hands, inspected it, and then slowly held up the same number of fingers plus one. Three fingers total, representing three silver coins.

"You can afford to pay this much. And once she has more made, you can increase it."

"Come on now, Mr. Kargo. I object to you interfering with my business."

"Miss Lacey saved my wife and daughter. You said she saved your cargo too. Things may be different, but this is still Plume, the feather-decoration village. We've made lots of ornaments and sold them off to you. We know the fundamentals of trade here."

Kargo made an uncharacteristically obstinate smile. The fox was dripping with sweat. He yielded. Things were settled before Lacey even knew what was going on.

"Of course, if it's too much for you, we can call it off," Kargo told her, smiling in his usual gentle manner. Lacey quickly shook her head. She didn't know what she was doing, so she was immensely grateful for him.

* * *

Lacey's daily schedule turned hectic after that.

She tended to her colorful rakka garden, boiled the petals, and then immediately dried them with magic. She followed mostly the same steps as she used for potions to process the sachet materials. Gradually, her production speed couldn't keep up, so she ended up skipping the boiling step and just drying the fresh flowers. That allowed the flowers to keep their original shape, which in turn made the finished product cuter. It put a smile on the faces of Lacey and her pets.

Besides preparing the flowers, she also had to make the pouches. She cut fabric and made lots of small bags. At first, she'd just used whatever cloth she had on hand, but the merchant kept providing her with new fabrics, and she started to have fun with it. She'd tried using frilly lace material to make a see-

through pouch that showed off the flowers inside and changed up how the ribbon bow was tied. She found out that with a little creativity, she could create all sorts of combinations.

No matter how many sachets Lacey made, they sold in the blink of an eye. They were reportedly popular among women in the capital, and even some men were starting to buy into the trend.

Once Lacey realized that she couldn't possibly keep up by herself, the sachets became the business of the entire village. The fox let out a piercing cackle. "I was gutted the day that the cockatrice feathers dried up, but I kept coming by the village in the hopes that an opportunity like this would come by again!"

He barked with laughter before Tee started to peck him all over. "What do you think you're doing?!" the merchant shrieked, then fell over. Tee seemed to be satisfied by this. It got onto the boar and tramped off.

Tee was the abused phoenix's child, but since the child of a phoenix was like an extension of itself, perhaps they could be said to be one and the same. The golden feather decorations that the merchant was talking about hadn't been offered of the phoenix's own free will. However, since he hadn't been aware of this when receiving the products, his punishment was light.

The merchant had beak marks from top to bottom and looked to be on the verge of crying. Lacey modestly offered some medicinal herbs to him.

When she did, the merchant's narrow eyes opened as wide as they could and sparkled. "Please sell me this too!" he shouted.

Of course, she had to refuse.

Once the distribution stabilized, she started to leave an embroidered mark on the sachets. It was a tiny star emblem.

The magic artifacts with Lacey's mark were dubbed "aromatic artifacts," and before long, they were a household name all across Croix. However, the manufacturer was left anonymous. Only the mysterious star emblem made its mark in people's memories.

As she stared at her enormous pile of gold coins, Lacey absentmindedly murmured, "Just having all this money makes me feel nervous..."

But since she had enough to spare, it wouldn't hurt to try using some of it.

"What do you think?" she said, though the person she wanted to ask wasn't there.

Lacey looked up at the portraits hanging in the mansion. In the picture was a woman with voluminous red hair. Next to her was a handsome blond man.

It had been several months since they'd parted at Thalattadini, and in that time, Lacey hadn't seen Wayne even once.

* * *

Inside a rattling carriage, a young man gripped a sword.

"—anic. Captain Cielanic!"

"Hm? Oh, sorry. What is it?"

"Nothing, sir. You just seemed to be zoning out, so I was concerned. Shall I stop the carriage?"

"I'm fine. I just had something on my mind."

Wayne Cielanic—that was Wayne's full name. As the former hero, he also acted as captain of the anti-monster expeditionary force.

"Not even the captain's immune to spacing out?"

Light laughter came from a few of the royal knights.

"Not really," he replied informally. His tone was much more aloof than when he talked with Lacey or Brooks.

Wayne had always been this kind of person. But while his status would have allowed him to monopolize the whole carriage for himself, he was instead sharing it with the soldiers like this. At first the soldiers had been very deferential, but now they were casually chatting without minding Wayne's presence—although they probably felt awkward doing so in front of their superior, so their conversations didn't continue too long.

Doing this allowed Wayne to remember their names and faces. He'd learn about who they were and what they cared about.

The months-long expedition was slowly but surely sapping their energy.

However, the latest shipment of goods from the country restored a bit of cheer to the troops. One man happily exclaimed that he'd gotten a package from his wife. If memory served, his name was Mace. He was a newlywed.

It's taken longer than I expected.

They'd first set out on a commonplace request to slay a large monster attacking a village, but one thing led to another, and now here they were. Wayne sighed.

"The next one should be the last. I don't mind you getting optimistic, but stay focused," Wayne instructed without looking at them. The carriage instantly went silent. Then there came a unified response.

"Yessir!!!"

"We're on the march. No need to respond like that."

"Yessir!!!"

He was about to make an exasperated reply of "What did I just tell you?" but decided against it.

The most cheerful response had come from Mace. He must've been really thrilled by the package he'd gotten.

Their last job was a pushover. Supposedly, a monster had been sighted in a cave near a village. Nobody could approach, which was making things hard for the residents.

There was probably only one monster, but the reports said that it had a peculiar form. They said that the monster looked almost like...a *spider*.

Chapter 5: Starseeking

This wasn't what they'd been told.

Wayne quietly clicked his tongue. It was possible that their information was outdated. While they were busy with the rest of their expedition, the situation here had been changing by the hour.

There were *spiders*.

For each one he killed, more came to take their places. Wayne wordlessly sliced through them with his sword. Sweat beaded on his forehead. The surface of his sword had a layer of wind magic applied, letting him cut through foes that he would normally only be able to bludgeon. "You're one versatile guy," Brooks had once bantered.

However, most of his squad didn't have that ability. Some of the soldiers had very little experience.

The monsters came from the right, the left, and who knows where else. They were far more repulsive than ordinary spiders, and they were making light work of the junior squad members. Wayne could hear them struggling with the limited visibility.

Should I have them retreat?

Wayne could still manage on his own.

While each individual monster was easily slain, they were steadily overwhelming the squad. There was probably *something* manipulating these spiders.

With a shudder, Wayne gripped the hilt of his sword. He knew what that *something* was. It had intelligence. It had a plan.

It could predict human behavior and use it against them.

As he deliberated this, he noticed a woman at the far end of the cave. She was half-naked. Below her waist, there was a spider's body.

“D-Did it eat her?!” Mace’s voice quaked as he shouted. Mace was older than Wayne, but he was the least experienced member of the bunch.

“...No.”

“Huh? But, Captain...”

“Look closer.”

The woman slowly moved her body.

Mace had thought that she’d been eaten, but there was no border between bodies. There was a round spider abdomen where the woman’s legs should have been. This was a kind of demonkin called arachne. Unlike normal demonkin, these had intellect similar to that of humans. Now that Wayne had defeated the Demon King, no more of them would come into being—which meant that this was a survivor. She had probably been lurking in the depths of the dark cave, quietly breeding monsters.

She had a woman’s face, but it was like an expressionless mask. She just had eyes, a nose, and a mouth. In her stomach, there was something wriggling and squirming about. She was still giving birth even now.

Wayne couldn’t afford to turn his back on this.

“Everyone, retreat! Use potions freely on anyone who’s injured! I’ll handle this!”

“B-But...!”

“Run!”

Wayne no longer had the Holy Sword. He was just a normal person. However, he’d been born with a wealth of talent.

He’d gained a lifetime’s worth of experience on his quest and had refined his skills even more since then. There was a short pause, and then two spiders crumpled at Wayne’s feet. He repeated this. He would slay them faster than they could reproduce. It was simple. *Too* simple.

* * *

“Mace, I told you to run already!!!”

While the rest of the many soldiers retreated, Mace stood where he was, trembling.

He had to run. A single demonkin was as powerful as a whole nation's army. Charging at one without advance recon and careful preparation was just asking to be killed.

Mace understood that in theory. But he couldn't run. The sight before him right now was simply that magnificent.

Wayne slipped around the spiders and struck them with extraordinary bladework. If his sword couldn't finish the job, then he used his fists. Mace had no way of knowing this, but Wayne was using Brooks's martial arts.

Just how much had he trained and overcome peril with that mortal body? Wayne was no longer the hero. He was a former hero, now an ordinary human. In the past, he had wielded a dazzling sword in his hands.

The sword that proclaimed him to be the hero was no longer in his possession. It had been sealed deep underground, waiting for the next time it would be used.

It was almost like a fairy tale. But this was reality.

"I-I'm not— I'm not running!"

The mage who had been lighting their surroundings had already left under Wayne's orders. They were probably sending a message to the capital asking for instructions by now.

Mace had magical aptitude. In this darkness, not even Wayne would be able to tell where enemies were attacking from. Mace cursed at his buckling knees, then chanted a long spell to create a fireball.

The famous Dawn Witch could've done the same thing with a wave of her finger, but this was the best he could do at present. He used his sword as a wand and continued to yell a lengthy incantation. If he stopped for even a moment, the fireball would most likely vanish.

It was fortunate that the spiders that the arachne commanded were weak to fire. They slowly stepped back from the warm flames and kept their distance

from Mace. It helped that Wayne was fighting in a way that shielded Mace.

When Mace realized this, he wasn't sure whether he should've run away like he'd been told after all, or if he'd made the right decision. His vision blurred. But Wayne was no longer shouting for Mace to retreat.

"Incredible..."

Bit by bit, the number of spiders was decreasing.

The cave had been overrun with a plethora of spiders, but now there were few enough of them to count. The speed at which the arachne was dropping them was falling as well. As Mace relaxed, the feeling of paralysis slipped away, and then a belated sense of terror made him tremble again. But compared to Wayne, he was just standing around doing nothing.

Wayne's blade reached the arachne. The woman screamed. Mace was trembling all over, but unconsciously exhaled a sigh of relief. Just then, his vision spun a little.

He was sure that it must've just been because he used too much magic, but that wasn't it. He staggered and could no longer stay standing. Nevertheless, even as he fell to the ground and coughed wheezily, he kept chanting, determined to keep the fireball going.

What's going on?!

Mace wasn't the only one. Wayne's movements were getting dull, and his body was wobbling.

But by the time he realized that it was venom, it was already too late.

Within the closed area of the cave, there was nowhere to run. His whole body dripped with sweat. He couldn't breathe.

"Ngh, gaaahhh..."

He scratched at his neck. The fireball gradually extinguished.

As his vision dimmed, Mace remembered his wife. He automatically clutched the small charm he'd concealed in his breast pocket.

Captain...

Wayne had been knocked down by the arachne, tearing a huge hole in his stomach, before being strung up against the wall.

That was the last thing Mace saw before his memories cut off, as if severed completely.

* * *

There was a cry of agony.

But Lacey couldn't do anything.

Whose voice was it? She didn't know for sure, yet she could tell...

Lacey.

It was Wayne's.

Usually, he was nonchalant. A busybody who flashed the occasional mischievous smile. But none of that could be seen now. He was stuck deep in a mire and all he could do was croak out her name.

He sank into the dense sludge. Gradually, she could no longer even hear his voice. Where was he going?

* * *

"Wayne!"

She bolted awake. Bright light shone in through the windows. Tee and the boar were curled up in their small bed together, still snoozing.

Lacey had been up until late again last night making sachets. The two animals had stayed up and accompanied her as she worked into the night. The peaceful chirping of birds from outside the window told her that this was reality.

She could hear a strange pounding noise coming from her heart. She didn't know why, but she was tremendously frightened. Soon enough, she was shaking down to her fingertips.

However, the bell that signaled a visitor was chiming. Lacey got out of bed and was about to throw on a cape before deciding against it. It had already warmed up outside.

The doorbell kept chiming. Holding on to the handrail, she rushed down the

stairs with pattering footsteps and moved to open the door.

Just then, she remembered what she'd seen in her dream. It felt like a cold zap came from the doorknob. She didn't want to open the door. But this was no time for dawdling.

It was just a dream. She pulled open the door.

"Yo. Been a while."

It was Wayne.

The blond-haired, green-eyed stud. From top to bottom, he looked just the same as ever. Nothing was different.

Actually, he *did* look like he'd lost some weight. He was lugging even more gifts than usual under his arm.

"Lacey, have you been keeping yourself fed while I've been away?" he nagged.

Lacey trembled all over.

"Huh? What's up?"

"H—"

"Go on," Wayne encouraged her.

"How are you alive?!"

"Why did you randomly decide that I was dead?!"

* * *

Lacey's outburst had been extremely rude. All she had to substantiate it was a plain old dream. She'd probably still been half asleep.

The person she'd been concerned about had popped out of nowhere acting completely normal, so she'd gotten confused, she explained to him at the dining table as she leisurely drank tea with him for the first time in a while. It really did taste better than Lacey could ever hope to make.

Next to her feet, the boar flared his nostrils and Tee flapped its wings, making a fuss.

“You got another housemate?” Wayne had asked with narrowed eyes when he first spotted the boar.

“There are plenty of rooms to go around,” Lacey had responded smoothly.

“Guess it’s fine, then,” he acquiesced.

That brought them to the topic of Lacey’s dream.

The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to shrink in embarrassment. But Wayne’s expression was unexpectedly serious.

“I get it,” he said understandingly. “You’re a mage. Mages with powerful enough mana can become attuned to other people and see their pasts.”

Lacey had heard about this before, but she’d never had a strong enough affinity with anyone to become attuned to them. She was aware that it was theoretically possible, but that was all.

“Hm... Let’s see here,” Wayne said as he rummaged around in his pockets and pulled out a small item.

When Lacey saw the item his fingers had hidden, she found that it was something completely familiar—a Lacey-brand sachet.

Apparently there were more imitations going around lately, but Lacey always embroidered a star on hers, so there was no mistaking them. A little bit of mana resided in a mage’s stitches.

“Wayne, you bought one too? I’ve got plenty, so I would’ve given you as many as you wanted.”

“So you *did* make this, Lacey.”

She couldn’t tell if he was disappointed or if he’d just loosened up. Wayne sighed and looked at the aromatic artifact in his hand. Apparently he hadn’t known that she’d made it.

Thinking about it, Lacey had started making the sachets only after he’d gone off on the expedition. They hadn’t seen each other in four months. The manufacturer of the sachets had been kept secret at Lacey’s own request, but while Wayne had been gone, the aromatic artifacts had gained tremendous popularity in Croix. Any person with an ounce of fashion sense wanted to buy

one. Experimenting with scent was the latest trend. The ladies who spent each day in continuous pursuit of fashion would never have imagined that the artifacts had originally been invented to fix Brooks's problem.

"Yeah. The people of Plume Village have been helping me, but I suppose that I did make it to fulfill Brooks's request. It took some time, but I did find a solution somehow." Saying this about herself made her blush a little.

"Brooks's, huh? I see, that's what's going on here." For some reason, Wayne was smiling bitterly.

He was acting kind of strange. *Did I do something wrong?* Lacey fiddled with her bangs in the same way that she might have touched her absent hat. She wanted to hide her face.

Wayne made an even heavier sigh than before. Lacey crouched atop her chair, thinking that she'd made him *really* mad.

"No, sorry. That one was directed at myself," he hurriedly added. After that, he seemed to be mentally prepared. He spoke slowly.

"Lacey, this thing you made saved my life."

What does that mean? Lacey's hazel eyes blinked. Tee and even the boar, who'd been hiding under the table in fear of Wayne, slowly poked their heads out and looked at him puzzledly. Wayne's tone was just that solemn.

"Also, I used up the herbs you gave me last time. Sorry about that."

As Lacey looked him over, Wayne started to tell her one thing at a time. Indeed, the sachet wasn't just any bag of petals with a nice scent. It had Lacey's special magic imbued in it.

As Wayne continued to explain, Lacey's eyebrows furrowed more and more. His life really *had* been in danger. He'd encountered a demonkin.

To summarize Wayne's tale: the arachne had filled the cave with toxins. Wayne and an imperial soldier named Mace had breathed this in and were on the brink of death.

However, Mace had one of Lacey's sachets. Like Wayne, he'd been off on the expedition, so he hadn't been aware of the sachet's effects. It had just been

sent to him by his wife, so he'd treasured it as a protective charm.

The arachne's toxins were making them lose consciousness. However, the moment that Mace gripped the sachet, the toxins suffusing the cave blew away, leaving only a faint floral scent. Since Wayne had gone with Lacey to buy flower seeds as a souvenir for Tee in the ocean town Thalattadini, he knew right away that it was the smell of rakka flowers.

He pasted the medicinal herbs he'd received from Lacey onto his gaping stomach wound. The toxins had been the arachne's last resort. Now that they had been neutralized, her previously expressionless face turned to a look of surprise, and Wayne's sword buried itself deep into the center of her chest.

* * *

"Lacey, this item...it doesn't work as simple as just scenting up the area with flowers, right? It purifies the surrounding air and then spreads a floral fragrance. That means you've got two kinds of mana stone sewn in here."

It seemed Wayne had investigated how the toxins had been neutralized. He was correct, so Lacey nodded.

Mana stones could only be taught small-scale magics. Lacey had first considered using wind magic, but as she'd previously told Wayne, she'd given up on the idea since that wouldn't be strong enough to disperse the odor. What she came up with instead was a way to purify the surrounding area, air included.

If the effective range was narrowed down enough, even small mana stones could be used. Of course, this was all only made possible through Lacey's ability to refine a formula to its most efficient form. An open-air space would've proved more difficult, but a closed space like a cave was manageable. The purified space would then have a vacancy, which would be filled in by the scent of rakka flowers. That was how it worked. Since it erased stench entirely, even the kraken's yawn could be neutralized.

The reason the aromatic artifacts had gained nationwide popularity lay in their strong deodorant properties. That was it. There were some members of high society who wore flowers directly on their person, but the scents were too delicate and would quickly fade. Meanwhile, Lacey's sachets purified the

surrounding air, preventing odors from mixing in. Plus, they had been adjusted so that if a different flower variety was added, the scents wouldn't clash, which allowed one to enjoy each kind.

As Wayne explained all this, it finally dawned on Lacey how exactly the artifact she'd made had saved Wayne's life. She sullenly clammed up. It had been quite some time since she last acted like this, but she made her staff bigger and held it close as she glared at Wayne.

Wayne's wounds had completely healed, and the food he made was just as tasty as ever. She was still sullen as she ate it.

Lacey's bad mood persisted throughout the whole day. Seeing her like this made Wayne grimace.

When night came, Tee and the boar went back to their bed. There was a room set aside for Wayne as well. Lacey was still giving him the silent treatment.

Thus Wayne spoke to her as if he were dealing with a troublesome child. "Hey, Lacey. Wanna go outside for a bit?"

* * *

Lacey walked outside with her staff in hand and saw a full vault of stars.

The sky was clear, without a single cloud in sight, and stars twinkled across it.

The pair decided to trek out a bit. Lacey followed close behind Wayne. She wasn't saying anything. The truth was, Lacey wasn't angry. She was just, well...having second thoughts.

"Come on, let's sit down."

Wayne lowered himself onto the field with a light thud. Lacey silently did the same.

The season had turned to a mild one before she knew it. When she'd first arrived in Plume Village, it had been soon before the onset of winter. After that, she'd met the phoenix, gotten to know the villagers, and became friends with Brooks. From her perspective, it was an astounding series of changes.

The two of them just looked up at the stars. After some time, Lacey noticed that her frustratingly childish tantrum was wearing off and her mouth wasn't so

clamped up anymore. The words that she'd been thinking this whole time slipped out.

"Hey, Wayne? You're still fighting demonkin?"

"Yeah," he acknowledged.

Demonkin were beings that had harmed many people. Lacey and the rest of the party had set out on their quest to kill them and had defeated the Demon King, which was their source. However, deep inside, she'd had a feeling that not all of the demonkin had been wiped out. That feeling turned out to be true.

If just one thing had gone wrong, Wayne might not have survived. That scared her. That was why she next said:

"Maybe I should serve the country again too."

Lacey had wished to live freely. She'd come to Plume Village and had so many first-time experiences. For the first time, she was standing on her own two feet, moving forward, and going where she wanted to. But what about Wayne?

Wayne was still fighting by himself. The party had already been disbanded. But one day, the demonkin would reappear. There was no guarantee things would turn out so well next time. So at the very least, if Lacey could join him...

She was entirely serious when she said this. But Wayne broke into a laugh. "It's okay, Lacey. Go ahead and live freely."

Wayne folded his arms behind his head and lay down on top of the grass. His response had been much too casual.

"But..." Lacey hesitated. Wayne was kind, and he was also a busybody. But that was no reason for him to suffer alone.

"You made a wish to the king to live freely, right?"

Lacey recalled that when the king had freed her from the contract emblem, she'd been terrified. She should've been crying endless tears of joy, yet inside, she was deeply shaken. Going down a new path was just that unbearably scary and exciting at the same time.

If Wayne hadn't been there, she probably never would've thought of it. Even if her engagement was still called off, she probably would've been given a

different fiancé right away and spent her whole life as a wife in name only.

Now, she no longer wanted to go back to the way things had been. But at the same time, she didn't want to forsake her companion.

She tried to say something, but couldn't get her feelings situated right. Just then, she recalled the question that she'd had. It had been lingering in the back of her mind ever since she had pondered Brooks's wish back in Thalattadini.

Lacey didn't know what Wayne had wished for. As the hero, he was entitled to the greatest reward. He had the right to ask the king for a wish, so he must have used it for *something*. Or had he wished for nothing at all, like Lacey had?

Wayne didn't seem to have any inner desires. Lacey didn't understand him that deeply. She figured it was probably okay to ask. She wanted to know.

"What did you wish for, Wayne?"

Wayne's eyes widened. His mouth tautened into an uncharacteristic expression. But still, he sighed. He briskly waved his hand, beckoning to her. Lacey came closer, leaning right over him as he lay down.

He lightly tugged a lock of Lacey's long black hair.

"For you."

Overhead, stars tumbled down.



* * *

Wayne had been indecisive about whether or not he should say it. If he told her, it might weigh on her conscience. But if he didn't tell her, she might give up her current life.

"I wished for your wish to be granted, no matter what it was."

Granting a wish to whomever vanquished the Demon King was just a courtesy. Lacey was the country's best mage. The king wouldn't willingly let her go.

That was why Wayne had asked that whatever Lacey wished for, it would be the wish of both of them combined. That way, it was sure to come true.

"Why?" Lacey's massive eyes opened as wide as they could go. He had a feeling she'd ask that. Wayne himself didn't know why he cared so much about Lacey all the time.

That was a lie. He traced back his memory.

You don't have anything?

To this day, he remembered it clearly.

As soon as it had been discovered that he could wield the Holy Sword, he had been lionized as the hero. Without knowing what was going on, he'd been ordered to be the leader of a party formed out of elites from throughout the country. Although their abilities were superb, they were a mismatched bunch of eccentrics. Wayne was completely at a loss for what to do. Among them, Lacey was particularly abnormal.

She always had the hood of her heavy robe hung over her face. She was clothed in all black and stuck out so little that one might misperceive her staff to be walking on its own.

Wayne had no clue what she wanted to do or say. If someone gave an order, she'd follow it. Although she was tiny, she had more firepower and advanced magical skill than anyone else. She was more than satisfactory as an asset in battle. However, she just had too little presence. It seemed like if she were left alone, she'd go off somewhere and die, or so Wayne had thought detachedly

back when he was a bit more aloof. He was, in fact, right.

Sometime during their quest, Lacey had stepped out of their simple tent and tripped down. She weighed so little that Wayne wondered if there was even really a person inside the robe. He'd considered her to be a strange girl and had kept his distance, but she was still his companion. He called out to ask if she was okay and stepped toward her.

When he approached, he heard a small stomach rumbling.

Thinking about it, Lacey was always on the sideline during meals and didn't talk to anyone. By the time he realized it, she'd be gone.

"Are you hungry?" he tried asking.

She looked up at him with a mystified expression. This was the first time he'd seen her face, which was both surprisingly cute and young-looking.

She haltingly replied that she could just eat medicinal herbs if she got hungry, and she wouldn't die if she ate just one meal a day. Wayne reacted by grabbing her by the scruff of the neck.

Whenever he took her eyes off her, she went to train by herself. She was the country's best mage, and yet she was still aiming for greater heights.

Eventually, Lacey started to let her hood down in front of Wayne and got much better at holding longer conversations. That was why he'd asked what she'd wish for when their quest ended and what she planned to do.

Lacey blinked confusedly like a child and tilted her head. She responded that she had a fiancé, so she'd marry him. Her only purpose in life was to defeat the Demon King, so there wasn't anything else she wanted to use her magic for, nor was it her decision to make.

* * *

"So before I knew what I was doing, I asked if you didn't have anything."

"I remember that. I hadn't thought about my wish at all, so you surprised me."

"Oh, so you remember it too, Lacey?" It hadn't been a monumental conversation, so Wayne had assumed that Lacey had forgotten about it. But just

then, Wayne felt something snap into place inside him.

“I’m the second son of the Cielanic family. I don’t get any inheritance, so I thought I’d just be married off somewhere convenient. That’s just the way things are when you’re a noble. I came to terms with it as an adult, but when I was a kid, I kicked up a real fuss about it. On the outside, I looked like a well-behaved brat, but I had a bit of a rebellious streak.”

Nowadays, Wayne had greater than average mana capacity, but he’d barely had any as a child. People with low mana were shunned in noble circles. In hindsight, it might’ve just been the case that his smaller body was unsuited to his potential as the hero, preventing him from being able to use magic well.

“In the end, they told me that I was the hero and then I got tied down to the country, but I gained a little bit of freedom in exchange. So looking at you was like I was looking at the past me. It was miserable.” Besides, Lacey’s wish had been buried even deeper inside than Wayne’s, to the point where she hadn’t even noticed it was there. “If I had to say why, that’d be it.”

That was why when Lacey’s engagement had been called off and Wayne saw her wailing and crying, he had wanted to hug her. But he felt like he couldn’t.

“Wayne, I had thought that I wanted to set you free from me. You’re a busybody and always helping people, and you’ve stayed by me, but I thought it wasn’t right for things to be that way...”

“Ha ha, seriously?”

Wayne wasn’t kind to just anyone, and he still regretted not being kinder to Lacey when they’d first met. He pulled her skinny wrist. With a tiny yelp, she swiftly rolled down next to Wayne.

“Don’t go away. Stay at my side. Let me see you live freely from right up close.” Wayne lifted Lacey’s bangs with one hand and bumped his forehead against hers. Lacey’s eyes were tinged with tears.

He felt this strongly for her, and yet Wayne didn’t know the name of his own emotions. Was he just worried seeing her walk along on unsteady feet and therefore wanted to help, or did he just see his old self in her?

Lacey had wished that she could be separate from Wayne. To stand upright

on her own two feet and live in a way that wouldn't cause him to worry. She shut her own desire to be with Wayne into a box and sealed it away, wishing only for his happiness.

They cared so much for each other, yet neither of them had realized that this was love.

This was the second time Lacey was crying and wailing in front of Wayne. As the two of them lay under the twinkling stars in a field that seemed to stretch on forever, this time, Wayne was able to hug her.

"This isn't anything to cry over. Don't cry. C'mon, don't cry..."

But since he couldn't wipe away her tears, he just let out a helpless murmur and pressed her tiny head against his chest. He smiled at her as she broke down, her shoulders twitching. He stroked Lacey's head again and again. And he'd keep doing so.

* * *

One day, Wayne stopped by Plume Village.

Once it gets warmer, Brooks will have lots of energy, so he might drop by soon, he thought as he headed to the mansion. Standing in front of the place was a boy he recognized.

He was taller than the last time they'd met. He must've been going through puberty. The cheerful, orange-haired boy with freckled cheeks was swinging a hammer and staking some kind of sign in front of Lacey's mansion.

"Yo, Allen."

"Hey, it's Lacey's boyfriend." After replying, Allen stared dubiously at Wayne and tilted his head. "You're definitely blond, right? Your hair doesn't look black or brown to me..."

It was probably the effect of the concealment magic. "Never mind that. What are you doing there?" Wayne asked back.

"Oh, this is, uh..."

"Thanks, Allen. How's it look?"

“Hey, big sis Lacey. It’s super-duper perfect. Take a look.”

Lacey had just opened the door and come out. “Wayne, you’re here?” She suddenly smiled with delight.

He had unintentionally compared her against Allen, but it seemed like Lacey had gotten a bit taller as well. Wayne suddenly felt a jolt near his heart and was confused by it. *It shouldn’t be a surprise. She’s almost sixteen. Of course she’ll get taller. She was just too short before.*

Completely unaware that what he’d just felt was a “flutter,” Wayne approached like usual and took a look at what Allen was proudly standing next to. The sign was engraved with “Anything Shop.” Below that was a word he hadn’t heard before.

Lacey caught Wayne’s gaze. “Um, I have money saved up from making sachets, so I decided I should use it on something...”

“You didn’t have to pay me for this. I’d be willing to make as many of these as you wanted for free.”

Lacey was usually thrifty. She’d probably come up with this after significant pondering.

Wayne was surprised by how much a single sign could change the vibe of the whole place. Much like the old Lacey, the mansion had an aura that spurned visitors. That had gradually cleared once Lacey started living in it, and now it was so bright and welcoming that it was as if the house had forgotten all about how it used to be.

“What’s this say?” The one flaw was that the sign was somewhat low. Wayne stooped down and pointed at the letters underneath the carved “Anything Shop” part.

Lacey blushed a little and put her hands together. “Um, well, Granny said that what’s important is how you move forward alongside a name, so I tried writing, um, a goal, of sorts...” She didn’t sound very self-assured. She was red to the tips of her ears.

In other words, this was the shop’s name.

“Why not? It’s pretty, and I think it suits you.”

“R-Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Could you guys stop ignoring me?” Then Allen murmured, “And besides, *I’m* the one who carved it.”

“Sorry!” Lacey hurriedly apologized, then reopened the mansion door. “Once again, Wayne, welcome. And good job, Allen. I’ve got tea and snacks made, so you can come on in if you like.”

“Score!” Allen sprang up and ran into the mansion as fast as he could go. When Wayne saw this, he started to have doubts that if he wasn’t careful, Allen might take his place as the mansion’s most frequent visitor.

Like usual, Tee was riding atop the boar, and the two of them were running around the field going “kwee kwee” and “grr-oink.” It was good to see them having fun. Wayne nodded and entered the mansion as well.

The cool breeze blowing through the room was probably Lacey’s magic. She’d gotten really flexible at using it.

“Um, Wayne? Actually...”

“Hm?”

“I know it’s late, but I’m writing letters.”

Wayne wasn’t so uncouth as to ask who she was writing to. He swiftly placed his palm on top of Lacey’s head. “I see. Things’ll be lively again when they get here.”

“Do you think they’ll come?”

“Course they will. In fact, they’ll probably be a little angry. And they’ll get angry at me too and demand to know why we didn’t tell them,” he laughed with good humor.

Seeing this, Lacey lowered her eyes anxiously. “I wonder...”

Her fingers trembled a little as she addressed the letters. But of course, she didn’t have any regrets. With a mix of excitement and worry, she followed after

Allen.

* * *

Not too many days after Lacey sent the letters, they plunked into several mailboxes. It took a long time for one of the recipients to notice. As for the other one, someone informed her that the dragon post had arrived. She leaned her head and softly thanked the messenger.

She looked at the address label. She always received stacks of letters.

To the Saint of Light, Dana.

She didn't recognize the handwriting. She received plenty of unnecessary letters, so she was inclined to toss it before checking the sender.

From anything shop Starseeking.

Again, she didn't recognize the name. But strangely, her fingers unsealed it without hesitation. Her plump lips opened a little in surprise.

Then her mouth softened into a smile.

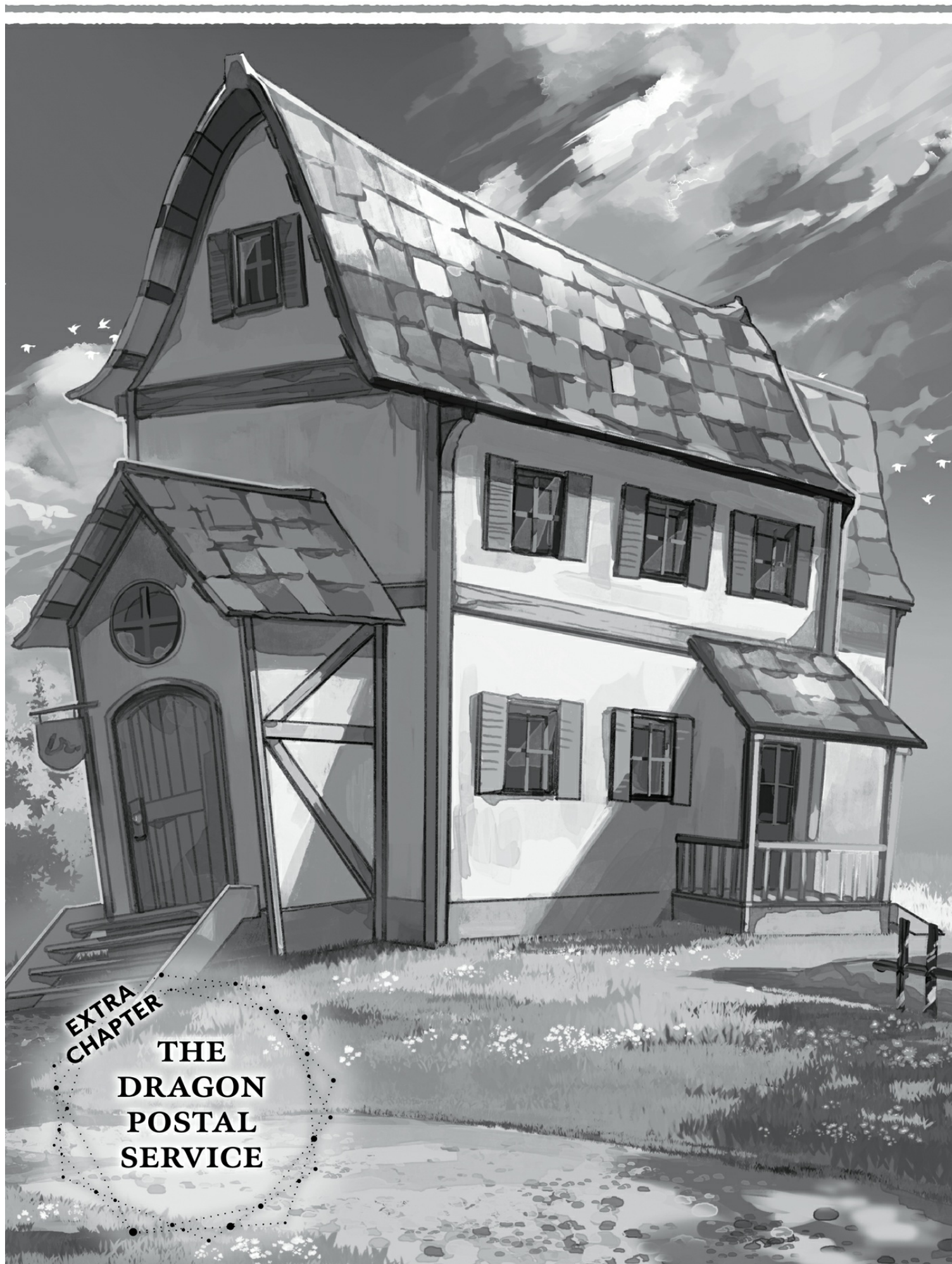
"Say, is it all right if I take a trip?"

While reveling in the exclamations of surprise, she eagerly made preparations for her journey. *I've been so busy that I haven't traveled anywhere in a while. Well then, what shall I bring?* Her excitement grew as she packed her luggage.

One chance had brought forth another and then continued to proliferate.

Lacey didn't know about the many precious connections that she would gain in the future, but she would steadily learn at a low-key pace.

Like walking across the glittering starry sky. One step at a time.



EXTRA
CHAPTER

THE
DRAGON
POSTAL
SERVICE

Extra Chapter: The Dragon Postal Service

There was the sound of leaves rustling. When the wind blew, the greenery bent over, making it obvious to see where it had passed through. A small figure flew over. It was barely flapping its wings and seemed somewhat unsteady. At last, it dropped down over the field.

“Pyuu-ee...”

It flopped, out of energy. It crashed down into the middle of the medicinal herb garden, getting dirt all over itself. The first to notice *it* was Tee, who was waddling around.

Tee spread its wings and flapped them, checking their condition before flying—but on second thought, that was too much hassle, so it tottered over instead.

Tee’s duty was to protect Lacey’s field. Any ruffians that sought to harm the field would be justly punished. After all, the herb garden was an important food source for Tee and the boar as well. *Hm?* It noticed something strange and waddled closer. But since the herbs were too tall to easily walk through, it flew up a little. And then...

“KYEW-KWHUUUUUUUUUH?!”

What the heck?! it screamed.

* * *

Around the same time, Lacey was peacefully savoring the last vestiges of the spring winds along with Wayne again today. They’d set a table outside the mansion and were enjoying tea, almost like they were having a picnic.

She had recalled the Starseeking sign that Allen had made for her and kept inadvertently glancing outside the window. “If you’re thinking about it that much, why not just go outside and look at it for a while?” Wayne had suggested. Thus they were spending teatime looking at the sign. It seemed kind of bizarre, but she partially felt proud as well. It was a strange feeling.

As Lacey talked about inconsequential things with Wayne, she occasionally looked over at the sign and her cheeks loosened up with bashfulness. She'd finally stepped forward. It made her heart pound with anxiety, but she was simultaneously ecstatic. When she noticed her own feelings, she felt embarrassed.

Wayne's expression said that he could read Lacey like a book. He laughed a bit in amusement and nibbled on the souvenir snacks he'd brought. "Oh yeah, since you wrote letters to everyone, that means you must've successfully registered your address," he nodded, impressed.

But this seemed to be unfamiliar terminology. "R-Regist...addre...?"

"You're kidding me. You used the dragon post, right?"

"N-No. There's a collection box in Plume Village, so I just...put them in there."

The "dragon post" was the short name for the Dragon Postal Service, a system where mail was delivered by a smaller subspecies of dragons: mini-dragons. Lacey had used one of the public boxes placed in villages and towns, which were picked up in bulk. However, nobles could get a contract for direct pickup service from their homes. Additionally, people like Wayne who held an important position in the country, and others who had been approved by the tamer guild that managed the dragon post could have letters delivered to them wherever they were, and they could call for a pickup as well. Mini-dragons had a strong sense of smell and wouldn't forget a human's scent once they'd learned it.

Lacey was aware of that much. At the moment, Wayne was staring at her from across the table, giving her a vague look that hovered somewhere between disbelief and total plausibility. His silence added to her anxiety. She gulped her saliva and her stomach grumbled. *Did I do something weird?*

Lacey's gaze darted around suspiciously. Being as timid as she was, it had taken a great deal of courage and preparation to write letters to her companions. She couldn't possibly have gotten something wrong. She desperately tried to stay strong.

"S-So what's the matter with that? I checked the addresses on the envelopes multiple times before putting them into the box. I think they should've gotten

there fine!”

“Yeah, they’ll get there. But once they arrive, you should expect a reply. If you don’t register your home address, the mini-dragons can’t deliver any mail you get back.”

She crumbled in an instant.

“I-I’ve never gotten a letter from anyone besides you before, so I didn’t even think about that...”

“That thing I made with magic? When you tried it, it went fast enough to kill me, so you made the right choice in sending your mail by dragon post. Well done.”

“W-Wahhh...”

Wayne complimented her on even small things. But Lacey was just too clumsy, and that made her feel a little suffocated. She had thought she was going forward, but she’d just marched right into a ditch instead. She felt so mortified that she just wanted to curl up in a hole and stay there.

“All you have to do to register is send your address to the tamer guild, so it’s pretty easy. Wait, does this mansion even have a mailbox?”

Lacey was already on the verge of death. In order to receive mail back, she’d have to start by making a mailbox. That had been completely outside of her expectations. She covered her face with both hands and silently drooped.

Wayne frantically tried to cheer her up. “W-Well, if you tell them that you’re the Dawn Witch, you might be able to register individually even without a mailbox, like me. And if that doesn’t work, we can just make you one. Yeah, I can make one for you!” He patted Lacey’s shoulder. “Just let me handle it!”

Wayne was an all-rounder hero who had repaired the mansion roof and was now even going to craft a mailbox. Lacey almost felt that he was *too* versatile, but this wasn’t the time to bring it up.

“You’re right. A reply might be coming even as we speak! We can’t just sit down and relax!”

“Precisely.”

“But in the first place, I might not get any replies back. I wonder if I’m just getting way, way ahead of myself...”

“Doesn’t swinging from high to low like that wear you out?”

Wayne then encouraged her to settle down and drink her tea. Lacey took a melancholy sip. Just then, Tee and the boar charged over toward her.

“Kyew kyew kyew kyew kyew-wee!!!”

“Grr-oink-oink grr-oink-oink grr-oink-oink-oink!!!”

She nearly spit out her tea. “Wh-What’s the matter with you two guys?”

Ignoring Wayne’s grumble of “Not two guys, two animals” for the moment, Lacey stood up in surprise and ran over to the two alarmed pets. Then she noticed that there was a monster buried in the fur of the boar’s back. Tee looked in one direction and frantically waved its wings in another as it cried, “Kwee kwee.” It was looking toward the field, so Lacey could generally gather that Tee had found it there, called over the boar, and had brought it to her.

The small monster lying limp on the boar’s back seemed to be unconscious. It didn’t have any conspicuous wounds, but it was probably exhausted.

“This little thing...” Lacey knit her brows as she peered at the boar’s back. Behind her, Wayne bent his tall body over and poked his head out. Just like Lacey, Wayne was also at a loss. After all, this was the very kind of monster they’d just been talking about.

“No doubt about it. It’s a mini-dragon.”

The dragon’s nostrils flared as if in response.

At the time, nobody could have known that this would be the first encounter in a long relationship between Lacey and this one tiny monster.

* * *

“Pyuu-ee pyu pyu pyu, pyu pyu pyu pyewww!”

The reenergized mini-dragon was gobbling up a pile of crunchy raw carrots. The plentiful medicinal herb garden in the backyard of Lacey’s mansion was like a feast to monsters.

The mini-dragon had started out by eating the herbs it had been given out of charity. After that, its stomach had rumbled, it looked all around, and then it charged at the crate of carrots Lacey had been planning to bring into the house.

Its head had gotten stuck and its tiny body couldn't get any farther in, so instead it writhed around in panic. Lacey had been confused about what it was trying to do, but she'd managed to get it out. After that, she'd brought it in the house and gave it carrots on a plate, thus leading to now.

"Wayne, this is definitely a mini-dragon, right?"

"Yeah. But it seems a bit smaller than an adult. This one might be a juvenile."

Lacey observed the mini-dragon as she sat in the mansion's kitchen.

Tee and the boar had at first worried over the mini-dragon's voracious appetite. As if wondering "Won't eating all that give it an upset stomach? Is it okay?" they paced around restlessly. But eventually, they realized that it was their own lunchtime, and they were now gorging down a salad of healing herbs and vegetables on the sidelines. Lacey wished they would slow down a little. Nobody was going to steal it from them.

"Buuurp." The mini-dragon seemed to be satiated at last. It rolled over on the floor, exposing its swelled tummy.

The mini-dragon was a little bigger than Tee, but considering that Tee was also still growing, they might have ended up around the same size as adults. It had glossy dark green scales, and its eyes—contentedly cast downward at the moment—were round, black, and large. On its back, it had wings as large as the rest of its body. It seemed strange that it could lie down without the wings getting in the way, but they seemed to deftly adjust to a convenient angle.

Wriggle, wriggle, flop, flop. The mini-dragon twisted around on the floor.

"It's getting really comfortable."

"Yeah..."

Lacey met Wayne's gaze and nodded. The mini-dragon seemed *too* incautious. Either that or it maybe was trying to do something about parts that the healing herbs couldn't restore, given that it had been very worn out when it

arrived.

“Hey, can I ask where you came from? Do you know where your home is?”

“Pyu-whoaaa...”

“Guess that won’t work... Well, it’s safe to say that it’s a lost dragon. Let’s send a letter of inquiry to the tamer guild. If this is a postal dragon, then they’ll be able to find its owner right away.”

“Okay. Thank you. Please do that.”

She had put her trust in him. Once Wayne got Lacey’s approval, he stood up and whistled outside the window. Wayne’s exclusive postal service promptly arrived. He handed over a letter he’d written and requested express delivery. A response arrived the next day.

At this rate, they could get this resolved before Wayne ran out of time off and had to return to the capital. Relieved, they unsealed the response envelope, but...

There are currently no reports of any missing mini-dragons.

Lacey and Wayne both gripped the letter and grimaced. From behind them came “kwee kwee” and “grr-oink” sounds as the three creatures happily played together.

* * *

All right, recruit! Allow me to explain our mission! Tee spread its wings sternly and screeched, “Nnn-kweeeeeee!”

The mini-dragon sitting squatly at the edge of the field inclined its head. “Pyuu?”

Tee believed itself to have saved the collapsed mini-dragon from its predicament, which made the mini-dragon inferior to it. It felt the need to assert itself as the other monster’s senior. The boar oinked and benevolently watched over Tee.

“Kwee kwee kyeew-wee!” *Eliminate! Any enemies! That target! Lacey’s field!* Tee slapped its wings out and struck a pose.

Lacey's field was extremely attractive to monsters. Although she wasn't aware of it, permeating the soil with her rich mana had caused the medicinal herbs to mutate. The more herbs that monsters ate, the stronger they grew. There was no end to the monsters who wanted some for themselves, and while there hadn't been any yet, it was possible that humans might become enemies as well. That was why it was crucial to be vigilant every day and snack on medicinal herbs in order to build up strength.

"Kweeh kyew-kwee!"

"Grr-oink."

"Pyuu-wuu?"

In this fashion, they kept a lookout for enemies while snacking on any yummy-looking herbs they came across. It was a taste test, so to speak. Just as importantly, they were picking matured stems rather than young buds, pruning the growth in order to produce herbs of even higher quality.

Tough, isn't it? Like this, see! Right here! Tee explained as it pecked at the food with its beak. The lumbering boar also chowed down. The mini-dragon inclined its head in confusion, but followed suit. To Lacey, it just looked like the three creatures were playing, but nothing could be farther from the truth. They were always as serious as could be.

"If that monster doesn't belong to the Dragon Postal Service, then is it feral?"

"I haven't heard much anything about mini-dragons living in the wild, but it's a possibility. What do we do next, then?"

Lacey and Wayne seemed to be discussing something with sober looks, but that was none of the monsters' business. *We have to revamp our strategy for protecting the field!* Tee cried. The boar firmly agreed.

"Tamable monsters don't have to be eradicated, but I'm not sure it's the best idea to just release it back into the wild."

"It looks like it's still a juvenile, so its parents might be nearby."

"Hmmm..."

In contrast to Lacey and Wayne's quiet conversation, the monsters were

getting down to business. *Found some!* Tee expressed with a “kwee kwee.” There was a new strain of medicinal herb growing there. *And it tastes really yummy.*

What?! All three of them jumped at it and munched or pecked it down, their butts wiggling in the air.

“Mini-dragons can be trusted with the postal service, so that means they’re a clever and docile species. It can probably survive if left on its own, but I’d still worry about it,” Lacey said. “I mean, I’ve already got two pets, so a third one wouldn’t make a difference...”

“This mansion’s definitely big enough for it,” Wayne remarked. “Why don’t you give it a name and tame it?”

“I-I don’t think giving it a name is really...”

“Well, I guess it’s good enough that you’re lending it a room. By the way, they’re eating a ton over there. Is that okay?” Wayne pointed a finger at the trio, who turned around and met Lacey’s gaze. They immediately froze.

Lacey thought about it for a little. “Yeah. They’re always helping me out, and it looks like they know how to moderate themselves.”

As soon as Lacey responded, the group resumed their feasting with even greater intensity. They weren’t even looking at Lacey and Wayne anymore.

“If you say so, then I guess it’s all right...?” Wayne tilted his head and gave a strained smile. Meanwhile, Lacey brainstormed more about how to find the mini-dragon’s parents.

* * *

The mini-dragon had been stuffing its face with herbs, but soon after, it suddenly shrieked, “Pikyaaa!”

It had remembered its very important mission. It had been focusing on recovering from its wounds and exhaustion, so its mission had completely slipped its mind. The mini-dragon used its tail as support and skillfully stood up on its hind legs while its front paws trembled.

What’s the matter, recruit? Tee talked down to it with a “kwee.”

The mini-dragon frantically told Tee. “Pyu pyu pyu-pyuu-ee! Pyu-pyuu-ee, pyu pyu pyuu!”

“Kyew-kwuuuuuuh?!”

“Grr-oink-oink grr-oink?!”

“Sounds like they’re having fun over there,” Wayne commented.

“I’m glad they’re getting along,” Lacey agreed.

The monsters’ panic didn’t get across at all. Lacey and Wayne just watched them peacefully. It was a stark contrast.

Tee summarized what the distressed mini-dragon had said. In short, the mini-dragon had been in the middle of transporting an “important thing” when it had been attacked by monsters and barely escaped with its life. It had dropped the “important thing” at that time, but since it remembered the scent, it could find the object again. It had to be retrieved somehow, the mini-dragon sincerely pleaded.

Now that it had regained its stamina and its stomach was full, the mini-dragon had to go recover the object, or so it asserted. At this, Tee screeched, “Kwuh?!” The approximate location was a whole mountain away. It wasn’t a distance that a young monster could easily travel.

Hold on. Tee reined in the mini-dragon with a flap of its wings. Then it waddled over to Lacey’s feet.

“Hmmm, mini-dragons have a good sense of smell... If we can spread its scent over a wide area so its parents catch a whiff... But how... Oh, what’s up, Tee?”

“Kyewww-wark?! Kwuh kwuuuuuuuhhh!”

“Sorry, I’m a little busy right now. You can show me your dance later.”

It then despondently trudged back.

Lacey could guess the general idea of what Tee and the boar wanted to tell her through pantomime, but it was ultimately just body language. It was very approximate, so whether or not the intricate details got across made a huge difference. Tee had vehemently moved its wings to convey a sense of urgency, but Lacey had just interpreted this as it wanting to show her an intense dance.

Tee felt a mix of frustration and sadness within.

The mini-dragon would have a tough time on its own, so Tee had wanted to borrow help from Lacey, but it couldn't make her understand what was going on. Lacey seemed to be preoccupied with something else, so it was bad timing.

"Nkwee..." it moped. But then it dynamically stretched its wings upward with a "Kwuuh!" Since the mini-dragon was a new recruit, then it fell to the senior to provide support for the junior.

The three of us together should go retrieve the dropped "important thing"! Tee yelled. The mini-dragon's eyes sparkled.

Oh, all right, the boar shook his head with a "grr-oink." But of course, he had no intention of stopping them.

Tee flapped its prized wings, and the mini-dragon energetically took off to the skies. The boar chased after the two of them, kicking up a dust storm in his wake.

Lacey was mumbling under her breath about "that wouldn't work" and "not that either," apparently deep in thought. She didn't notice the trio. But Wayne did.

"You sure they're okay?" Wayne asked with folded arms as he watched the three monsters run into the distance.

* * *

The trio ran and flew over fields and mountains.

Tee knew the approximate direction and distance and therefore took the lead when they first set out, but the mini-dragon surprisingly kept up with its fast pace. *At this speed, I can keep going just a little farther,* the trio thought to themselves as they zipped forward as fast as the wind.

The boar's threatening roar made the lesser monsters scatter and go away. Although he had once been captured by Brooks, he was a veteran fighter.

They would reach their destination soon. In order to locate the "important thing," Tee and the mini-dragon dropped their altitude and plunged into the forest.

Oo-eek-eek-eek-eek...

As soon as they did, a creepy chattering echoed through the forest.

There was a little bit of sunlight filtering in through the dense tree growth, but it was still dim enough to make one forget that it was the middle of the day. The *oo-eek-oo-eek* voices came from the right, left, up, and down, bouncing from every direction as they jeered at the trio.

Confronted with the bizarre chatters, the mini-dragon made a pathetic “pyuru pyuru” cry and cowered. It had said that it had dropped the “important thing” after being attacked by monsters. These must have been the ones.

“KYEWWW!”

Hey, you guys! Tee shouted at the voices coming from who-knows-where.

“Oo-eek-eek...” The response just rubbed it the wrong way.

Suddenly, the forest moved. The coiling ivy and tree branches intertwined in complex ways to create a “ceiling” that closed off the forest from the sky and “walls” that prevented travel. In no time at all, the trio was trapped within the forest.

Tee was shocked at how the forest itself had moved as if it were alive.

“Oo-eek-eek-eek...” A single monster slowly appeared before the stunned trio, walking on four legs. “OO-EEEEEEK!!!”

Of course, it was a monkey. But this species had sharp, vicious claws and was even more devious than regular monkeys. This was a monster known as a caper monkey.

They were always seen in groups and worked as a team. It was said that wherever there was one, there were twenty. Judging by the way the mini-dragon was trembling with chattering teeth, there was no doubt that this was what had attacked it.

“Oo-eek-eek-eeeeeeeeek eek-eek! Oon-eek-eek-eek!”

“Kwoo?! Kwuuuuuuhhh!”

“Grr-oink!”

“Pyuu-ee...”

As this is unintelligible, what they said is explained below.

“Hey, hey, you guys stink! You reek of human stench! The kind I hate the most! You’re monsters and yet you’ve got human stench clinging to you. It’s an insult to all monsters! I’ll make you regret coming here!” the caper monkey bickered.

“I don’t give a cheep if you hate us!” Tee flared up.

The boar joined in. “Yeah, yeah!”

“Please don’t fight...” the mini-dragon whimpered.

From this point onward, all their speech is translated to prevent confusion.

“Humans chased us caper monkeys out of our habitats. We hate ’em more than anything. So we can’t stand monsters that reek of human stench!”

“Sorry to hear that, but we don’t have anything to do with the humans who wronged you. Quit lashing out at everything.”

Tee bore its own grudge against humans, but it had Lacey to credit for its birth. If not for her, Tee’s parent would have eventually died alone in a locked room. It couldn’t easily let go of its hate, but it didn’t believe that all humans were evil.

“It’s got a point. Although I was prepared for death when that beefy guy got me,” the boar agreed, then recalled what had happened with Brooks. He’d been one step away from becoming Brooks’s dinner. “But that was because I wasn’t strong enough. I fought and lost. That’s just how things are. I highly sympathize with you losing your habitat. It’s unfortunate. But that’s no reason for you to bully this child.”

“Yeah! You guys stole the mini-dragon’s ‘important thing,’ didn’t you?! Give it back right now!”

Grr-oink grr-oink, kwee kwee. They were steaming mad.

The mini-dragon made a “pyuu-ee” sound and looked at Tee and the boar with sparkling eyes. It was captivated by these monsters who were getting angry on its behalf.

“Huh? ‘Important thing’? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The caper monkey casually denied Tee’s claim and laughed. He shook his butt in their direction to taunt them.

It had a cute, bright red butt, but more importantly, a shoulder bag that was too small for him was slung across his back.

“Th-That’s m-m-m-m-my baaaaaag!”

“What are you talking about? This is *my* bag. Don’t accuse people—well, monsters—at random.”

“It’s not random! That’s definitely got my scent on it!” The mini-dragon flapped its wings, extremely upset.

The caper monkey sneered when it saw this and grinned. “Wrong. I just picked up something that fell on the ground. I’m the head of the cunning caper monkeys. I’ve heard how the mini-dragon species let humans boss them around and how they work for some ridiculous ‘postal service’ thing. All tamed monsters are my enemy, but your kind is the worst. I can’t stand you even existing! Your luck ran out when you came through our territory!”

“Guys!” the caper monkey shouted at the forest. The whole area instantly rustled and moved. Tee’s trio shivered as they looked at their surroundings. Dozens, no, a *hundred* monsters with glowing eyes stared down from the tree branches at the trio.

Wherever you could see one caper monkey, there were twenty. Then what if you could see twenty?

OO-EEK-EEK-EEK-EEK! Laughter echoed through the inescapable forest. A human probably would have clicked their tongue. But the trio wasn’t human. So if talking things out didn’t work...

They’d have to settle things with their fists.

* * *

“Oo-eeeeeee-eek-eek-eek!” The caper monkeys took full advantage of their natural agility to jump between the trees.

The forest was their territory. There was no escaping when the branch walls

were in place. Whenever Tee spit a fireball, the branches would open a gap where it was aimed and skillfully avoid getting singed, then quickly go back to normal. The monsters, which were also known as tree monkeys, controlled the plants to attack the trio.

The enemy seemed to consider the mini-dragon, which had no combat ability, as a nonissue. They were luckily focusing their attacks on Tee and the boar.

“Kwee, kwee, kwee!” Tee dodged, dodged again, and spit out fire even though it knew it wouldn’t have any effect. It could only hope that doing so would let them find a way to break through.

Tee’s marker for keeping track of the boss monkey that had given them a whole speech was the unfitting shoulder bag. He must have wanted to see the trio’s frustrated faces, because he wasn’t hiding. Instead, he was still shaking his butt at them. Once, Tee had fallen for the taunt and spit fire at him, but he had readily dodged and then bombarded it from above with acorns and spiky chestnuts.

The monkeys had almost no attack power, but they had the overwhelming advantage in a fight. Their condition for victory was making the trio give up on retrieving the bag. It was a hundred against three in a battle of attrition, and they showed no weakness.

“Kwuhhh...”

Beating up the boss monkey was their objective. However, there were other ways to achieve victory in this battle.

Tee had whispered this to the mini-dragon while dodging attacks, but the mini-dragon had vigorously shook its head. Actually, it was hard to tell whether it had shaken its head in fearful refusal, or if it was just shaking all over. It was impressive that it could even fly like that.

The mini-dragon was probably afraid of Tee. It was thinking that Tee must be angry that it had dragged it into this annoying mess. However, nothing could be farther from the truth. Tee wasn’t fazed by this at all.

In a life-or-death situation, the mini-dragon had far fewer options than Tee, who was able to fight. However, despite its extreme fear, it had come all the

way here to protect its “important thing.”

“Nnn...kyew-ohhh!!!”

I’m not demanding that you do the impossible. I’m telling you because I believe you can do it.

The mini-dragon’s round eyes became downcast. However, it now clearly remembered its objective.

* * *

Stupid monsters, the caper monkey sneered at the red bird. It resembled a cockatrice, but some time after their fight began, he realized that it was the juvenile form of that legendary monster, the phoenix.

At first, the monkey had been annoyed at the mini-dragon and had decided to harass it by stealing the bag that it was treating with such care. He’d wanted to bully it more, but regrettably, it had gotten away. So when he noticed that it had come back to retrieve the bag, he was dancing on air...or well, on branches.

Even more than the mini-dragon, he disliked the phoenix, who was acting friendly toward those stupid humans despite being a legendary monster. The monkey certainly couldn’t win against the phoenix in terms of raw power, nor could it win against the surprisingly nimble feral pig. But it *could* make them surrender. The hundred monkeys would overrun the three of them. All they needed was time and patience. The caper monkey was confident in his victory.

But his opponent was acting strangely.

“KYEW-OHHHHHHH!”

The phoenix’s screech didn’t have any verbal meaning. It was like a cry rousing it to action. It was useless, though. Doing that would just waste its energy.

In response to the phoenix’s call, the feral pig also let out a roar. He mustered his saved energy and repeatedly rammed into the tree trunks in the caper monkey’s vicinity. A few monkeys lost their balance and fell from the shaking trees, but they simply climbed their way back up the trunks. This also seemed to be a meaningless action.

The caper monkey was suspicious of what they were trying to do, but in that moment, the phoenix spit out a humongous, blazing fireball that threatened to swallow him whole. He backed away, but even still, the terrifying, skin-searing heat closed in on him. However...

“Oo-eek-eek-eek-eek!”

I get it, he laughed. The feral pig had made a distraction, and in the meantime, the phoenix shot out a charged-up fireball. But the two of them didn’t understand: the bigger they were, the easier they were to evade. The caper monkey controlled the tree branches and swung his body around. He shook his long tail, acting completely unfazed.

Just then, the caper monkey noticed that something was off. “Oo-eek, eek-eek?!”

The bag that had been slung over his shoulder wasn’t there. *What’s going on?!* The caper monkey looked around and spotted that the bag that had been in his possession was now in the grasp of the mini-dragon, who was now falling backward toward the ground.

It must have been hiding behind the phoenix’s humongous fireball. When the caper monkey had dodged, the mini-dragon had slashed through the strap with its sharp claws and stolen it back.

“Oo-eek, eek, eek...”

He shook with rage. He tensed up to the very tip of his tail, and his face went red. Theft was *his* thing.

But even if the mini-dragon had wings, it couldn’t escape from the monkeys’ forest. The caper monkey howled at the top of his lungs, ordering the forest to take back the mini-dragon’s bag and show them a world of pain too.

* * *

As it clutched the bag it had retrieved from the caper monkey, a strange feeling was running through the mini-dragon’s head.

Do your best. I’m rooting for you. I know how amazing you are.

This had been what it was told when it first set off on this journey.

It had to hold on to and protect the bag. When the mini-dragon had been attacked by monsters and lost the bag, it had been so scared that it tried to forget all about the bag. But it just couldn't. It wanted to live up to the expectations of the person who'd told it that it was amazing.

This bag is sure to hold many words in the future. Your wings may be small, but on them, you'll cross seas and perhaps even countries.

This bag will be filled to bursting with words, and you're going to deliver them, he'd told it. This had made the mini-dragon feel a strange sense of pride. Right now, it was just a cowardly mini-dragon. But with this bag, it wouldn't be a weak monster anymore. It felt like it could become something stronger.

* * *

As the mini-dragon firmly clutched the bag, the tree branches and vines rapidly climbed up to grab it. The mini-dragon's wings, which had been frozen as stiff as ice, gradually melted free.

Escaping from the plants that the caper monkeys manipulated was easy. The mini-dragon flipped over its falling body and flew straight ahead. The caper monkey laughed at it as if to say *What are you trying now?*

"Eek-eek, eek-eek...?!"

His easygoing expression quickly changed to one of shock.

Behind the mini-dragon, another one of Tee's fireballs approached. This gigantic fireball was even more charged-up and was rapidly gaining speed as the wind boosted it. It was hot enough to sear the mini-dragon's tail. When it had heard the strategy, the mini-dragon had shook its head and insisted it couldn't do it. But Tee had told it that it was possible. At that time, Tee's eyes had looked like *his*.

The caper monkeys shrieked and moved the trees with a rustle, running away so that they wouldn't get burned.

Now! the mini-dragon said with a mustered cry. A section of the ivy which formed a dome around the sky hurriedly opened a hole to let the fireball escape outside. The mini-dragon flew through it faster than the fireball.

It was like everything had turned to light.

Its vision had gone totally white. Within this space, the mini-dragon dreamed again.

The species known as mini-dragons couldn't fight, so they didn't really deserve the name "dragon." The reason they were the only kind of monster working for the postal service was due to their unparalleled aerial velocity.

However, they were unable to attain the necessary speeds while they were juveniles. In many cases, they were preyed on by other monsters. That was why humans protected the young mini-dragons and coexisted with them.

The mini-dragons were glad to have a place to put their speed to use and enjoyed delivering bags as fast as they could. They had many friends as well. However, while this was the most natural thing in the world for the rest of its kindred, this particular individual was terrified to death of the job.

What if it was attacked by monsters? What if it couldn't deliver a letter? Most of all, it was terrified of betraying the trust of the person who'd said it would be okay.

You really are a scaredy-cat, came a weary but warm voice as the mini-dragon whimpered, "Pii pii." *It's a shame, since you have such exceptional speed. I've never had a mini-dragon this small take the test before. Nobody can catch up to you when you fly your fastest, Piana. I know that one day, you'll be the absolute fastest mini-dragon in the whole of the Dragon Postal Service.*

The light waned.

The mini-dragon regained focus and turned its body with force. A moment later, the fireball burst in the sky.

Its heart was pounding so hard that it hurt. It clutched the bag even tighter and looked up.

It was under a clear blue sky.

"Piyahhh..."

The victory condition for this brawl was to steal back the bag from the boss monkey. The mini-dragon had just escaped from the forest with the bag in its

possession.

When Tee had explained the strategy, it had told the mini-dragon to get away as fast as it could. The mini-dragon wasn't worried about leaving them behind. On the contrary, it would've just gotten in their way if it had hung around. Now the question was just whether it could move the right way like Tee had instructed.

The mini-dragon's whole body melded into the blue of the sky. It noticed that it was shaking all over—not from fear, but from overflowing joy that it had succeeded, that it too was capable. It was filled with a baseless feeling that from now on, no matter what happened, it would be okay.

No, I shouldn't be thinking about this. Right now, I have to get away, the mini-dragon thought. But just as it was about to flap its wings...

"P-Pikyaaa?!"

Losing focus right after getting out had been a bad move. Vines had tangled around the mini-dragon's legs while it wasn't paying attention and were tugging it, trying to pull it back into the forest.

I messed up! it thought, full of regret. All seemed lost. But suddenly, its body became lighter. Someone had picked it up with one hand.

The man cleanly sliced through the vines tangled around the mini-dragon with his long sword, running on top of the dome without a single wasted movement. He shifted the mini-dragon to his shoulder, then whirled back around and shockingly ran down into the monkeys' forest. The mini-dragon didn't know humans could move like that, so it doubted whether this man was a human at all.

But then it remembered. This person was the man named Wayne it had seen earlier. With superhuman athleticism, the man jumped from one branch to another without flinching even once.

"So?" Wayne let go of the mini-dragon. He looked around and rested his sword on his shoulder, inclining his head. "I thought you three were acting sneaky, so I came to check up on you. What's going on here?"

"Kwee!"

“Grr-oink!”

The pair suddenly turned their faces away. They weren’t very good actors.

“Uh-huh.” Wayne smiled amusedly. He shrugged at the hissing caper monkey. “This is a pretty uneven battle. Sorry, but these guys are with me. I hope you’re ready for a beating.”

His sword flashed, and he grinned.

It had been a hundred against three, and now it was a hundred against four.

Only one person had joined the fray, and yet the battle was settled in no time at all.

* * *

The caper monkeys had been beaten to a pulp and stacked in a pile with their eyes all spinning. In front of them, Wayne sighed.

“I followed on horseback at first, but you guys were going through some pretty tangled overgrowth, so then I had to run on my own feet. After that, I lost sight of you, and when I looked at the forest, there was suddenly this weird green dome.”

Wayne explained the reason he’d arrived late, but the monsters all standoffishly faced away from him. This was another form of human-monster relationship. Wayne had assumed that they’d be able to handle things on their own one way or another, so he wasn’t trying to earn their gratitude by saving them.

“You guys are monsters, so it’s fine with me if you do whatever you want, but...hey, what the heck?!”

Tee and the boar ignored Wayne and briskly headed back. The mini-dragon was confused as to what it should do, but then apparently decided that it should leave as well. It zipped past and headed back faster than the rest of the bunch.

Wayne, left behind on his own, shouted, “WHY?!” and ran after them. On the way, he retrieved the horse he’d tethered partway there and returned to Plume Village.

They made better time on their return trip. Wayne and Tee's group arrived at Lacey's mansion at approximately the same time. It had only taken them a few hours between morning and afternoon, but it had been a bit of a big adventure.

Wayne had been concerned about the trio and followed after them as soon as they left. He didn't know what he was going to say to Lacey.

"Where'd you all go?" Lacey asked with a clueless look once they got back. The tea table was still set outside, and she was stirring something on top of it. *Knead, stir, knead, stir.*

* * *

The three monsters and one person who seemed somehow more ragged than this morning looked at each other. Wayne spoke for them all and answered, "A little way out."

Tee made a "phwee phwee" sound to imitate a whistle without actually blowing air out and tried to play it off. The boar snorted and swished the tuft of its skinny tail, facing away. The mini-dragon very caringly rubbed a bag with a torn strap against its cheek. Obviously something had happened, but since they were so transparent that even Lacey could see through them, she conversely lost interest in prodding them for more details.

It wasn't as if Lacey hadn't been worried about the four of them suddenly disappearing, but she trusted that they would be all right. After all, Wayne was with them. So when she pondered what she could do while everyone else was out, she decided to create something.

She repeatedly kneaded a white powder, then wrapped it in a cloth and wrung it.

"What are you doing there, Lacey?"

"I thought I'd create a scent. That little one doesn't know how to get back, right? Then the best thing to do is to have someone else come pick it up. Mini-dragons have a keen sense of smell, right?"

"Pyu-whoa?" The mini-dragon flapped its wings and hovered in the air. Lacey had noticed that it now had a bag she hadn't seen before, so she'd surmised that it had gone to pick it up. However, the fact still remained that she'd been

at a loss as to where they'd gone.

"The Dragon Postal Service uses mini-dragons not just because they're fast, but because their noses are good enough to locate people from far away, or so I've heard. So I thought that it might be worth infusing this little one's smell."

She had thought that she might be able to create something new by crossing the properties of a sachet together with a failed product from when she'd formulated her healing potions. However, coming up with the best ratio had stumped her, and before she'd realized it, whole hours had passed.

Wayne and the monsters looked at each other. "All right." He rolled up his sleeves. "I'll help. What do you want me to do?"

"Kwoo!"

The boar sniffled, and naturally, the mini-dragon flicked its big tail as well.

"Huh? I'm fine. Aren't you tired? Get some rest. Besides, Wayne, you have to leave here tomorrow afternoon so you can get back to the capital."

"Fine, if I'm just gonna get in your way, then never mind."

"Th-That's not what I meant!" Lacey objected.

"I know. Sorry, I was just being facetious. Let me stay with you."

For some reason, she felt her heart thump.

Lacey was reminded of when he'd told her "Stay by my side," and the cloth plopped out of her hands. But she quickly shook her head.

"What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing...huh? I'm not sure, it's really nothing. Nothing...? Th-That's not it, I mean, if you want to help, then I'll take you up on that, I guess..." She patted her chest and pushed aside the strange feeling in her heart.

In any case, many hands would make light work. She hadn't found the right ratio to make the powder clump up well yet. She'd figured out what ingredients to use, but slightly changing their amounts and testing them out would be tedious work.

After setting up a short-legged table for the creatures to use, Lacey explained

things.

“First, you add baking powder to the bowl... Next, add citrus juice. Each of us will be using a different kind of citrus. Then I’ll use water magic to create a mist and add a little bit of water at a time.”

They each used a spoon and fork to knead and mix. Of course, since the boar couldn’t hold these, it just rammed its bowl with its head and skillfully shook the contents around. Lacey wondered if this was really a legitimate method, but decided to ignore it for now.

The mini-dragon had gotten its whole head stuck in the bowl and was flailing its legs around. Wayne helped it out. Then Tee gave an irritated “KWUUUUUUH!” squawk. But it seemed to be satisfied after yelling and just went back to mixing, its wings rustling as it stirred.

Lacey wondered what that had been about. Maybe it didn’t like the water getting mixed in. She tried to tell Tee that it didn’t have to push itself, but it just faced away with a “phwee.” It was rather unusual behavior, but it showed that Tee wanted to try its hardest.

“If it gets too unpleasant, stop right away.”

“Kwoo.”

There wasn’t a lot of water in the mix, so she opted to just keep an eye on things and let Tee decide its limits.

They each needed to change the amount of powder and figure out which clumped together best. When Lacey had created her healing potion, she’d considered making it solid so that it could be carried around easily. Ultimately, she’d determined that it would be too hard to consume and thus gave up on the idea. However, if it *wasn’t* meant to be eaten, then it could be applied toward other purposes.

They experimented with a variety of mixtures. Adding more baking powder made it more stable. Adding in salt made it even firmer, but she decided to omit it this time.

“So, Lacey, what exactly are we making here?”

“I want to try diffusing the mini-dragon’s smell so that its friends know that it’s here. I want it to spread over a wide radius, so I was thinking about launching it into the sky, but then I have to consider what happens when it falls. So something that disintegrates would be ideal.”

“Okay...?” Lacey was acting rather talkative, unlike her normal self. Wayne was puzzled by this, but it was fine as long as she was having fun. He encouraged her to continue. “And then what?”

“Right! This...well, for convenience’s sake, I’ll call it a bomb. This bomb dissolves in hot water. So if we knead in a scent while making it, the scent should hang in the air when it disintegrates. When we launch the bomb, I’ll envelop it in water magic and then cast an explosion spell on it. That way, it’ll spread far, and when it falls down, it’ll be like rain.”

“By the way, how do you propose to launch it?” he asked after a brief pause.

“With a slingshot, maybe?”

That was one weapon that Wayne didn’t have. “Hmm...” he thought. “If a toy’s good enough, then Allen might have one.”

“That’ll work!” Lacey clapped her hands together.

Tee made another irritated “KWUUUUUUH!” squawk, became satisfied after getting it out of its system, and resumed stirring the contents of the bowl with its wings. There was a repetitive clunking sound of the boar’s tusks hitting the bowl. Wayne had gone to the village to go borrow a slingshot from Allen, and when he came back, he was carrying a ton of food. Lacey could imagine the gist of what had happened.

They kneaded an ample amount of flowers into the bomb and used Lacey’s magic to dry it out.

Since they hadn’t added salt, the bomb crumbled easily and had to be wrapped in cloth. The mini-dragon was enraptured by the mild fragrance and hugged the bomb close to its chest, along with its bag.

Allen had been confused as to what they needed a slingshot for, but he’d lent one of his little brothers’ toys. The sun had set completely by that time. They chowed down on Wayne’s homemade dinner, and Lacey spent the night making

a replacement strap for the mini-dragon's bag. The next morning arrived.

"All right." Lacey's lips drew tight as she raised the toy slingshot straight up. Wayne could probably launch it higher, but enveloping the bomb in water magic while shooting it was something only Lacey could do. "Here goes...!"

As a breeze blew through the open field and rustled the grass, she cast wind magic on top of water magic to further enhance it, then launched the bomb with a *sproing*.



It shot straight up into the clear blue sky. When it was no more than a speck, Lacey quickly pulled out her staff and hummed an incantation.

“Wait, hold on. Doesn’t that bomb only have a flower fragrance? We didn’t put in the mini-dragon’s scent.”

“...Huh?!”

Wayne looked up at the bomb with his arms folded. Lacey had already finished casting her spell. “Oh crap!” she exclaimed. Not even a moment later, they were hit by an intense shock wave from Lacey’s explosion magic.

“Grroink-oink-oink-oink-oink!” The boar braced his four legs and hung on for dear life. Behind it, the mini-dragon shrieked and Tee fell over backward, flapping its wings.

Lacey stooped down and held on to her hat so that it wouldn’t get blown away. Beside her, Wayne was the only one who hadn’t budged. His bangs just got wildly swept up.

“How did *that* happen?” he asked.

“I was so focused on getting it to fly as far as possible that I overdid it...”

“I get where you’re coming from, but don’t do that again.”

He was right. It was a good thing that just in case, they’d moved out to a nearby field instead of staying in the mansion’s backyard.

After a short delay, there came a mild flower fragrance and droplets of water like a sun shower.

“I messed up,” Lacey said finally.

“Seems like it.”

The two humans murmured to each other, dumbfounded. Out of the corner of their eyes, they could see the monsters running around.

Water! Water! Tee was trying to evade the horrid stuff, whereas the boar and mini-dragon were having a great time.

All they had done was spread a nice smell around. The fragrance was much weaker than expected. It was carried off by the breeze and vanished, leaving

only a faint trace.

“It’s tough doing this outside,” Lacey sighed and was about to consider her next move when a shadow appeared in the sky.

It was backlit, so she couldn’t see it well. Lacey squinted and lifted the brim of her hat. The shadow quickly grew larger, and another blast of air accompanied it. This time, Wayne pulled on Lacey’s arm and shielded her behind him. His other arm reached for the sword at his waist.

With a loud flapping sound, a dragon big enough for a person to ride came down from the sky. In fact, there *was* a child mounted on the dragon. The child looked to be the same age as or slightly younger than Lacey. It was hard to tell because one eye was hidden by long bangs, but judging by his figure, he seemed to be male. The boy jumped down from the dragon’s back. Wayne immediately became even more wary, but soon relaxed his guard.

“You’re a tamer?”

“Yes! You’re the hero Sir Wayne, correct? I’m familiar with the scent of all persons who are registered as an individual with the Dragon Postal Service!”

Wayne made a dismayed face. Few people would be happy to hear that their scent was recognizable. Lacey poked her head out from behind Wayne’s back and noticed that the boy was wearing an armband. It had the insignia of the tamer guild: a likeness of a dragon and a letter.

The boy kept his greeting short. He looked around, calling out someone’s name. “Piana!” The mini-dragon bounded out. Apparently its name was Piana.

It happily cried out, “Pyuu-ee, pyuu-ee!” like a darling child. The boy’s expression softened and he meant to indulge it, but then he quickly tried to scowl. “Hey! You can’t join the Dragon Postal Service with this kind of performance!”

Piana made a pitiful “pyu-EEK” sound and cowered.

“The Dragon Postal Service...?” Lacey tilted her head in confusion.

“Yes!” the boy responded enthusiastically.

Wayne had inquired to the Dragon Postal Service about whether there were

any missing mini-dragons, but they had responded that there weren't any. Wondering what was going on, Lacey and Wayne looked at each other. The boy had no idea why they were making these expressions and blinked repeatedly at them.

All their questions would be answered shortly after this.

* * *

In short, Wayne's inquiry to the tamer guild had come too early.

Piana didn't belong to the Dragon Postal Service. It was just a monster who had been tamed by the tamer guild and had been in the middle of its examination to *join* the postal service. The goal of the exam was to protect the bag and deliver it to the examiner.

Wayne had contacted the tamer guild regarding a lost mini-dragon, but at that moment, Piana was taking the exam. Therefore, it had been too early to declare it lost.

Additionally, the mini-dragon in charge of Wayne's mail was an express one. If it had been just a little slower, perhaps news of Piana would have reached the guild. But since they had been in too much of a hurry, they had ended up missing the information that came in later.

While everybody looked at each other in confusion, another letter came in from the guild elucidating the situation.

The boy, who was Piana's owner, had arrived right away because of the bomb that Lacey had launched. They'd completely forgotten to imbue Piana's scent, but since Piana had helped make it and then fallen asleep while holding it, enough of its scent had seeped in.

Apparently, the boy had known where Piana was all along, but the massive shock wave had startled him enough to make him come check in on the situation.

"That's a full-blown dragon, right? Those are rare," Wayne commented while observing the dragon that the boy had ridden in on.

Mini-dragons like Piana didn't have much of a size difference between

juveniles and adults. While mini-dragons and dragons shared similar names, they were actually different species. Wayne stroked his chin and looked up at the dragon that was taller than him. The dragon made a nickering sound.

“Yes, it’s specifically a wind dragon,” the boy confirmed. “It’s not one of those legendary ancient dragons that show up in fairy tales or a temperamental red dragon. I think that phoenix is far more unusual. This is the first time I’ve seen one.”

The boy looked at Tee with a sparkle in his eyes, but Tee just apathetically moved onto Lacey’s head and squatted down. Lacey was upset that it was acting so standoffish, but the tamer boy still seemed to be having fun. He was probably used to this. However, he quickly stiffened his expression and bent down in front of Piana by his feet.

“Piana, I hear you lost your bag during the exam. That’s an automatic disqualification. Plus you lost track of where you were and didn’t notice our scents nearby.”

“Piyahhh...” Piana hung its head dolefully.

“You’ve got more talent than any mini-dragon I’ve taken care of so far, but when push comes to shove, you can’t get the job done. You’re going to have to train back up from the basics.”

“Pyaaa-ah!”

“What’s up? You seem really chipper.”

I can handle it! Piana had jumped at the boy.

“It’s a big difference from when you set out. Did you have some kind of good experience?”

The boy smiled and picked up Piana with one hand, then mounted the wind dragon along with it. “I apologize for the trouble, everyone. I promise to repay the favor!”

“Pyauw!”

The boy called out as he gripped the dragon’s reins. As it looked at them, Tee let out a small, sad chirp. Perhaps it had thought that it would be able to stay

with Piana forever.

After this, Piana would once again take the necessary training for joining the Dragon Postal Service. One day, it would carry loads of letters and follow a new path for itself.

Lacey suddenly felt a strange sense of kinship with it. She herself had just taken a new step forward with Starseeking.

“Um, if you pass the exam...!” As soon as the thought crossed her mind, she found herself shouting out. “Can you come visit us again as a courier...?!”

Lacey regretted it as soon as she said it. She went red to the tips of her ears and bit her lip. But the tamer boy met eyes with Piana to check, then nodded with a grin.

“Of course! It seems Piana’s memorized your scents perfectly!” the boy interpreted for Piana. Then the dragon soared upward.

They were buffeted by a breeze, but only for a moment. The dragon quickly vanished. In the middle of the field that had gone uncannily quiet, Lacey and her friends just looked up at the now-vacant sky.

A sky that was clear blue as far as the eye could see.

* * *

“A lot’s happened, but it’s about time for me to head back to the capital,” Wayne murmured to himself. Next to him was one of the monsters: the boar. Tee wasn’t expressing its feelings outright, but looked somewhat forlorn, so Lacey was busily picking out tasty herbs to cheer it up.

Wayne finished gathering up his things and set up a mailbox to the house just in case. “Last up, I’ll do some food prep,” he said as he stood steadfastly in the kitchen. Just then, Wayne spotted the boar nestled under the table with his back dismissively turned toward him.

“Well, you had it kind of rough this time.”

The boar was a species of monster known as a feral pig. Wayne of course knew that that boar understood every word that he was saying.

“Lacey can get fixated on the weirdest things, but hanging around its

owner...well, not exactly, but she's really rubbed off on Tee, I think. I get dragged around by her all the time. Must be a lot of trouble for you too."

Though he said this, it made Wayne a little happy to go through the trouble. While he was mystified by this, he felt that one day, he'd be able to understand his own feelings in clear terms.

The boar still made no reaction, so Wayne decided to just keep speaking by himself. "Maybe you overheard, but Piana...or well, we didn't know it was named Piana yet. I had asked Lacey if she wanted to give a name to the mini-dragon. But she said no."

He was talking about when they had been discussing what to do with Piana. Would she release it into the wild or keep it in the mansion? In the latter instance, just calling it "mini-dragon" would be inconvenient, so he'd casually made a suggestion. But Lacey had looked somewhat sour.

"I think she was scared of shouldering the burden. It was the same way when she named Tee. She was feeling really self-conscious and insecure about it."

To put it less nicely, she was hopelessly scared of taking responsibility. However, one could also say that she was just being cautious. Lacey was currently figuring out what she was and wasn't capable of. She was trying out one thing at a time and was adding to her pile only when she finally felt like she could handle it.

It was plain frustrating to watch her. He just wanted to drop a whole stack onto her pile. But that wouldn't be what was best for her, so Wayne was constantly trying to restrain himself. His habit of folding his arms was to prevent his hands from acting on their own. Of course, there had been plenty of times when he couldn't hold back anymore.

He was doing the same thing even now.

"Hey, want *me* to give you a name?"

The boar didn't have a name, and nobody called him anything. He had started out as a freeloader, but now, he was like Tee's family. Instead of making a reply, the boar clamored under the table.

Seeing this, Wayne could more or less guess what the boar wanted to say. He

bent down and looked underneath. The boar shot him a sharp glare.

“I guess it’s pretty safe to say you hate me.”

“Grroink!”

“What, that’s the only time you give me a response? Excuse me for living. You tried to attack Lacey when we first met, remember? So come on, all right? In fact, if you wanna complain, tell it to Brooks.” The boar had traumatic memories of getting strung up by Brooks as a gift of meat. “But come on, isn’t it inconvenient? I can just give you a name, quick and easy.”

“Grroink!”

“You don’t like that idea, huh? You’re gonna wait for Lacey?”

“Grr-OINK!”

“All right, then, if you insist.” Wayne stood up. The boar sniffled with his large snout and wildly swished his skinny tail for good measure. Turning around so the boar couldn’t see him, Wayne narrowly managed to stifle a smile.

He tied an apron around his waist and thought for a brief moment about what to make. He quickly started to rhythmically chop with a kitchen knife, envisioning how the food would turn out.

Lacey would come in soon. When he imagined how she would react once she arrived at the lunch table, Wayne broke into a smile.

He had to return to the capital soon after this, but when he thought about Lacey, it filled him with energy.

This might have been Wayne’s new goal.

* * *

The Demon King had been defeated, and the world kept on turning. Everyone was on their way to their next destination, moving forward, pausing, and sometimes getting lost.

Anytime, any place, new beginnings awaited for them.

Afterword

Hello! For those who don't know me, I'm Hyogo Amagasa. Thank you so much for reading *Lacey Longs for Freedom: The Dawn Witch's Low-Key Life after Defeating the Demon King*!

This series was published on the Shosetsuka ni Naro website. It's been adapted into novel form after winning the gold medal in the 7th Overlap Web Novel Awards.

The protagonist, Lacey, is the country's greatest mage and has been chosen to defeat the Demon King. She and her companions surmount various challenges and set out to vanquish the Demon King...but that's already over. This book tells the story of what happens afterward.

I enjoy books, of course, but I also love video games, manga, and anime. I've been completely obsessed with these stories since I was a kid, and in particular, I loved to read epics where the hero defeated the Demon King over and over. Too many times to count, I imagined what might happen after his chaotic journey was over—the stories that weren't included within the pages. The hero might remain in the country, or he might go on a journey. It would be nice if he could live freely. This was the thought that led me to create the "Dawn Witch Lacey."

On a different subject, when I finish reading other people's works, I happily think, *Wow, that was really enjoyable! I had a great time reading that!* But at the same time, I get really sad...because I can't read that fantastic work for the first time again!

You may be wondering what I mean by this. Once I've experienced one great story, that's one less great story in the world that I've never experienced before. I wish that I could erase my memory and go back to enjoy it with a clean slate, but obviously that's not possible. I always break down thinking, *Agh, I read it... I wanted to read more, but there's no more to read...* But I definitely still feel a profound happiness while and after reading those stories. I get to

experience them again for a second or third time, and that brings new things to look forward to. I hope that my stories can be like that for somebody one day.

On one final note, I'd like to use this space to say thanks.

To the Overlap editing department and my editor in charge, H: thank you so much for your thorough guidance. To Kyouichi, who made the book more vivid and provided wonderful illustrations that conveyed the delightfulness of Lacey and her friends: I'm immeasurably grateful to have worked with you. Lastly, to the readers: I was able to continue writing thanks to all of your support. I look forward to when we can meet again.

—Hyogo Amagasa











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Lacey Longs for Freedom: The Dawn Witch's Low-Key Life after Defeating the Demon King Volume 1

by Hyogo Amagasa

Translated by Alex Honton Edited by Aldia Elwood

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