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Prologue: A Memory

Layers of heavy, oversized leaves hung above the heads of Lacey's party.

An occasional rustling came from birds flitting through the branches. They darted between the trees, flew away until they were only the size of a fingertip, then vanished into the blue sky. Lacey gently lifted the hood of her robe and squinted up at them.

Chirp, chirp, chirp... Was that the muted sound of birds singing in the distance? Or was it something else entirely?

"It'll take a while before we're out of this forest." Wayne got one foot caught on a tree root and breathed a "Whew."

"It's no problem! Feels to me like we're on a picnic!!!"

"Careful, Brooks! Don't shout so loud. What if you attract monsters?"

"Oh. Good point... You're right, Dana. SORRY!!! HRMMM!!!!!!!"

"Don't 'hrmmm' me! You're being too noisy!"

"Huh. I just can't tell whether you two get along well or not."

As she watched the stout young man incur the ire of the light green-haired woman, the girl in shorts folded her hands behind her head and gave an exasperated smile.

"Brooks, Dana, Rosie. Don't play around too much," Wayne turned around and told them.

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"All right!"
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"Very well."

"Okaaay."

Each of the three gave their own unique response.

"Lacey, are you doing okay?"

Hearing her name suddenly mentioned startled her. Lacey stopped scrunching the hem of her clothes and stood bolt upright.

It hadn't been long since they'd set off from the capital and begun their quest. They weren't complete strangers, but they weren't close enough yet to trust each other. Lacey squeezed her lips tight and breathed in a lungful of air. Then she stayed that way, biding her time.

The other members of the party seemed to be on the lookout for monsters, with Brooks at their center. Wayne kept his eyes fixed on Lacey. After a while, she realized that he was waiting for her to answer.

When you were asked a question, you answered. As basic as this concept was, Lacey was so socially inept that she couldn't respond immediately.

"Er, um..." She was flustered, and her tongue was getting tied. She clutched her rustic wooden staff with both hands.

Wayne waited for Lacey. She'd heard that he was the second son of a duke, but he wasn't impatient like Lacey's nobleman fiancé. On the contrary, he was even giving her encouragement.

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"Go on."

"Er, well..."

"Mm-hmm?"

"Um, er, w-well..."
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Just as she was about to say something, the green leaves rustled in the wind, and the sun peered out from the gaps. Wayne's blond hair caught its light and shone.

What a pretty color, Lacey thought as she looked up at Wayne.

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"Are you tired?"
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Lacey had suddenly closed her mouth and was acting vacant, which Wayne had misinterpreted as fatigue. In the end, all Lacey could do was grip her staff tightly.

So she didn't really understand the meaning behind the hand that was

stretched out to her as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Come on."

This is a story from before they defeated the Demon King.

Chapter 1: Do You Have Any Problems?

"Are you asleep?"

Suddenly, a shadow fell over her. She couldn't make out the face belonging to it, because it was backlit. The sun made a glowing outline around the shadow.

Lacey drowsily petted something relaxing in her lap, which returned an odd cry of "Kwoo." There was a pleasantly soft and fluffy sensation between her fingers.

"Heeey, Lacey? Huh, that's unusual. You wanna keep sleeping?"

The shadow's swaying hair caught the light.

Just like in my dream... Lacey thought, before jumping up with a start. "Wahhh!"

Wayne was guffawing loudly. Spooked, Tee jumped off Lacey's lap onto the ground with a flap of its wings, shooting Wayne a grouchy look before leaving.

"Sorry to wake you up. I wanted to let you know I'm going soon."

"I'm sorry too. I accidentally dozed off."

"It's okay," Wayne responded. A refreshing breeze passed through, making him softly narrow his eyes before looking out over the broad medicinal herb garden. The footprints of the murmuring wind left tracks over the herb garden, then vanished once more.

Lacey slowly took a breath and wiped away the light layer of sweat that had beaded on her forehead.



Summer had come to Plume Village.

When Lacey had first arrived in the village with only a modest amount of luggage and a staff, winter had been on the horizon. She had been a mixture of hopeful and nervous and had been too busy to savor the seasons. Before she knew it, Lacey had spent half a year in Plume Village.

It seemed both long and short at the same time. At least she could relax enough now to sit in her handmade chair and doze off while looking at her herb garden.

She hastily masked her embarrassment at having been caught sleeping. "Anyway, is that the time already? I didn't realize it'd be so soon," she noted with some confusion as she looked around and checked the position of the sun.

"Yeah. It'll be hot out, so I figured I'd give myself a little more time than usual to reach the capital. I don't want to put too much stress on my horse."

Wayne held the status of former hero and spent all his time off going back and forth between the capital and Plume Village. His reason for returning so often was that he'd get worried about whether Lacey was still alive.

Lacey, nicknamed the "Dawn Witch," had met Wayne when she traveled with him as a member of his party. He'd started looking after her before she'd had a chance to protest.

"Oh," she replied. As she observed Wayne's profile and his blond hair swaying in the breeze, she felt like she was on the verge of remembering something. She had listlessly closed her eyes under the shade of a tree, and in the dream she'd had—

That was as far as she thought before she tightly pulled down the brim of the same old hat she was currently wearing to block out the sun and hide her face.

"Hm? What's up?" Seeing her strange behavior, Wayne rubbed her head, hat and all. This happened all the time. She hunched up a little. Lacey's unruly black hair bounced as he patted her over her hat.

"Nothing," she answered, closing her mouth tightly shut. She'd felt a sudden surge of embarrassment.

When she closed her eyes, she could still see tiny stars streaking by, gently leaving a trail and then vanishing.

Don't go away. Stay at my side. Let me see you live freely from right up close, Wayne had said to Lacey about two months ago.

"Nnngh!" She bit her lips and pulled her hat even farther down. Recently, Lacey would occasionally remember these words. She didn't know why, but it made her feel fluttery inside, and in particular, she would become restless when she was near the person who'd said it.

"Seriously, what's wrong?"

Lacey was clearly acting strange. Instead of withdrawing his hand, Wayne slowly lifted up the brim of Lacey's hat and took a look at her face.

"I-It's nothing, really!" She raised her voice uncharacteristically and batted away Wayne's hand—or at least tried to, but he pulled it away first. Suddenly at an impasse, she exclaimed "It's not a big deal! I'm just tired of how helpful you are!"

"Hey, don't go complimenting me all of a sudden now."

"It's not a compliment!"

Thinking back, he had been like this during their quest as well. She must have been quite a burdensome mage, but Wayne had always turned back to face her and patiently stretched out a hand to her.

Ah, but... At the same time, she recalled something else, but she quickly took a breath and tightened her lips into a straight line. "You're in a hurry, right? You've already told me you're going. I think you should head back to the capital already."

"Don't push me, sheesh. I'm not in *that* much of a hurry. I could even wait till tomorrow. I'm just saying that if I wanted to head out today, around now would be a good time for it."

"Argh! If you're going, then just! Get! Going! Already!" She pushed strenuously at Wayne's back and knocked her fists against him repeatedly, but Lacey was too small to even make him budge. She was going red in the face.

Wayne glanced at her. "Hm, what shall I do?" he teased, standing up straight with his posture completely unaffected, until...

"Grr-oink!"

"Kyew-ohhh!"

The two monsters suddenly crashed into him.

"What was that?" He blinked. Of course, it was Tee and the boar.

"Huh? What's wrong, you two?"

"Kweeeee, kweeee..."

However, only Tee seemed to be distressed. It flapped its wings and had tears in its eyes. The boar watched Tee with concern.

Lacey and Wayne looked at each other.

After spending some time deciphering what the two were trying to say, they learned that the boar was going to return to his home.

* * *

The next morning, Tee ran around like mad on the boar's back so it wouldn't forget the feeling. Afterward, it wildly waved its wing as if it were shaking a handkerchief to say goodbye, then kept watching as the boar faded into the distance.

Incidentally, Wayne had decided to stay an extra day to see the boar off, but was currently covered in grit. Just before leaving, the boar had kicked up dirt with his hind legs, specifically targeting Wayne. For some reason, the boar didn't seem to like him, but that wasn't important at the moment.

"Nkwuuuuuhhhh..."

"It'll be lonely without him."

Tee kept sobbing "kwee kwee" atop Lacey's head. It wasn't as if they'd never see each other again, but it was still depressing not to have a friend around.

Even so, Tee's heartbreak was making Lacey feel sad as well. "Tee, don't cry. He's got his own home. He's stayed at the mansion for longer than he should have."

"Kyew-weeeee..."

"He's probably got parents and siblings. Let him go back and visit them," Wayne suggested.

"He's right. It's fine, I'm sure he'll be back soon. Wayne, don't you need to leave soon too?" she asked.

Wayne patted the grit off his clothes. "Yeah," he confirmed. There was a lot going on at the moment, but it would be more advisable to head out before it got too late in the day. "Guess I'll bring my luggage and the horse over. Can you wait a bit?"

"Okay," Lacey nodded.

Just as Wayne briefly left, an orange-haired boy came lumbering up the hill with a heavy-looking crate on his shoulder.

"Huh? Is big bro Wayne going somewhere again?" the boy blinked in puzzlement. His name was Allen. Ever since Lacey had first helped him out, he'd been periodically bringing her boxfuls of vegetables that he'd harvested from the field.

"Um, he's going to the capital, apparently."

"Huh. Must be rough going back and forth. Makes me wonder what his job is."

He's the hero. Or was, at least. But of course, Lacey couldn't say this, so she quietly looked away instead. "Anyway, Allen, you brought vegetables for me again? I could at least go pick them up myself."

"I'm the one who owes you, so I wouldn't wanna make you haul your own thank-you gift. I'm doing it because I want to, so it's fine." His freckled face broke into a smile as he giggled. Lacey couldn't argue against him.

With a groan of effort, Allen set the wood crate down on the ground with a thud.

The mansion in which Lacey lived was not only situated on the far outskirts of Plume Village, it was also on top of a hill. It must have been hard for him to haul things there. She'd told him that she'd received enough compensation already,

but Allen always stubbornly asserted that "your boyfriend asked me to do this too." Allen seemed to be mistaken about Lacey and Wayne's relationship.

But was it just her imagination? The crate seemed to be stuffed even fuller than it used to be, but, before she'd realized it, Allen's wobbly gait had become strong and steady as he carried it.

She'd heard near the end of winter that Allen was twelve, so he was probably thirteen by now. Meanwhile, Lacey would turn sixteen soon. She was still underweight with skinny arms, but she felt that she'd grown just a little taller. But somehow, even though she was getting taller too, she wasn't even at eye level with Allen—she had to look up at him.

Allen effortlessly lifted the crate he'd set on the ground back up and patted away the dirt at the bottom. "Big sis Lacey, want me to put this in the usual spot in the kitchen? Or do you want it in the cooling chamber?"

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"E-Eek..."
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"Hey, are you listening?"

"I-In the kitchen... Ah, I can carry it there with my magic."

"The job's not done till it's done!"

Allen moved swiftly, commenting about how nice it must be to live in a place with a cooling chamber. As she watched him, Lacey shuddered at how fast a child could grow. She saw him all the time, so she hadn't noticed. Her knees buckled, and her hand hovered over her mouth.

There was hardly a trace left of the boy who had crumpled to the ground when he'd first seen Lacey's magic. She felt as if he'd completely overtaken her.

Tee had jumped up onto Lacey's head, but tilted its head in puzzlement with a "Kwee?" upon seeing Lacey so dejected for no apparent reason.

Allen, who knew his way around the house by now, returned from stocking the provisions at the same time as Wayne brought over his horse by the reins with his travel luggage in tow.

"Thanks as always, Allen."

"It's no big deal. When are you coming next, big bro Wayne?"

"In another month, if I can manage it."

"Y'know, you don't have to come that often." Allen had meant to express concern for Wayne, but he realized a moment too late that it could be taken the wrong way.

"I come here because I want to," Wayne said without any hesitation, despite probably being aware of what Lacey would think.

"Whew..." Impressed by this, Allen gave a mild smile. He rubbed his upper arm and glanced over at Lacey. Of course, Lacey had lost the ability to say anything more. She turned a little red and abruptly faced away.

After that, Allen wished Wayne a safe trip, and once they finished talking some more, Wayne casually waved a hand. "See you." He mounted his horse and left.

After he was gone, Allen said, "Big bro Wayne's gone now. He travels by himself, though? What if monsters attack him?"

"He'll be fine. You don't need to worry about that. But it feels like it's suddenly gotten quieter around here," Lacey murmured vaguely, listlessly staring down at the vacant hill.

Allen folded his arms behind his head and glanced at Lacey out of the corner of his eye. He was about to say something, but then shut his mouth again.

The sun's rays beat down on the two of them. They spent a while standing around in silence before Lacey nodded. "Okay." Then she addressed Allen. "Say, since you're here, do you want to have some tea before you go?"

"You bet!"

* * *

Since he'd come all the way out in the heat, Lacey wanted to show him some hospitality as well.

Allen soothed his parched throat with tea. "Whew!" he breathed, a cheerful look spreading across his sweat-drenched face. They occasionally enjoyed tea breaks like this at the outside table that had been set under the shade of the trees. At first, Lacey had been intimidated even by the simple act of brewing

tea, but she was very happy at how she'd gradually improved.

"Do you want a refill?"

"Yeah. I'll take some...more..."

Just as Lacey was about to pour more tea into Allen's empty cup, she noticed that he'd trailed off unusually. Still holding his cup's handle, he'd turned away from Lacey and was looking elsewhere. Apparently something had captured his attention.

The tea table had been set up near the front door of the mansion. That made it more convenient to carry over pots and trays. There was also a gently sloping hill in front of the mansion. The sun was shining down brightly, and the greenery along the side of the road was growing in abundance. But Allen wasn't looking at any of that.

Then what is he looking at? She wondered.

Tee jumped atop Lacey's head, and at that moment, she had a realization.

In front of the mansion, there was a handmade sign with skillfully carved letters reading "Anything Shop, Starseeking." It had only gone up a month ago, so it was still conspicuously new.

Lacey slowly turned her face away.

"Hey, big sis Lacey?"

But there was no escaping this.

"Has your anything shop gotten any jobs at all?"

Allen's words pierced straight through her. Lacey flopped down onto the table and then quietly sank into the ground. Of course, this was a metaphor—Lacey was *actually* just pulling down the brim of her hat with both hands to hide her face and quaking as she sat. She was trembling a *lot*.

Allen watched her without saying a word. Lacey's pitiful expression said it all.

Anything Shop, Starseeking.

Lacey had fulfilled three jobs since coming to this village—and that was inflating the count by including a job she'd done for a monster. She didn't know

if that was a lot or a little, but when she'd received a job request from Brooks—her former companion—Lacey had made up her mind.

Her goal was to live her life standing firmly on her own two feet. She'd quit following the path that the country had ordered her to take. That was why this sign was a major step forward for Lacey...or at least, she had hoped it would be.

On the first day, she anxiously circled around and around the sign.

On the second day, she restlessly kept going in and out of the house.

On the third day...you get the picture.

The reason Lacey had been so depressed when she'd realized earlier how much Allen had grown was because she was frustrated at her own lack of growth. The boy whom she'd thought was still young was actually ahead of her. Meanwhile, what did she have to show for herself? All she could do right now was tremble. On top of Lacey's head, Tee danced wildly, unable to keep its balance.

"Come on, it's only been a month since you put up the sign. I'm not even sure if everyone knows you *have* a sho— Wait, I guess they do..." Allen tried to console her, but wasn't of much help.

Lacey had wished she could just put up a sign and be done with it, but she had to do more. She had needed permission to establish a new business. She'd gone to Granny, the village elder, to get it. Allen's father, Kargo, had supported her as well.

Lacey didn't have many connections, but after spending almost half a year in the village, she'd made a handful of acquaintances. She'd quietly whispered to a few other people and put in what effort she could.

However, there was a more fundamental issue.

Though they had been told that Lacey was running an anything shop that would do anything, the residents of Plume Village weren't exactly sure what to ask for. If she had been running a tool shop, they might have popped in to see it. But the villagers were satisfied with their current small-town life, and since they didn't have any problems, they didn't need to visit Lacey.

Allen had a hunch that this was the case as he observed Lacey acting depressed. The villagers were aware that Lacey was some kind of extraordinary mage, but since they didn't know anyone who could use magic well, they didn't know what it was capable of. Besides, the whole village was reaping a profit by helping Lacey manufacture sachets, so they were all relatively thriving.

Although Lacey had vaguely realized this, there was nothing she could do about it. If nobody had any problems, then there was no need for her services. It was a tragic tale.

Lacey already had a small build, but she was shrinking herself even farther. Seeing her like this, Allen felt rather sorry for her. She was lying on the table and sulking now.

"It'll be okay," he patted her shoulders. "My dad said that things are always bumpy when you first start out. Having a solid start is important, but so is the stuff that comes after. It's what you do now that counts the most. In any case, you should come down to the village sometimes. My brothers will be happy to see you, and you could use a breath of fresh air every so often, right?"

* * *

Thus, at Allen's invitation, Lacey left the mansion and went to the village, but she remained melancholy as she wobbled and clutched her staff. Tee was gliding up in the sky and basking in the sun's rays, enjoying itself as it circled around.

The perfectly cloudless weather contrasted starkly with Lacey's mood. She trudged along, quietly moping as she bumped the tip of her enlarged staff against the ground.

"What do I do...? What if I don't get any clients at all, ever...? What do I do...?"

Next to her, Allen had an inscrutable look on his face.

In general, Lacey was pessimistic and not very sociable. Allen wondered why she didn't have more confidence in herself, but that had to do with the environment that she had been in.

Lacey was without question the best mage in Croix and had earned the alias

"Dawn Witch." However, from her own point of view, this was just the result of hard work and luck. She was an orphan, so she wouldn't have been able to survive if she didn't improve her magic skills.

Only those with mana could use magic. She was of the belief that anyone with magical talent could cast magic on her level if they just dedicated their lives to it the way she did. Since she'd had very little human interaction in her life, Lacey felt that she was really nothing special.

The flaw in her logic was that nobody could possibly put forth as much hard work as Lacey had.

"Nobody *ever*? You don't have to rush things. People will come to you eventually. Anyway, I've been meaning to ask, what's up with your staff? It keeps getting bigger and smaller. Is that magic too?"

Allen had a good point, but just putting up a sign for her anything shop had required a great deal of resolve from Lacey. She'd decided to walk her own path, but the courage to do so alternatingly swelled and shrank within her. Naturally, she didn't regret making that choice, but inside her heart, there was a feeling that twinkled like the starry sky she'd seen with Wayne.

That was why, well...it was understandable that she'd feel discouraged, like she was getting nowhere.

Lacey answered Allen with a sniffle. Her voice was reduced to a whisper. "The staff itself is just a normal staff, but it changes size depending on my motivation."

"How does that work?"

"I consciously made it that way so it'd be easier for me to focus, but instead, it just seems to be influenced by how I'm feeling."

"Not sure I understand, but magic sounds really difficult."

The majority of people who possessed mana were nobles. Not only was there a limited pool of people who could use magic, but memorizing the formulas required strenuous effort. It was no surprise that common citizens were unfamiliar with magic.

Hm? Hold on, the reason I'm not getting job requests is because people don't know what mages can do...so what if I made it so that they had a better understanding of magic?

"What's up with you, sis? You just got jittery all of a sudden."

"U-Um, Allen, I think—I think I just—" Just as Lacey felt like she'd hit upon something, she was interrupted.

In front of a small house, a little girl with orange hair stood up with an audible effort. She leaned on the nearby fencing with quivering legs.

"Ah!" Lacey's eyes went wide in surprise. A moment later, the girl fell backward onto her butt. She sat stunned, her two arms still sticking out ahead of her.

Lacey and Allen looked at her with the same expression on their faces. But the girl made another grunt and once again pulled herself to her feet, her hips wobbling.

"Ah! Ahhh! Lane, be careful!"

She almost fell backward again—but before she could hit the ground, Allen swiftly slid and caught her. Safely on Allen's knees, the toddler called Lane laughed happily with her mouth open, flashing a few baby teeth.

The circumstances of her birth had been chaotic. After all, it had been Lacey's second job.

The last time Lacey had seen Lane, she hadn't had any teeth growing in yet, but in no time flat, she was trying to stand upright and do things on her own. Lacey was even more aghast. It seemed like she was the only one who wasn't making any progress. The sheer shock of it all made her tremble.

"Reeve! Yorma! If you're watching her, then help her!" Allen scolded his younger brothers, still holding on to Lane.

Their features were still marked with youthful mischief, more so than Allen's. They were getting yelled at, but the two brown-haired boys just rested their hands on their cheeks as they sat and smiled broadly.

"She wanted to do it..."

"And we would've felt bad stopping her..."

They casually finished each other's sentences, ending with a "Uh-huh!" as they looked at each other. The two of them were twins.

This wasn't the first time Lacey had met them, but she'd seen them much less often than Allen, who always came to deliver vegetables. Therefore, she awkwardly clammed up a little, but the twins just cackled and ran around her. They paid no mind to her squeals as she bounced around on her feet.

Allen noticed that Lacey was getting flustered and her eyes were spinning. He meant to stop the twins, but he had Lane in his arms. He tried to shout at them while still holding on to his little sister, but it just wasn't enough.

"Would you boys be quiet?!" came a shout, along with the sound of an egg being cracked on the bottom of a frying pan.

The twins froze in their tracks. They had literally gone stock-still. It was like time had stopped. Lacey darted her eyes about, wondering if a petrification spell had been cast on them. She gulped and timidly searched for the person who had spoken.

Her eyes flickered and met the gaze of the person, whose lips immediately softened into a sweet smile.

"Haven't seen you lately, Miss Lacey. Sorry about the twins."

"No, um, it's fine, Ms. Tricia." She bowed—but just as she did, Tee dropped down from the sky on top of Lacey's head. "Oof!"

Tee's fall was somewhat controlled, but still, getting hit out of nowhere made her head hurt.

Allen and Tricia stared down at Lacey, who'd collapsed onto the ground. Meanwhile, the twins gave a round of applause to Tee spreading its wings majestically atop Lacey's hat.

* * *

"Don't be shy and eat as much as you want, Miss Lacey. It's no feast though."

"Ah...no, it's fine, really."

Lacey was as quiet as a mouse as she sat at the dining table.

Allen's mother, Tricia, had the same orange hair as her son. Her youthful vigor made it hard to believe she was a mother of four children. Half a year ago, she had almost died while giving birth to Lane. Lacey had saved Tricia, which led to a lasting connection between them. However, she still felt immense uneasiness as to whether she should really be barging in on a mother and four kids at mealtime. Meanwhile, next to Lacey's feet, Tee was taking up the offer. It unreservedly pecked away at a plate of beans as if scoffing at her conflicted feelings.

The twins were making a fuss on either side of Lacey, and Allen was busy scolding them. Tricia had sat Lane on her knee and was feeding her vegetable soup. Lacey just stayed stiff, gripping a spoon. Their father, Kargo, hadn't returned from the fields yet. Even so, there was plenty going on already.

"I'm so sorry, do you not like the taste?"

"N-No, that's not it at all, Miss Tricia."

They'd been repeating the same exchange for the last while. Lacey was fundamentally introverted. When she used magic or when there was an emergency, she demonstrated astonishing decisiveness, but didn't have a lick of it otherwise. She just ended up looking at her hands all the time.

I can't act like this. She hurriedly moved her stationary hands and took a sip of bean soup. It was fresh, warm, and very tasty.

For a moment, she recalled her times traveling with her companions. Wayne was a noble of high status, but had developed a knack for cooking and had often served warm soup like this.

While she was reminiscing, someone yelped. She couldn't tell whether it was Reeve or Yorma, but he shouted "HOT!" The other one shouted, "TEPID!"

The two of them were eating the same thing, of course. What they meant was that in comparison with the heat of the room, the soup was tepid. In Lacey's opinion, the temperature was quite fine. But the twins were both dripping with sweat, and so was Allen who was watching them with exasperation.

All the doors and windows in the house had been left wide open to let in as much of a breeze as possible, but that still wasn't enough. Tricia was lifting up Lane's clothing and industriously wiping sweat off her.

Now that they mention it...is it hot? Lacey tilted her head. But it's not really unbearable, she thought, not realizing that her endurance was world-class. Phrased less charitably, one might say that she was ignorant of her own needs. Although she'd finally graduated from wearing her black robe, she still didn't have much variety in her wardrobe.

She was suddenly reminded of how her companions had been on their journey. One time, Lacey had been vacantly clutching her staff and sitting down while their entire surroundings were engulfed by fire. They had been in demonkin territory, which included many environments that were hostile to humans. After some begging from her screaming companions, she'd managed to create an ice barrier.

As her eyes softened with nostalgia, there came a teary-eyed cry. "I wish we had a glacial stone!" It was probably Reeve who had said this. The twins were very much alike, but Lacey had noticed that it was almost always Reeve who spoke first.

"It's not that easy to get magic artifacts. They're in even higher demand than usual during the summer."

"Loosen up, big bro Allen. We're not talking realistically here. It doesn't have to be a glacial stone. I just want ice. I wish there were lots of it outside, just like in winter."

This time, it was Yorma who made Allen shake his head gruffly. "It's summer right now."

"I see," Lacey remarked. She examined the bowl which had contained her soup before she'd eaten it all. She twirled a finger and quietly chanted a spell.

Ting-a-ling-ling! There was a refreshing sound as several cubes of ice fell into her bowl.

"You can have these, if you like," she said to the twins.

Allen's entire family stared at Lacey in a daze. It was as if time had stopped.

"... I-ICE?!"

"No way! How'd you do that?! Was that magic?!"

Once they'd finally wrapped their heads around it, the overheated twins let out shrill cries of wild joy. Their sheer elation made Lacey blink. Meanwhile, Tricia's jaw had dropped open.

From Lacey's perspective, freezing a river in the middle of winter and creating ice in the middle of summer were the exact same thing. However, the rest of them seemed to believe there was a major difference. It was impossible for there to be ice in summer. That was just common sense.

Lacey had created something that shouldn't have existed, out of nothing. That was shocking beyond words.



"I-If we've got Lacey around, we don't even need glacial stones! This is crazy awesome!"

"Reeve, give big sis Lacey some respect! Yeah, it's really awesome, but even if she can make ice, it'll melt right away!"

"I want a cooling chamber!"

"Where would we make one in our house, Yorma?! Don't beg for the impossible!"

Allen was getting beleaguered. Seeing him be such a responsible older brother, Tricia gave a wry smile.

A cooling chamber was a type of barrier created by placing glacial stone artifacts at the corners of a room. In some cases, the room's temperature could be lowered below freezing, which created an environment suitable for preserving food.

Lacey's cooling chamber used glacial stones which she'd received from Wayne. While they lasted longer than ice, they would gradually start to melt unless they were periodically infused with mana. Thus, to the common folk who had no mana of their own, they were single-use items and were rather hard to obtain.

Lacey had conceptually learned this during her travels, but as she observed Allen's family lifestyle up close, she truly realized how inconvenient summer was.

"I suppose they can't just endure the heat," Lacey considered, placing a hand to her lips. If possible, she wanted to help them out. Her only talent was using magic, but even so, there had to be something she could do.

She could periodically create ice and deliver it to Allen's house, but this would be time-consuming, and it wouldn't be good to favor just a single household in the entire village. Even Lacey could see that.

In that case, she thought further, was there something she could create that would enrich their lives even while she wasn't around?

"A-Allen! Miss Tricia! D-Do you have any other problems?!"

Making the summer heat cooler and more bearable would be simple, but it was too rough around the edges. She could create a cooling chamber inside the house, but since it wasn't as big as Lacey's mansion, doing so would be challenging.

Noticing how Lacey had her fists balled up with determination, Allen and Tricia looked at each other.

"The heat's certainly been a problem lately, but besides that... Do you mean something more tangible?"

"It's hard to think of something off the top of my head. I mean, it's normal for the weather to be hot."

Unlike the young twins, the two of them had learned to tolerate the heat with age, so they couldn't come up with anything. As they pondered, Lane suddenly started babbling with laughter in Tricia's arms. That was when...

"I'm baaack. Oh, Miss Lacey's here too?"

The door had been kept open to let in a breeze, so they were late to notice him. A man in his prime with prominent laugh lines had just returned. Allen's father, Kargo, looked at Lacey and blinked a few times. The dining table hadn't been cleared of the bowls yet.

Kargo quickly inferred the situation and sighed with disappointment. "Agh, if I knew Miss Lacey was here too, I'd have come back early and eaten with you all. It's way too hot today. It was no fun eating crusty bread outside," he told them, holding up an empty cloth bag.

For a while, the only sound was Lane's laughter.

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"That's it!!!"

"Whuh— Huh?"
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Allen's exclamation made Kargo leap up. The twins high-fived each other and clapped their hands together. The family was on the same wavelength, but Lacey was left tilting her head in confusion. Once Tricia explained it to her, though, she understood perfectly:

The biggest problem with hot days was with storing food.

Miss Lacey, I'd like to make a request if it's at all possible. Can you create a nofuss way for my husband and children to eat the same things outside as they do inside?

"Hmm..."

Lacey recalled the job that Tricia had given her. She'd returned to her mansion and was currently rummaging around the room.

Of course, she had wanted to give it some thought even without being requested. She wanted to figure out what she could do. Learning this would be essential for her. Besides, Wayne had recently been beating it into her head that eating meals was extremely important.

"I've heard that there are restaurants in the capital where they sell meals you can eat right away. What about those? I've never been to one, though."

"You mean take-out restaurants? That's a good idea, but they can do that sort of thing because they have lots of glacial stones. Magic artifacts are sold mostly in the capital where there are always people coming and going, so by the time they reach this village, they'd melt."

"Oh, huh," Allen remarked.

He'd come back to the mansion with her to provide whatever labor she'd need. One person—or actually, one person and one bird—couldn't figure out everything on their own, so it helped to have someone to discuss things with. The two of them were currently scavenging the shelves that had come with the mansion.

I'll be able to make something fancier than usual today, Lacey recalled Wayne once saying with a smile.

Preserving food had been a perennial issue on their quest as well. With the brawny Brooks around, they could capture as much game as they had needed. But sometimes, there wasn't any game to be had, and besides, constantly going hunting was time-consuming. That was why they would stock up on preserved food along the way, which Wayne would then turn into a tasty meal.

In the case of Kargo and Allen, they could eat their meals right where they'd been prepared. But when they were doing work outside, returning to the house each time was a hassle. That was why they packed lunches to take with them. However, the sun was scorching. They couldn't take a chance on their food spoiling, so there was a limited selection of what foods they could bring. Their summer staples were crusty bread and lukewarm water. In the winter, they could bring soup, but it would have completely cooled off by midday.

A way to keep food in its tastiest state, huh?

Whenever he finished cooking, Wayne would always make Lacey and her companions sit down and eat it right away. When he saw his companions cheer up in front of a steaming hot meal, he'd grin broadly and his eyes would soften.

Lacey had been reminded of this aspect of him when she saw Tricia wishing that her family could enjoy fresh food. That was probably why an idea had immediately come to her as soon as Allen had told her more.

"Ah, I found some. This is what I need."

"It's cloth? Wait, it looks like cloth, but I don't think that's it. What is this stuff?" Allen looked with curiosity at the clothlike material that Lacey had pulled out of a chest.

Lacey regularly bought cloth from the traveling merchant whenever he came by Plume Village so that she would have material for her sachets. Sometimes, she'd get a sample of whatever other interesting materials he had as well, and this "stuff" was from one such purchase.

"This feels a lot like cloth to the touch, but it's actually a special kind of tree bark. I gave up on using it for sachets since the bark smell would clash with the other ingredients, but it's more durable than regular cloth, so I think it would work well for what I'm trying to do here."

"O...kay."

Allen handed over the tree bark, fixedly staring at his hands with some skepticism. Lacey gave a small chuckle. Naturally, the bark alone wouldn't do the trick.

Lacey could simply fulfill Tricia's request by handing over some glacial stones

and periodically coming over to pump mana into them, but that was a half measure.

A stopgap solution won't fix anything, Lacey thought to herself. She needed to come up with something that would work for Allen's household even when she wasn't around.

"Say, Allen, could you hold this for a bit? Spread it facing me."

"Like this?"

"Yes, exactly." Lacey stuck up two fingers, quietly chanted a spell, then swiftly swung them down. The tree bark split right down the middle and gently draped down. Moments later, a slight wind swept across Allen's face.

"Ah— AHHHHHH?!"

"Mm-hmm, just like I thought."

"Hold on, I don't care about what you thought! Did you just cast magic toward me?! You did, didn't you?!"

"I didn't even need my staff for that, it's fine. Anyway, Allen, take a look."

Lacey showed Allen the bark that had been split all the way through. It was thin bark, so all that he could tell by looking at the cut edges was that it had come apart rather cleanly.

"Well, I'm looking, but it just looks like a clean cut."

"That's what's so important!"

Lacey held up a piece of bark and repeatedly stretched and pulled at it. After confirming its durability, she nodded multiple times. Outside, she had been speaking in a whisper, but right now she was quite peppy and seemed to be enjoying herself.

"I used cleaving magic just now. It does more than just cut things. The magic formula needs to be changed each time depending on the material. I modified the formula so that the material would be given certain qualities that I envisioned," Lacey explained excitedly. Meanwhile, Allen frowned and wrinkled his forehead. He didn't understand what she meant by "formula."

"When you need to cool things down, ice is best, right? Well, on my travels before, we once had to set up camp in a place called the Infernal Belt that bubbled with lava."

"When the heck was that?"

"I tried making an ice barrier, but it melted instantly. I could've just stayed up and kept casting all night, but Wa—um, my companions stopped me from doing that."

"Well, yeah. Why did you even have to set up camp there in the first place?"

"I did some experimenting and found out that it worked if I stirred the surrounding air in addition to casting ice magic."

It had been a mess. Brooks had proclaimed that guts and determination could get them through anything and started tossing off his clothes. Wayne had restrained him from behind while the girls' expressions went blank. Lacey was the only member of the party who could do anything about the circumstances, and they were all on the brink of desiccation.

Besides cooling the party down with ice, she'd also come up with the idea of slowing down the rate at which the heat reached them. She had combined the two to create a makeshift spell. Things became warm because the surrounding heat transferred to them, so step one was mitigating that process.

"The spell I just used can't split things cleanly unless there's a moderate amount of air within what's being cut. So although this bark seems very stiff, it's not actually that dense. There are lots of air particles in it."

"I feel like metal or something else more solid would be better."

"Metal can be cool to the touch while in the shade, even during the summer. At first, it seems like it'd work because of that, but it gets hot quickly when it's near fire. That means it transfers heat easily."

"I get it." Allen could understand this.

Lacey was going to add, "I've slashed through lots of metal before, so I know what the structure of it is like," but held back knowing that Allen wouldn't believe her.

"Big sis Lacey, you seem like you've got a lot of energy today."

"Really? You're sure you're not imagining it?"

"Definitely not," Allen looked at her skeptically.

Lacey had spent the better part of her existence practicing magic. She didn't know if she loved it or hated it, but magic was a part of her. She didn't have confidence in *herself*, but magic was a different story. It made her talk much more than usual and feel excited.

That was why, well...she couldn't deny that she was having a bit of fun, probably.

"Which brings us to this!"

She triumphantly pulled out a sheet of paper. Magic required formulas, which in turn normally required thinking them up from scratch and writing them down, but Lacey could construct formulas entirely within her head. That was why she was very talented at constructing something three-dimensional out of just two dimensions.

She'd made an appalling number of paper patterns while manufacturing her sachets. Lacey slid a pen across the paper sheet and created a pattern in no time flat. She made a second design while she was at it.

Allen and Tee sat kneeling and watched her with blank stares. "She's working too fast to figure out what she's doing," Allen vacantly said before suddenly catching himself. "I shouldn't be sitting here whining. I'm here to help her, not to play around."

Allen too was a member of the feather-decoration village. Even the children had been put to work when they'd been commissioned for a massive amount of sachets for the capital. He observed Lacey's hands closely with such a serious expression that his brows were getting furrowed.

Lacey cut out paper patterns and placed them on top of the bark. Allen didn't think it could be pierced, but the marking pins went through more readily than he'd imagined. Lacey cut along the pattern pieces.

Guessing by the construction, Lacey was making a small sack. The cover at the

top was probably intended to be closed with a button. The bark was durable, so Allen had thought she would just make one layer. But apparently, this was meant to be used as the interfacing, and the outer layer would be constructed of something else. She then added another piece of regular cloth as the inner lining, making the bag three layers thick in all.

Allen tilted his head, thinking that this was a little *too* thick, before recalling Lacey's earlier anecdote. The important thing was to slow the rate at which heat transferred. Putting bark in the middle meant that there was lots of air sandwiched in between. On a cold winter day, wearing just one layer would make you feel chilly, but adding another layer on top of that would keep you warm. That was probably because there was also a layer of air between the clothes, he realized.

While Allen considered all this, Lacey lifted up her finished prototype and exclaimed, "How does this look?!"

She'd even made handles for it. The bag's small, round shape would likely make it appealing to the female demographic as well.

"Is the cover really necessary? It limits the kinds of shapes you can make."

"It absolutely needs a cover. It has to be as airtight as possible."

"I see. Then what about putting a cord through it horizontally so it can be pulled shut?"

"That's a great idea! I'll try making it right now."

"No, let me give it a try this time."

Allen got surprisingly into it. Before they knew it, they'd made a handful of different prototypes. They were having a great time, when suddenly, Allen had a realization.

"Hold on, big sis Lacey. I thought the goal here was to chill food down so it lasts longer. This won't make stuff cool, this is more like keeping heat in, right?"

"Yes. You're right, this isn't enough on its own. So, Allen, can you break this stone for me?"

"Wait, that's a mana stone. I've never heard of any uses for a crushed mana

stone. That's a waste!" A mana stone had magic sealed in it and was the core of a monster.

"It's okay, just do it," Lacey insisted.

"Fine, I guess." Allen worked on the floor and hammered the stone with a stick, breaking it into smaller pieces. "Ah. S-Sorry, big sis Lacey, I think I made it a bit *too* small..."

If a mana stone was too small, that would limit the scale of magic that it could be imbued with.

Meanwhile, Lacey had been making inner pockets for the sacks. Her unfaltering movements were the result of her experience making sachets.

"That's all right. I'll imbue magic so that even tiny mana stones will work."

"But..."

"I'll craft the magic formula right after this, of course."

She spoke casually, but Allen was full of doubt. Is it really that easy?

* * *

Lacey told Allen that she'd do the rest of the work by herself, so he went home. When he got there, the twins were playing with their little sister. Lane was standing, sitting, and rushing at her brothers, who were clapping their hands trying to get her to come toward them. She was a busy kid.

The sound of children's cheerful laughter rang through the house, but Tricia welcomed Allen back with a worried expression. Kargo was still out working.

"How did it go, Allen? I guess we made a rather unreasonable request of Miss Lacey."

"Yeah, about that..."

"I thought you'd be back later. It's tricky, isn't it? That must be why you came home. I'll go visit Miss Lacey's house tomorrow and apologize to her."

"Actually...big sis Lacey said she'll be coming here tomorrow."

"I see, all right. I'll make her something to eat to show her how sorry I am." Tricia tied the back strings of her apron and mulled it over. "I wonder what would be good."

Allen's gaze flickered a little as his lips tightened. "It sounds like she's still going through with it. She said that the prospects look good."

"What?!" Tricia's shock was only natural. After all, preserving food by means of something other than a glacial stone was unheard of. It was inconceivable.

The twins heard Tricia's reaction. They picked up their little sister and crowded around Allen.

"She said the prospects look good? That means she can make something, right?"

"No way, she can do it? For real? When's it going to be done? A week? Two weeks? A month?"

"Maybe it won't be ready this year, but it'll be ready for next summer? Awesomeee!!!"

"Shame on you, Reeve, Yorma! We asked her for something very unreasonable! Yes, it'd be wonderful if we could all eat tasty food outside, but don't be so impatient!"

The twins ran around Allen excitedly. Lane planted herself on the floor, clapped her hands together, and shrieked with laughter, with no clue as to what was going on. Tricia put her hands on her hips and scolded them crossly, but it went in one ear and out the other.

"So when will it be done?!" The twins said in unison and leaned forward.

"He's not going to know that!" Tricia shouted at them.

Allen scratched his neck and evaded his mother's gaze, hesitant. "Tomorrow, she said."

Everyone thought they'd misheard him. "Tomorrow." "Tomorrow...?" they repeated a few times. Then all three of them, including Tricia, screamed.

Kargo, who was on his way home and getting close, heard the screams from the house and thought something had happened. He burst through the door. Had thieves come to their peaceful village, or had monsters attacked? But instead, he was greeted by something completely different than what he had imagined.

With the exception of Allen, who was standing still by himself, the children were dancing around with glee. Meanwhile, Tricia kept murmuring the same thing again and again. "Tomorrow? That can't be right. Tomorrow?"

"What in the world is going on here?" Kargo asked, and Allen explained. Once again, screams rang out from the house.

* * *

This is a lot of fun...

Elsewhere, Lacey's hands kept working even though the sun had set completely. Time was ticktocking away, but she hadn't gotten the result she wanted yet. It was testing her patience.

"Kweeeeee..."

"Oh, sorry, Tee. You can go to bed already. I'll sleep soon too, don't worry."

"Kwee." Tee nodded. It rubbed its sleepy eyes and slowly waddled off to its room.

Lacey watched Tee's tail wag as it left, then looked at the sack she was holding. "How should I do this?" She'd already finished the one she was going to give to Allen's family tomorrow, but felt that she could create something even better. She ripped out the stitches on a finished sack and made alterations, doing one thing and then another.

Lacey's mansion was at the edge of the village, standing alone at the top of a hill. When night fell, silence came over it.

Lacey's needle was swift. She wasn't using magic—she diligently made one stitch at a time, deliberated, and then moved her hands. As she worked, she could hear the patter of rain hitting the roof of the mansion.

The raindrops trickled down and soon enough slid down the glass of the windows. After that, it quickly started pouring buckets. However, this was just a passing summer shower. It would let up soon.

As she moved her needle to the sound of the rain, a funny feeling overtook Lacey.

She was huddled up at the foot of a tree, rain pelting down in front of her...

* * *

This was a memory of the past, during their quest. She was wearing a black robe with the hood hung low over her face to hide it, and was listening to her companions talking.

"What's the plan? Do we keep going?" Wayne asked.

"Getting a little damp doesn't bother me!" Brooks laughed.

"It bothers me, stupid!" Dana put her hands on her hips indignantly.

Wh-What...should I do? Lacey had just watched in a corner while her companions discussed matters. They'd ended up deciding to move on.

"The rain's starting to let up, so we should be fine," Rosie said, rubbing her cheeks that had gone red from the cold.

"Come on, let's go." Wayne turned around and extended a hand to Lacey. The young man did this all the time, and Lacey had gradually gotten used to it.

But when exactly was it? At some point, Wayne had gradually stopped stretching out his hand to Lacey.

It wasn't because he was abandoning her or because he'd gotten fed up with her.

Lacey had feet of her own to stand on and possessed adequate magic skills. Both of them had slowly realized that she didn't actually need to be led around like a baby.

That was why Wayne started to nervously watch over Lacey and call out "Are you okay?" to her instead of offering a hand. "I'm okay," Lacey would respond. As they spent more time together, both the one who offered a hand and the one who took it built trust in each other, a little at a time.

Through both thick and thin. Through the sweltering heat and shiver-inducing cold. And on the muddy path after the rain had gone.

But even then, as if he'd been holding back unless it were absolutely necessary, Wayne stretched out his sturdy fingers to Lacey.

His boots, which he'd been treading down the road in, were covered in mud. There was a strong earthy smell, and although they were in the middle of a forest, the oppressive humidity made sweat drip down the back of their necks.

"Lacey, give me your hand."

The chirping of birds bounced around the dim forest. Wayne turned around and grabbed onto a thick trunk with one hand to support himself, then held out the other hand to Lacey.

Lacey exhaled a little and reached out to him. Wayne's hand immediately grasped her wrist and forcefully pulled her up.

"Wah!"

Wayne picked up Lacey's lightweight body with one arm. Her exclamation at getting suddenly lifted up was supplanted by another cry of surprise.

"Huh? Oh, wow!"

Looking out from the precipice, the sky after the rain was bright and blue as far as the eye could see. The world was vast, stretching from horizon to horizon. Mountains, towns, and trees all seemed like specks. A lake glittered like the stars at night. It was like the sky had flipped over onto the ground.

"It was worth traveling for this," Wayne said in a low voice.

Lacey quietly agreed. "Yeah."

She heard Dana calling for them worriedly from below. "Something wrong?" Lacey suddenly felt embarrassed at herself for crying out and overreacting.

"All good here," Wayne responded, lightly patting Lacey's back.

For some reason, this startled her. Her back straightened with a jolt.

Drops of rain slid off the leaves of the trees...

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The drops splashed and slid down the windows of Lacey's mansion.

The vivid memory quietly waned. Lacey moved her needle, listening only to the music of the pattering rain. "Those were fun times..."

Of course, there had been hardships too. But whenever she thought back on their quest, it always made her lips soften into a smile for some reason.

"Wayne really is meddlesome." Her tone of voice didn't match the expression on her face, though. "But whenever he helped me, it was just a little push as a last resort. That made me happy."

In the beginning, he'd fretted over her constantly. That might have been true even now. Even so, he patiently watched over her.

Lacey didn't have an ounce of confidence in herself, but Wayne had placed firm, definite trust in her. That was why she could naturally reassure herself in a soft tone.

"It's okay. I know I can make a great bag."

A wonderful bag that would make Allen and his family happy.

"We went all kinds of places... We crossed the ocean, and we flew through the sky on dragons. It was a bit chilly, though. That reminds me, I wonder if Piana's doing well."

Lacey was by herself right now, but strangely, she didn't feel lonely.

"Okay. I can keep on going a little longer."

The tranquil night slowly wore on.

* * *

The next day, the sun was shining as Lacey walked down the freshly rained-on road toward Allen's house to show them her prototype. But for some reason, the family was acting rather uptight.

"U-Um, Miss Lacey, are you already done making the product we asked for?"

"Huh? Well, yes, of course."

"Oh my, is that so...?" Tricia replied, placing her palm on her cheek.

Lacey was confused, but since the other party didn't say anything further, she just rummaged through the bag she'd brought.

Incidentally, Kargo hadn't gone to work yet, so the entire family was gathered at the dining table. They all had meek looks on their faces, and even the hyperactive twins were sitting tight in their chairs. The only ones acting the same as ever were Tee, who was chirping "Kwee kwee" on Lacey's lap, and Lane, who was fidgeting her hands toward Tee.

The whole atmosphere felt off, but Lacey was eager to fulfill her objective. She pulled out two completed sacks.

"Um, for the moment...please take these. I think that it really is necessary to chill food down to make it last. I made it so that when these sacks are chilled, they stay cold for a long period. I put cooling magic in them just last night."

"Oh, how lovely. It'd be convenient for carrying all sorts of small things. I'd love to have one for when I go places." Tricia unconsciously broke into a smile. The sacks were small and round, and Lacey'd prepared two models. One of them was tied closed with a bow as Allen had suggested, and another one was a little bigger with a cover that buttoned shut.

Tricia seemed to prefer the one with the bow. She took the sack from Lacey and looked down at it carefully, forgetting the objective at hand.

Among those present, the only ones who had seen Lacey work her magic were Allen and Kargo, and only Kargo had witnessed her truly staggering might. When he'd seen her freeze the river from bank to bank in the middle of the winter, Kargo had fallen down in shock.

Kargo did suspect that Lacey might be some renowned mage. However, this time they'd requested that Lacey make it so they could eat the same food indoors and outdoors in the summer. One little bit of magic wouldn't be able to solve that problem.

Drinking lukewarm water and eating dry foods under the blazing sun was joyless, to be sure, and even in the shade, chewing crusty bread still sapped his energy. He'd definitely be grateful if she could do as they'd requested, but he doubted that one little sack could accomplish anything. Yes, she could use extremely powerful magic, but that had no bearing on this matter.

"Please take one too, Mr. Kargo."

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"Ah, all right..."
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He was given the model with a button and tested how it felt in his hand. It fit well and it was sturdier than it looked. But as far as he could tell, it was just a regular sack. He didn't feel disappointed, since he hadn't been expecting anything from the start.

He gave a sidelong glance to Tricia, who was carefully examining her sack with a smile next to him. She seemed to be paying more attention to the pattern of the sack rather than its ability to chill things. Kargo's laugh lines deepened upon seeing his wife so happy. His expression, which was mirthful by default, filled with even more cheer.

These aren't what we were hoping for, but Miss Lacey did put effort into making them, and Tricia's happy too. Let's buy them.

They hadn't bought any bags in quite a while. Bags weren't something that common folk could replace that often. This was a good opportunity. Kargo felt that the button model he was holding was a good design too.

"Miss Lacey, how much would you like for the two of these?"

"Um, before we talk about that, can you open the sacks and look inside?"

"Oh, you have a point."

It won't make much of a difference now, Kargo thought as he undid the button and removed the cover. Tricia similarly untied the bow and looked inside. Then they suddenly gasped.

It was cold. That couldn't be right. Inside the bag, it was as cold as winter.

"How?!"

"Argh, let us see already!" The twins had kept their mouths shut and restrained themselves thus far, but they'd finally lost patience. Reeve was usually the first to act, but just as they'd suggested by saying "us," both he and Yorma opened the cover of the sack Kargo was holding.

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"It's cold!"
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[&]quot;It's cooold~!"

The two of them exclaimed with enthusiasm. Even Allen was starting to dart his eyes around restlessly.

Kargo blinked in surprise, then noticed that there was a small pocket inside the sack. This was the part Lacey had altered after Allen left. The pocket was sewn on, so he couldn't look inside, but when he touched it, he could feel something small and hard. Once he surmised that it was a mana stone, he immediately understood why the inside of the sack was cool.

"I see now, it's got cooling magic in it. I'm surprised. But wait, hold on, you said you put magic in last night... Can small-scale magic really last this long?"

Kargo had figured that Lacey had basically made something akin to a glacial stone, but that didn't explain how cool it was. A small mana stone would interact with the surrounding heat and quickly return to room temperature.

Lacey shook her head. "I did put in cooling magic, but not into the mana stone. I just blew it into the sack. The mana stone is actually imbued with absorption magic. It's usually meant for leeching the life energy of monsters and demonkin, but I reformulated it so that it would just absorb surrounding heat or cold."

"Er...is that any different from a glacial stone?"

"Glacial stones just radiate cold air. If they're not regularly infused with mana, they'll quickly melt and become useless. But with absorption magic, it can suck in the cold automatically and will constantly circulate the inside air around, so it can be used again and again," Lacey explained.

Kargo's eyes went wide. He stared in bafflement at the item in his hands that looked no different than an ordinary sack.

It was all so sudden, he couldn't believe it. But the interior of the sack was definitely cold.

"So, for example, I could open the sack's cover in the winter, flap it around, and just get cold air in it that way?" Allen asked, miming the action. "Like this."

"Yes, exactly," Lacey nodded.

"Whoa, that's really convenient... Hold on! Big sis Lacey, does that mean if it

takes in the summer heat that's going on right now, or if we light a fire in the winter to warm up the surroundings..."

When he'd seen the sacks before they'd had a mana stone in them, Allen had commented that they would just keep heat in. He'd just remembered what he had said yesterday.

Lacey slowly smiled. "Yeah. In the summer, you can use it to keep things cool, and in the winter, you should be able to keep things warm."

Allen's whole family suddenly buzzed with excitement. On the other hand, Lacey hunched her shoulders and made herself smaller. All of a sudden, she'd lost confidence in herself. She cast her eyes downward and started to mumble.

"Um, although, you can just light a fire to make it retain warmth, but finding a source of cold air in the summer to retain cold will be tricky. So I think it'd be best to have two sacks, one for hot and one for cold. That makes it kind of inconvenient...or well, just not good enough..."

"It's not inconvenient at all!" Allen hastily stood up. His chair clattered backward and he slammed his hands on the table. "It's amazing, big sis Lacey! If we use this, not only can we have cold food in the summer, but we can even have warm soup outside in the winter without lighting a fire, right? I always thought that it was an unchangeable fact of life that we can't eat good food outside. But I guess it doesn't have to be that way. You being able to use magic is incredible enough on its own, but what I'm trying to say is, the way you think, is just..."

Allen was earnestly focused not on Lacey's magic, but on Lacey herself.

At that moment, Lacey felt a strange twinge in her heart. She had thought she was just an empty shell whose only strength was magic. But something warm had quietly trickled into her and seeped throughout, just like the words that Wayne had said to her.

The whole time that Lacey was making the sacks, she had been hoping that they would make the lives of Allen's family a little easier. In order to accomplish that, she had been thinking over and over about how to craft the sacks. She wanted to leave an impression on the people who had so kindly welcomed in a shy, suspicious mage like her.

The experience she'd gained on her quest with her companions hadn't been in vain. Because of it, she'd been able to come this far.

Lacey looked down and bit her lip a little. She felt that if she didn't, she would cry.

Tee, sitting on her lap, seemed to notice. "Kwee?" It poked her with its beak.

"Hey, big sis Lacey, if it's okay with you, let's make tons more of these sacks. Then you can advertise to the whole village that you can make awesome stuff like this. I swear they'll all be shocked!"

"That sounds great. What are you calling it, a cooling bag? Well, the cooling part doesn't matter so much. It's just so cute. I want to show it off to anyone."

Lacey wanted to shake her head and insist that it really wasn't a big deal, but she just couldn't say anything to the family when they were having so much fun.

"I'll help!" "I'll help!" The twins both clapped their hands together, and Kargo gave a wry smile.

When she saw them like this, Lacey slowly took a deep breath. She noticed that her mouth had curved into a soft smile.

"Would you all care to help me? I'd be really happy if you could tell me which design is best."

"Of course!" they all agreed simultaneously, their voices overlapping. Then they all looked at each other and grinned.

As a rule, a small star mark was added to the corner of each sack. And that was how Lacey's second magic artifact, the insulated thermal bag, was completed.

* * *

A new trend slowly started to take root in the village. On hot summer days, one could pack lunch into a sack and eat the same kinds of foods both inside and outside the house. Chilled vegetables were a delicacy.

A merchant regularly came through Plume Village. This was the man who had bought Lacey's sachets and spread them to the capital. Demand had fallen since

the initial rush, but orders still came in.

The man with fox-like eyes twitched his nose and sniffed. He was sensing an unusual change in the village.

As a merchant, he could spot the beginnings of a trend from a mile away. He caught sight of and overheard the villagers enjoying lunch to-go, and then ran to Lacey as fast as his legs would carry him. He was sure that *she* was behind this. He bolted over to Lacey's mansion.

"MISS LACEEEEEY!!!!!"

"Wh-What is it?!"

Someone had been banging on Lacey's door, and when she opened it, there was a man with tears of exertion in his squinted eyes. Lacey took a few steps back. Tee was bristling at her feet. Tee and the merchant had a complicated history and they didn't get along well.

"Wh-Why?! Why, why?"

"PI-Please calm down! Can I get you some tea?"

"If you'd be so kind! But that's not what I'm here for! Why didn't you tell me immediately?!"

"Immediately?" Lacey looked up at him, confused. She'd echoed him without thinking.

"Yes, immediately!"

She was already acquainted with him, so she let him into the house and sat him in front of a table.

"I can't believe you had a bestseller product on your hands and you kept me in the dark! In the dark! Urk, hic, nrgh..." The merchant cried and drank down the tea Lacey had offered him.

"And this tea is co— EEEEEEH?! It's cold?! Is this okay?! Of course it's okay!"

He'd just come from the scorching outdoors, so a cold drink was just the right thing. Some people might've gotten upset, but Lacey had correctly judged that he wouldn't. He didn't dismiss new things automatically; he tried them out first.

He likely set aside his preconceptions to judge whether or not an item would sell.

"Allen and everybody else gave me their opinions, and they said that since it's summer, cold drinks are good too."

"There's a slight bitter taste, but that doesn't matter so much. How did you alter the tea leaves and brewing time? This has so much potential!"

Lacey had hoped for exactly this kind of response. It made her feel a little happy. "Well..." As Lacey answered, even her tone of voice was light.

The merchant was curious, even about the vessel. Since it wouldn't contain hot tea, something that could be carried more easily with two hands might be an option as well.

"Very well, I understand. We can sell this. After all, it's cold tea! You could set up your own shop for it, but that might not give you time for anything else. We can sell the recipe once it's perfected instead. This seems like it would appeal more to commoners than nobles. I'll make the arrangements with the trade guild."

"Actually, well, I haven't thought quite that far yet..."

"And those sacks! They're called insulated thermal bags, correct? I'm just so very distressed about them! Please, let's sell them! How much are you asking per unit?!"

He was talking faster than Lacey could answer. It wasn't terrible, but it did make her feel awkward. Her one comfort was Tee bristling "Kwee-oh-oh!" at her feet even more persistently than usual.

"For the sacks...um, I don't have the material to make that many. I need the tree bark you gave me previously to make them."

"Fylachtó bark?!"

"Ah, so that's what it's called..."

When Lacey was making the sachets, in lieu of specific ideas, the merchant had given her all kinds of cloths and tools. There had been so many that she didn't think he'd be able to remember it so quickly, but given his profession, he

probably had a good memory.

"I'll procure it! At once! On my honor as a merchant! Swifter than a horse can run!"

"You don't have to rush..."

The phrase "swifter than a horse" reminded Lacey of Brook's muscles. The young man in front of her was somewhat, or actually, *considerably* more lean.



And so Lacey had a very busy summer. But who could have predicted that there was something even more shocking in store for her?

Actually, Lacey *could* have predicted it, but even if she'd imagined it, she would still have been shocked when it happened—even though she was the one who had prompted it.

* * *

"This is Plume Village?" A woman absently murmured, holding a letter.

After slowly crossing the bridge across the river, she'd arrived at the edge of a quiet village. She looked closely at the letter, then shifted her gaze back to the village. Her light green hair was concealed under a broad-brimmed white hat. She looked to be over twenty. Her hat hung low, hiding most of her face except for a prominent mole near her mouth. Nonetheless, she had a mysterious presence.

The outside of the white envelope she was holding had a charming border of sparkly stars. It was addressed *To the Saint of Light, Dana*.

She was one of the party members with whom Lacey had traveled the world and defeated the Demon King.

Chapter 2: Becoming Involved and Smiling Together

Hello Dana, this is Lacey writing. It's been a while.

You said that you were going back to the orphanage in your hometown. How have you been since then?

As for me, I'm sorry that I took so long to tell you: I've moved out of the capital and am currently in a place called Plume Village.

The people here are all kind and wonderful. I have a bird too. Also, I started a new business. I'm sure you must be busy, but if you ever have time, feel free to come visit.

I'll be waiting.

"'I'll be waiting,' eh?" Dana reread the letter from Lacey.

Scorching sunlight was beating down from above. The first thing she spotted upon reaching the village was a huge tree. She placed a hand to her mouth, giggled, and playfully rushed over to sit in its shade.

Lacey must have rewritten the letter multiple times. They'd only spent one year on their quest together.

Dana couldn't say that she knew everything about Lacey, but they *had* slept and eaten together for a year. There was a lot she did know. The girl was always reserved. Despite being able to cast more powerful magic than anyone else, she had very little self-confidence and barely even spoke. If anyone approached her, she would hurriedly retreat. That was the kind of girl Lacey had been. Yet she'd done her best to write this letter to Dana, despite not being used to it. Dana sensed a peculiar warmth from the words "I'll be waiting."

Although the part about "I have a bird too" confused her.

"I'm sure some wonderful change happened to her. In any case, I bet *Wayne* knew about this." Dana's brows involuntarily furrowed. Just watching whatever Lacey and Wayne had going on made her feel agitated, but since it would be

impolite for a third party to mention it, she'd been pretending not to notice.

"Hmm... It's been two months since I got her letter, but it should be fine, right? I doubt she's moved away already."

Dana had been curious about what Lacey had been up to, but she was in no position to go see. If only it had been possible, she would've jumped out the door as soon as she'd received Lacey's letter.

Just thinking about it weighed Dana down more. It was like a curse. Dana exhaled in pain and rubbed her shoulder. Her body was heavy. She sat in the shade of the tree and quietly breathed in and out a few times. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the wind. The heat was making her sweat, but as she breathed in lungfuls of the murmuring wind passing through, she gradually settled down.

"I'm hungry."

Then she heard the low rumblings of her stomach. Growl. Grooooowl.

Come to think of it, she'd forgotten to eat lunch. She'd just run out of the preserved food she'd packed as well. She had planned to immediately start looking for Lacey's house, but it seemed she would need to satisfy her hunger first.

Dana slowly got to her feet and entered the village.

* * *

"Let's see here. Is there even a place where I can get a bite to eat?"

Dana's hometown was far enough away from Plume Village that it would take forever to go between them by coach. Dana was permitted to use teleportation shrines around the capital, so she'd taken advantage of that. After that, she had taken a coach until it reached a stopping point midway, then walked the rest of the way.

She was a woman traveling on her own. In theory, she should have taken the coach all the way to the village and hired an escort, but for certain reasons, Dana refused to do this. Of course, as a member of the disbanded hero's party, she was also confident that she could hold her own against most robbers and

monsters she might encounter.

Along the way, she'd been picking up hearsay on what kind of place Plume Village was. It had once dealt in golden cockatrice feathers to the point where it had changed its name to the feather-decoration village, but now it was a peaceful place. There were no rumors about the Dawn Witch living there, but knowing Lacey, she was probably making herself inconspicuous.

Portraits of the party were available to buy in the capital. Dana didn't know how many people in Plume Village knew what she looked like, but she decided there would be no harm in veiling herself. She pulled the brim of her hat back down over her face. Just as her title of "Saint" suggested, she had a gracious appearance. She was less "cute" and more like "gorgeous."

As she carefully surveyed the village, she felt that it seemed a little different from the stories she'd heard around the capital. About the only people who traveled from the capital all the way out to Plume Village were merchants, so only they could say what it was like these days. Even so, the village seemed more lively than she'd been led to believe.

"'We have to-go lunches'...?"

As she walked down the dirt road, she saw a banner waving in the wind. "'We have to-go lunches'?" She once again read the incredibly bizarre phrase out loud.

Dana understood what a "to-go lunch" was. Though she was treated as a saint these days, she was also the church orphanage caretaker, and often used to go on picnics with the children. If you lived in the capital or were a powerful noble, glacial stones were easy to come by. But in Dana's mind, to-go lunches consisted of crusty rye bread in the summertime and cold soup in the winter.

Plume Village was only two days' coach travel from the capital, but it likely had similar circumstances. The shops were probably selling rye bread. In spite of that, the banner was awfully grandiose. When Dana approached to get a better idea of what was going on, she noticed a sign out front.

Today's to-go lunch is a two-course pick of the daily special. Three silver coins.

"Not bread, but a two-course lunch? And for three silver coins?!"

That was far too cheap. The word "lunch" suggested that it was a typical selection of food. That couldn't possibly be right. Dana had lived long enough to know that when prices were too cheap, there was a catch. That was why she couldn't let herself be dazzled by the low prices...but in her mind, she started calculating her remaining travel funds.

She was getting sick of tasteless preserved foods, but dining out made her wallet hurt. Dana was more concerned about money than most people. The more she had, the happier she was; the more she received, the more appreciative she was. She had been motivated to join the mission to defeat the Demon King because of the hefty cash reward. The reason she hadn't traveled by coach all the way between the capital and Plume Village was simply because she was skimping on expenses.

She was known as the Saint of Light, Dana, but surprisingly few people knew that the light that illuminated her was the dazzling glint of gold coins.

If she were asked whether she was a miser, she would wholeheartedly embrace the title of "extreme miser." However, she didn't want to restrict her expenses to an absolute minimum. In addition to stamina, traveling wore away at one's psyche as well. Instead of just staying at bare-bones lodgings all the time, she knew that it was ultimately more efficient to occasionally splurge on luxury inns and restore her energy. Applying this principle, now was the time to splurge on delicious food.

The moment she came to that decision, Dana entered the restaurant. Even inside, she kept her hat tilted low and covered her face. The surly proprietor threw her a slightly suspicious look, but still murmured a "Welcome" at her.

It seemed that dining in was an option as well. There were two tables, each with four chairs. It was still much too early for lunchtime, so customers were sparse.

"Are you from out of town? That's rare."

"Yes, I am. Um, I was wondering about the banner that mentions 'to-go lunch.' Is it still available?"

"Of course. Just one for you?"

Dana nodded and handed silver coins to the proprietor.

"Um, what's the daily special?"

"It's pasta today. It's got freshly picked tomatoes in it."

"That sounds delicious...er, well..."

That wasn't what she'd wanted to ask. What she was really curious about was whether it was packed to-go. Did it really include a full lunch like the kind that would be served in the restaurant? But before she could get clarification, the proprietor turned his back to her and opened up a box underneath the counter. He pulled something out of it and then pulled something else out of a separate box.

What?! He's taking the food from there?

Under the counter was shady and easily accessible, which made it convenient, but it definitely wasn't an appropriate place for storing food. It was a little late for it, but Dana was starting to get nervous. She was second-guessing the whole thing. If she couldn't get a refund, then so be it. Sometimes you had to pay to learn. This was the cost of getting an important life lesson.

"I'm sorry, sir, I've changed my—"

"Here you go. Water's on the house. Dessert's included too."

"Oh, thank you."

He'd handed over the stuff, so Dana automatically took it. *No, no,* she shook her head, then was startled by the sensation in her palms. It was *cold*.

She had been handed two boxes, one small and one large, stacked on top of each other.

They must have been made out of a sturdy paper. The lids of the disposable paperboard boxes were closed tight, and they were cold. Before she knew it, the proprietor had brought out water as well.

"I can give you an insulated bag too if you want. That would be four silver coins."

"In-su-lated...? No thank you, that's more than I'd like to pay."

"Then you'll be eating immediately? If you're eating outside, then you can come back later to return the water cup."

"L...see."

She hadn't given a clear yes or no, but the proprietor seemed satisfied and left. In the end, Dana picked up the to-go lunch and cup of water, calmly exited the restaurant, and returned to the shade of the tree where she'd been before.

* * *

Dana definitely felt that she'd made a bad choice and had some regrets about it, but she decided to just sit down on the soft grass growing in the shade and eat her meal. After gently setting down the cup so that it wouldn't spill and taking off her hat so it wouldn't get in the way, she placed the to-go lunch on her lap. It was chilly.

She took out a spoon and fork from her travel bag. She was well-prepared for these kinds of situations. The main clientele of these restaurants were locals, so it was presumed they would have their own forks.

"I suppose I got swept away by impulse..."

Just staring at the lid wouldn't do her any good. She apprehensively pulled off the band that kept the lid in place and opened the larger box. She had known that there was pasta inside, but...

"Huh?"

The pasta, which was separated into small rolls to make it easier to eat, was garnished with halved cherry tomatoes and mint. The red and green looked appetizing. Dana had been skeptical about *chilled* pasta, but the rumblings of her stomach and the pretty presentation shoved her doubts aside. She stabbed her fork in and took a bite.

"Mmmmm!!!"

She couldn't help but slurp it right up. It was both light and refreshing.

"Ahhh...this is great."

Dana was reminded of how wonderful it was to eat cold foods in the summer. The white of the hard-boiled egg on the side was smooth and appealing. What made it all the more maddening was that it wasn't just cut in half; it was cut into a decorative flower shape. The crunchy cucumber next to it looked as if it had been sliced just moments ago.

"What gives?! It's cute, cheap, and delicious!"

The taste was important, but the price mattered just as much. She washed it down with the water, which was blissfully chilly. She quenched her thirst with gusto.

"But how?!"

She was always delighted to get such a good deal, but it made her apprehensive to not know *why* it was so cheap. Dana had been burned many times before and had realized one simple truth: there was an appropriate price for everything.

"These to-go boxes don't look special. Which means...that box they were in is what makes the difference? Come to think of it, it didn't seem like an ordinary wooden box. It was shut tighter, like it was preventing cold air from leaking out... So was it a miniaturized cooling chamber? I don't know who came up with it, but that's a great idea."

Dana started to add up a theory in her head, just as she did when she was doing her hallmark calculations. "The unit price must be low because it takes less time to make. Judging by the size of that shop, it must have two, or maybe only one employee, which would leave it understaffed at lunchtime. It felt like there were intentionally only a few tables too. The low ratio of employees to customers is solved by offering to-go lunches! This keeps well, so by cooking large batches in the morning, fewer man-hours are required."

Plus, if the food was made with locally grown vegetables, that would explain why it was cheaper than in the capital.

"I see now! That's a load off my mind!"

It would drive her mad to leave a money-related mystery unsolved, so this set her mind at ease. Now that that was out of the way, Dana turned her focus to the thing from which she'd been intentionally averting her gaze: the other, smaller box she'd received from the proprietor.

This was probably what he had called "dessert." Dana set aside the finished, empty to-go box and picked up the somewhat smaller box, examining it. It was even cooler than the previous one.

"Let's have a look!" She opened the lid with a motivational shout and found raspberries stuffed inside. They were as bright and shiny as gemstones. However...

"R-Raspberries in a to-go lunch?!"

These berries were in season in the summer, but they were sensitive to sunlight and would easily bruise. Still shocked, Dana calmly pulled out a spoon, carefully stuck it in, and brought it to her mouth.

"H-Hmgh?!" The sweet-and-sour taste she was used to linked arms and danced with an unfamiliar, tender mouthfeel. "Th-This is des-dessert?!"

Dana was bewildered. She couldn't stop stuffing her cheeks and ate up all the raspberries in a frenzy. She looked at the pair of to-go boxes which had been emptied in no time flat, exhaled, and then leaned against the trunk of the tree. The rustling leaves sounded so gentle when she closed her eyes. An instant later, Dana opened her eyes resolutely and sprang to her feet. She picked up the to-go boxes, cup, and her luggage, then ran back to the restaurant at full speed.

When she entered, the customers who had been there before were gone. There was only the proprietor, who saluted her with another lackadaisical greeting. "Welcome back. That was quick."

"I'm here! To return! The cup!!!"

"Much appreciated."

"What should I do with the boxes?!"

"I can take those for you."

"Here you go!" Dana returned everything, then looked around restlessly. She just realized that in her haste, she'd forgotten to put her hat back on, but thankfully, the proprietor hadn't reacted. Anyway... She patted her cheeks and let her eyes wander around. Soon enough, she put her hands on the counter

and leaned over.

"Excuse me, what's this to-go lunch?"

"It's chilled pasta."

"Oh, so that's what you call it...that's not what I meant though! This is the first time I've had it. Is it an ordinary local specialty?"

This was such a novel invention that Dana couldn't resist asking. Despite appearances, she regularly dealt with nobles in her position as the Saint. The nobles wouldn't have ignored something so new and fresh. That was why this mysterious invention that could only be found in a tiny village was both wonderful and strange at the same time.

"Hm? No, I only started offering to-go lunches recently."

"Really? Then who came up with the idea? You mentioned an insulated bag earlier, yes? Is it different than that box down below?"

"Insulated bags are just sacks. Whatever you put in it will stay cold for a long time even if you don't eat it right away. As for the box, it's the same thing, just enlarged so I can keep it in the restaurant. Or so I'm told."

"So you're told? It wasn't your idea?"

"Well, no."

When Dana asked further, the proprietor was strangely tight-lipped and faced away from her. There was likely some reason he didn't want to tell her.

This is practically an interrogation, Dana thought to herself. Given how groundbreaking this technology was, it would likely spread throughout the country soon enough. As she often dealt with nobles, Dana wished she'd known about this earlier, but shook her head. *Oh well*.

"By the way, do you know if a girl named Lacey lives around here? She has black hair, and she's short and rather cute. I'm here to visit her. Have you heard of 'Starseeking'?"

"Of course I know." The moment Lacey's name had come up, the proprietor's stiff expression had softened. What was that all about? "So you're a friend of Miss Lacey? She's the one who made the insulated bag."

Dana's large eyes opened even wider. She couldn't hold back her shock. "Lacey did...?" she whispered.

* * *

After that, the proprietor told her where Lacey's mansion was. Dana thanked him and was about to exit the restaurant before changing her mind and turning back around.

She started down the road, insulated bag in hand. Supposedly, the proper name for it was an insulated thermal bag. She'd been given a choice of several different designs, so Dana had chosen the model with embroidered flowers. Just looking at it cheered her up. Besides the flowers, there were also scattered small embroidered stars. The same kind of pattern was on the letter she had received from Lacey. Dana then recalled one other thing.

Just as she'd parsed it little by little, her body suddenly refused to move. Dana crouched down on the side of the road and pulled herself along. She took a short break, caught her breath, and slowly walked forward. Her body shook with pain.

Dana groaned out loud. It's almost like a curse.

"These episodes are getting more frequent," she lamented to herself as she finally reached the top of the hill. There stood a large mansion. It almost looked fit for nobility, except for the lack of any ostentatious decoration. It had a certain simplicity to it.

The sign out front said Anything Shop, Starseeking.

"It really is her." It gave her a very queer feeling. The look on the face of the girl Dana had known said that she didn't care about her own welfare. She'd acted that way too. It was like she was only staying alive so that she could eventually die—although if Dana had said this to her, she probably would have denied it.

And now look at where that girl was.

Dana took a deep breath and calmly lifted the door knocker. *Knock knock*. It made a solemn sound.

"What in the world is going on here?"

"Nnnkwee-ee..."

Lacey groaned as she looked up toward the dazzling sun. At her feet, Tee responded with a gentle ruffle of its feathers.

The sunlight shining on Lacey wasn't as intense as usual. She knew the reason. Overhead, leaves rustled. At the top of a fat trunk, there were a number of large, hard, brown fruits growing. A bunch of them, in fact.

Lacey narrowed her eyes languidly. "This definitely wasn't here before, right?"

"Kwee kwee." Tee nodded its fluffy head in agreement.

"Yeah." Lacey tilted her head.

She was looking up at a coconut tree.

There had been a variety of trees growing behind the mansion when she'd first got there, but she was definitely sure that there hadn't been a coconut tree. As far as she could tell, it had just suddenly popped up out of the ground one day.

The coconut tree wasn't the only odd thing. Taking a look around, there were lots of plants she didn't recognize growing everywhere. Although this was plenty strange, Lacey had some idea of the underlying cause. It was her mana.

Lacey had cultivated the high-quality medicinal herbs that she'd received from Wayne into an even more superb variety by infusing her mana into the garden. Doing this might have influenced more soil nearby.

"Hmm..."

It was hard to believe that the coconut tree had been conjured completely out of thin air. It was more likely that seeds dormant in the soil had quickly reacted to Lacey's mana. The village had monster wards, but Lacey's mansion on top of the hill wasn't within the perimeter. Over the years, monsters had probably left behind all kinds of seeds from whatever they'd been eating.

She thought about it. "Well, as long as it's just in this patch, it should be fine..." The plot of land surrounding the mansion also belonged to Lacey.

There were also obviously out-of-season plants growing, but since nobody was coming by the mansion anyway, she decided to ignore them. Overhead, the clustered coconuts rustled in the wind. A very bizarre ecosystem was taking root, but she could ponder that more later.

"I'll put it aside for now," Lacey said out loud to herself. "All right, time to tend to the herbs."

Lacey averted her eyes from reality and turned her back on the coconuts. Tee followed behind her, chirping "Kwee kwee." She watered the garden and checked the soil, as was her daily routine. Just as she was wiping the sweat from her forehead, the tinkling of a bell came from the dark brown bag at Lacey's hip.

She'd adjusted it so that the pinky-sized bell would ring when there was a knock at the mansion's front door. The mansion was large and Lacey was often in the garden, so she'd made it in case any unexpected visitors dropped by.

When she had been preparing to open up her anything shop, she'd been worried about what she would do if lots of clients came. Half anxious and half hopeful, she'd painstakingly created another magic artifact. But in hindsight, it was rather depressing.

"Is that Allen?"

The artifact was meant as a practical tool, but it was always the same people visiting anyway. Well, still, it wasn't a waste to create this bell. I think. Right? Her confidence rapidly dwindled, as was usually the case. Her mood dropped and her shoulders hunched up as she stared at the ground.

But this time, she straightened back up and looked forward. "St-Still, I think the insulated thermal bags...were a really good idea!"

They were something that Lacey couldn't have invented independently. She had created them in order to fulfill a specific request, but would never have come up with the initial concept on her own. As for the visitor bell, she'd only thought of it to save Allen some trouble whenever he came with a crate of

vegetables.

In short, I'm just not creative. Lacey sighed. The same thing had happened with the sachets. She would never have even thought of them if not for Brooks.

She was skilled at killing and maiming hordes of monsters, but doing the opposite and creating rather than destroying was much harder. It was frustrating.

No.

If someone besides her was around, she felt like she could see a glimmer of light even on the darkest of paths. It was slight—like a few grains of sand piled together—but it made the bleak and scary path feel almost gentle.

Lacey slowly closed her eyes and calmly put a hand to her chest.

When she remembered the words of gratitude and the smiles that Allen's family had given her, she felt warm from the bottom of her heart. It was like she was being held in a firm grip. Every time she recalled it, the back of her eyelids became hot and her chest felt tight. But this feeling was probably...happiness.

"Kyew-wee!"

"A-Ack!"

Tee had zealously flown on top of Lacey's head. It spread its wings and puffed out its chest in a full-point landing pose. Lacey had involuntarily yelped when it dropped its weight on her. At the same time, the bell on Lacey's bag rang again, reminding her that there was somebody at the door.

"Oh no! Thank you, Tee. You're really heavy, though..."

The visitor had to be Allen, but since it was hot out, she didn't want to keep him waiting. She stretched her hands up to Tee on top of her head, grabbed it, and then hastily ran through the green field.

Nevertheless, she was newly reminded of how convenient artifacts were. She could live without them, but was grateful to have them around.

So far in her life, Lacey had been like a marionette. Remembering this made her feel a little sad. She'd always suppressed her own feelings.

She wanted to live independently.

She hated her own empty self, so she wanted to fill herself full of some kind of meaning. That was all she had wanted, but now that she was Lacey Aster, another wish was starting to take clear form within her.

I want to make artifacts.

Not something that would suppress feelings, but something that would put a smile on someone's face. Something that would make someone happy.

Something that would bring happiness to more and more people.

"Sorry to take so long!" She burst out panting, holding Tee in her arms. Then she realized in surprise that the person who had knocked wasn't Allen.

The person's face was hidden by a large cloth hat, but she seemed to be a woman. She was taller than Lacey and wore a pretty white dress. Lacey had been convinced that the only people who would come knocking on her door were Allen, Wayne, or possibly Brooks.

I-Is this a client?

Tee writhed in Lacey's arms. She hugged it tight.

"A red cockatrice? No, that can't be right. Is it a phoenix?" came a voice that chimed like a bell.

Lacey instantly blinked. "Dana?!"

"Long time no see, Lacey. Thank you for that lovely letter."

Dana took off her white cloth hat, letting loose tresses of perfectly straight, light green hair that flowed past her shoulders and went down to her waist. Her slight, relaxed smile was just the same as when they had traveled together.

Lacey looked up at Dana in a daze. No matter how many times she blinked, it was still Dana there. Lacey wasn't mistaking someone else for her, and it couldn't be someone using transformation magic. Lacey's eyes went as large as plates and her jaw hung open.

Dana placed a hand to her mouth in mild concern and chuckled. "Lacey, I know you've always had big eyes, but if you keep them that wide open, they'll pop right out of their sockets!"

A spotless white tablecloth was laid out in front of her. On top of it were two teacups resting on saucers.

I'm glad I just cleaned. Lacey, sitting down in a chair, felt a wave of relief sweep over her. Then she stiffened back up and timidly peered up at Dana, who was sitting across from her. Underneath the table, Tee was fervidly pecking at herbs, as it happened to be around its lunchtime.

"Nn-kyew, nn-kyew, nnnnnkyew!" Absolutely scrumptious! It expressed with great delight.

Tee could eat anything, but for some reason, its favorite food was medicinal herbs. Lacey was starting to zone out, but its chirps brought her back to reality.

Dana's slender fingers pinched the handle of the teacup and lifted it. The tea moistened her lips, and there was a gulping sound as it went down her throat.

Lacey's fists tightened atop her lap.

"It's very tasty," Dana smiled broadly.

It wasn't until she said this that Lacey felt like she could breathe again. Why do I feel so anxious? Lacey herself wasn't sure. But actually, she did know. This was the first time that the two of them—well, three of them, including Tee—had been alone together. There was always someone else around during their quest.

Dana had told Lacey that she'd made a special trip to the village after receiving her letter. Dana's town and Plume Village were too far from each other to walk all the way, so she must have used a teleportation shrine—but even then, it must have been a long journey.

Lacey had been dumbstruck when she first saw Dana, but she quickly realized that that could wait and hurriedly invited her into the mansion. Then she'd anxiously brewed tea.

Wh-Why did she come...? Lacey couldn't help but wonder, despite being distressingly aware that she'd written a letter asking for exactly that.

She'd sent the letter with her heart in her throat, and then what came next

was a complete blank in Lacey's mind. She hadn't imagined Dana coming, and certainly not like this, so she was bewildered by the reality playing out in front of her eyes.

She tried to distract herself by stirring the tea in her cup with a spoon, but she kept clinking it against the edge. She was breaking out in a cold sweat.

"I was surprised to hear that you moved. Tell me, does Wayne know?"

"What? Yes...and Brooks too. I sent a letter to Rosie also, but I don't think I've gotten a response."

"I doubt Rosie's even noticed that she got a letter. I can't picture her checking the mailbox. Anyway, I expected Wayne, but Brooks too? Hmm."

It felt like the temperature of the room dropped a few degrees.

Even Lacey, who was hopeless at interpersonal communication, had noticed that Brooks and Dana were often in conflict with each other. To be more specific, Brooks was more likely to get scratched up fighting on the front lines, and as the party's holy woman, Dana had to heal him each time and therefore flipped out at him a lot. Dana was usually quite mild, but she was very scary when she was angry.

Although, "conflict" might not have been the appropriate word—Brooks just loudly laughed off everything with a devil-may-care attitude, which made Dana erupt with anger even more. Lacey had always watched from the sidelines, but just remembering these moments gave her a jolt. The surface of the tea in her cup rippled.

"That aside, I really am sorry."

"Yes ma'am! Er, about what now?"

"For dropping in out of the blue. I'd hoped to send you a letter and ask about your plans first. I'm glad I caught you."

"It's okay, that's not a problem at all."

"That's a relief to hear. I had wanted to go as soon as I read your letter, but I just couldn't get time off. I kept scheduling it, but then things just kept getting in the way, so I had a limited window of opportunity."

Lacey shook her head. She had a feeling that something similar happened before. Oh yes—with the aforementioned Brooks. His circumstances had been different from Dana's, but he'd figured it would be quicker to go in person and had knocked heartily on Lacey's door.

Dana and Brooks were polar opposites, but if one went far enough down the spectrum, they'd loop around to the other side. Although they seemed incompatible, they actually had a good relationship. Lacey gave a small chuckle.

Then Dana's kind face stiffened into a serious expression. Lacey was startled by her sudden change in mood and shrank back again.

"Tell me something, Lacey. You wrote in your letter that you're running an anything shop. Then there's this thing I bought in town earlier. Am I correct in saying you made this?" Dana placed a familiar item on the table. It was an insulated thermal bag.

The fact that Lacey was the creator of these as well as the sachets was a secret to village outsiders. The merchant with fox-like eyes had recommended this as well, and Lacey herself had no intention of loudly announcing it. The insulated thermal bags weren't being distributed yet, but the merchant would be starting to sell them in the capital soon.

However, since there was no need for her to hide the truth from Dana, Lacey nodded right away. "Y-Yeah. You're right. Did you buy this? You didn't need to do that, I would've given you one."

"It's fine. I love money, but I hate not paying a reasonable price. That means that someone down the line isn't getting their fair share."

Lacey didn't understand Dana's doctrine very well, but she was a woman who lived by her own rules. Lacey wasn't about to make her bend them, so she just nodded her head in acknowledgment. Besides, Dana had recognized the bag as something worth paying for. Although Lacey hadn't made it all by herself, this still made her happy. She felt her heart growing warm again.

"I haven't used this bag yet, but I bought and ate a to-go lunch in the village. It was chilled all the way through and delightfully tasty. Lacey, I knew you were a brilliant mage—actually, just that adjective doesn't do you justice—but I didn't know that you could do things like this too. You've really surprised me."

This was a bit *too* much of a compliment for Lacey and she felt the need to tell her the truth. "It wasn't something I could've made alone. Allen—um, the villagers suggested that something like this would be nice to have, so I made it. I'm really not that good," she deflected, somewhat embarrassed.

"Maybe if this was the *only* thing you made." There seemed to be some weight behind these words.

Dana pulled out something else from her luggage. It was something that was even more familiar to Lacey than the insulated thermal bag.

"A sachet?"

"Yes, I hear it's called an aromatic artifact. It's all the rage in the capital," Dana noted. "It's an extraordinary little artifact that's kick-started a new obsession with scent. In my capacity as a holy woman, I deal with nobles a lot. Nobles *love* fashion trends. That's why I keep an eye on the market so I don't miss the bandwagon."

Lacey blinked, impressed. She couldn't do that kind of thing. Dana must have been using her exceptional good looks and conversational skills to get scores of nobles wrapped around her finger.

"You really are amazing, Dana."

"I just have some aptitude as a holy woman and take an interest in these kinds of things anyway. Lacey, I don't think you understand how incredible you are. You made this aromatic artifact too, didn't you?" Dana pointed a finger at the bottom of the pouch. The Aster insignia was there.

The word "aster" meant "star." The sachets were very popular in the capital, but that meant that plenty of counterfeits had started to circulate as well. As a mark of authenticity, Lacey always left embroidered stars on the items she'd made.

The merchant had registered the insignia with the trade guild, so while the villagers had been enlisted to help make the pouches, Lacey was the only one permitted to use the mark. The same symbol was on the insulated thermal bags as well. That was probably what Dana was referring to.

Lacey nodded, somewhat puzzled.

"I knew it," Dana let out a sigh, slapping a palm to her forehead. "I swear, you're so..." She sounded exasperated.

No, that's not it. Lacey had a bad habit of guessing what other people felt and interpreting it pessimistically. If I don't ask, I won't know what she really feels. She bit down on her lip and faced forward, clutching at her chest.

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"D-Dana, um, I..."

"You're so...amazing."

"...What?"
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Dana sounded earnest. The words had dropped so suddenly that they should've gone clean through Lacey, but as the seconds passed, they sank in and weighed bulkily upon her arms. She would've been perfectly unencumbered if the words hadn't sunk in, but knowing that she'd been complimented made the backs of Lacey's ears feel hot.

"Amazing? But..."

"You made both the insulated thermal bags and the sachets. I was wondering what you meant by 'anything shop' when I got your letter, but now that I know, I'm once again struck by how amazing you are. I can't think of any other word for it," Dana spoke earnestly.

Lacey automatically clammed up. Her mouth tightened into a straight line and her ears went red. Dana smiled affectionately upon seeing this, but Lacey was so embarrassed that she kept looking down at her hands and didn't notice.

Then Dana's expression turned serious again, as it had before. "Lacey, I want to request something from you—or rather, from the anything shop Starseeking."

While Dana had known that Lacey had started up an anything shop, she didn't know what exactly that entailed. Thus, this request was probably something that she'd thought of after arriving in the village. Though she was still startled by her sober tone, Lacey raised her head and looked at Dana.

H-Huh? Upon closer inspection, Dana's face was terribly pale. She emanated an uncharacteristically heavy, melancholy aura, and her eyes were half shut in

anguish.

"Because I'm a holy woman, this is something I can't talk about to anyone. I wouldn't have told you either if you weren't running Starseeking."

"Dana... Um, if it helps you out, I'll do whatever I can!"

"Thank you. The thing is...my body feels heavy."

"It's...heavy?" *Is it a curse?* Lacey wondered, her eyebrows furrowing. It was an entirely possible story if she'd been possessed by an undead monster.

Dana leaned over the table toward Lacey. Her gaze was steadfast, but paradoxically, there was a deep darkness within her eyes that threatened to swallow everything up. Lacey was almost about to lean back and try to get away...but this was a request for her anything shop. Lacey mustered up her energy and clenched her fists.

"Y-Your body feels heavy. Is there anything else?"

"My head hurts. My back aches. I feel dizzy."

I-Is it really a curse?! A holy woman couldn't exorcise herself if she got possessed, so it wasn't the kind of thing she would be able to speak publicly about. It must have been an incredibly powerful monster if Dana was having trouble with it.

"I'm worn out in the middle of the day and the sunlight burns. Getting here was so, so, so tough."

"Th-Then the problem is—!"

"Exactly!" Dana slammed the table with a heavy thud. Their teacups jumped up into the air, and Lacey likewise jumped up from her chair a little in surprise.

"I'M SO SICK OF DEALING WITH THOSE SHITTY SENILE NOBLES, THE STRESS IS KILLING MEEE!!!"

Lacey wasn't really sure what Dana was talking about. She spontaneously echoed a more modest "Um, shitty...?" to the vociferous beauty wearing a dress.

She could hear Tee chirping "Nkwee nkwee!" — Scrumptious! Scrumptious! —

as it messily ate medicinal herbs near her feet.

Dana panted, her shoulders heaving and her fists shaking.

"Ah, er, umm..."

Lacey recalled seeing this many times before. No matter how many times Dana warned him, Brooks kept coming back from fights worn and battered, which would prompt her to say "Cut that shit out! Making miracles happen saps my energy, so if you don't quit it already, I'm gonna start charging you! I will beat the crap out of you!!!" Then she would deliver a righteous punch to Brooks's butt. She was acting much the same way right now. This holy woman was *buff*.

"Oh dear. I'm sorry, that wasn't directed at you, naturally. Don't get me wrong, okay?!"

"O-Of course, I understand. It's all right."

Actually, she'd almost blacked out for a moment, but after shaking her head and straightening out her expression again, Lacey faced Dana firmly. There was just one thing for her to do right now: comprehend Dana's request in full.

This is a job. I can't keep looking down all the time. I have to do this properly.

Dan had said that she told Lacey specifically because she ran Starseeking. In that case, Lacey would have to acknowledge her in kind and act professionally.

"Dana, could you tell me more about this stress that's affecting you?"

If she was going to fulfill Dana's request, it was essential to first understand what she was asking for.

In a complete one-eighty from before, Lacey placed her palms on the table and straightened out her posture as she spoke. Dana blinked a little in surprise when she saw this, but she quickly guessed Lacey's intentions. She began to describe her situation in greater detail.

"As you know, I'm just a holy maiden. I'm not a mage like you, so I can't use magic. I am simply one who was chosen to convey the will of God, and I can use a healing power which we refer to as 'miracles.'"

Lacey nodded. Dana's miracles, Lacey's magic, and Brooks's technique for

converting the soul's inner power into strength were all different. However, there was really no other word for what Dana did besides "miracles." It was a sacrament that could only be conferred by a small number of people chosen by God. It was a power that could cure any wound or illness.

Dana was an essential member of the hero's party. Without her, they wouldn't have been able to complete their quest without any casualties among their number.

The sacrament of miracles was derived from bestowing a spirit of virtue unto people. Dana's power could easily cleanse the spiritual contamination known as a "curse," but those with healing powers could not receive miracles from fellow holy women or men.

In short, since she couldn't heal herself, Dana never skipped her daily workout routine and would always smash through monster curses with a battle cry. "HRMGH!" she would shout, her feet firmly planted on the ground and hands clenched into fists. The sight of this was still engraved deeply in Lacey's mind.

Lacey recalled that later, her companions had all sat around a crackling campfire and talked about what they would do once the Demon King was defeated and their quest was complete. Lacey was in no way capable of casual conversation, but she still hunched down and listened to what they had to say. During this, Dana had said that she wanted to receive fair compensation for using her powers as a holy woman.

"After our quest was over, I established a medical center annexed to the orphanage. Things got shockingly busy then. I'd like to say that there's no distinction made between nobles and commoners, but it *is* a customer-facing job. Handling the haughty nobles is where it gets really annoying. It's 'Hey, treat me first' this, 'Hey, be my personal caretaker and share your miracles with me and only me' that. It's nothing but stress every day."

Dana let out a heavy sigh. "But!" she raised her voice and asserted. "I'm doing it for the money! Nobles are important customers who pay well, so I can't let them slip away! All I have to do is plaster a smile on my face and talk a bit, and then they're like putty in my fingers!"

She was unwavering. This holy woman would forsake her pride for money.

However, no matter how determined she was, it must have worn away at her regardless. Lacey imagined what it must have been like to open a medical center after coming back from their quest and then deal with selfish nobles every day. I see. No wonder the stress has piled up.

"That sounds really hard."

"It is! And I realized that going in! This is work worth doing to me and I'm trying to be optimistic about it. But one morning, I woke up and my body felt so heavy that I couldn't move. I could just use a miracle on myself...but I can't!"

"So, what you're saying is..."

"My shoulders are stiff, my back aches, and my head is pounding! Save me, Lacey!"

It was all clear to Lacey now. In short, Dana's request was to fix her stress-related health issues. "Okay, I understand. I'll do what I can."

"You accept?!"

"Of course," Lacey acknowledged.

Dana's expression bloomed into a smile. She then stood up from her chair and tried to fling herself at Lacey...before clutching her back and crumpling to the ground. "Ooh, owwwww! My back pain...!"

It was, to say the least, a worrying sight.

* * *

Dana could stay in Plume Village for two days, today included. She had a packed schedule after that, so she would have to leave on the morning of the third day.

Lacey placed a hand to her chin and mumbled to herself. "Back pain, headaches, muscle stiffness... Something that'll fix all of these at the same time. Medicinal herbs should work for the back pain, but probably not for the rest of it. Hmm..."

"Lacey? Lacey? Oh my, she isn't listening." Dana, still bent over and worrying about the injury to her back, tried getting Lacey's attention. Instead of an answer, all she heard was mumbles.

"Oh dear..."

Dana had seen Lacey like this before many times during their quest. Whenever she had even the slightest dissatisfaction with her magic, she would lose sleep over devising how to make the formulas more efficient. The girl lived hand in hand with magic, to the point where she herself was like a perfected magic spell.

Lacey was a dependable companion, but she had an unapproachable aura about her. In those moments, Dana simply gave her space.

It would sound positive if she said it was because she was older than Lacey and was reading her mood, but the truth was, Dana could only worriedly keep an eye on her from a distance. Meanwhile, Wayne was able to ignore that aura that Dana couldn't get past and step right up to Lacey. She was a little jealous of that.

"You know, this is a really sudden request, so you don't have to strain yourself if it's too hard. Don't overdo it...yeah, she's not listening."

Since this was a job, there would need to be payment involved. However, Lacey shook her head and said, "You don't have to pay yet. I haven't figured out what to make. I can't charge you when you don't know what you're getting."

Dana sat down in a chair and followed Lacey with her eyes, wondering what was going through her head. She was pacing around the mansion and brainstorming. At Dana's feet, Tee spread out its wings and swayed to the right and then to the left like a pendulum. Dana chuckled.

"It seems your master's putting serious effort into this."

"Nkwee?"

"That's one of Lacey's strengths."

They'd traveled together for a year. Although there was a complex distance between them that couldn't be surmounted, Dana had always been observing Lacey. She was taller than she remembered, and her aura had changed a little as well. She seemed much more charming than before. Still, there were things about her that hadn't changed.

"I'm glad I came. This might sound weird, but I forced myself to take a vacation since I wanted a breath of fresh air. I mean, I've been going without any breaks and I'm totally worn out. I guess I really was at my limit, so much so that my body's starting to complain."

Seeing Lacey, who was very different and yet still the same, gave Dana a little bit of energy. She didn't know if Lacey was listening or not, though.

Tee kept its big round eyes focused on Dana and kept dancing, wagging its butt. "Kwee kwee!"

"You're charming too," Dana said sweetly to Tee. In response, Tee shook its beak in satisfaction.

"I did make a rather big request, so I don't think I can have very high expectations. Still, I'm glad just to see Lacey. Now I've got the energy to work hard again. Besides that...oh yes, there's something that I absolutely have to thank her for." Despite what she'd just said, Dana anxiously glanced over at Lacey. "She didn't hear that last part, right?"

Of course, Lacey wasn't looking over at her. She was still pacing back and forth across the room.

"Ah!"

She wasn't looking where she was going. "Watch out!" Dana was about to exclaim, but she was a second too late. *Thud!* came a heavy sound as Lacey crashed into the wall.

Just then, the bell at Lacey's waist chimed with a pleasant little *ding-a-ling*. There was a visitor.

* * *

"Dana, the Saint of Light?"

Allen, who had been invited into the mansion by Lacey, had his jaw hanging. As usual, he had a crate full of vegetables in his arms. Dana noticed Allen's reaction and then realized that she'd forgotten to put her hat back on.

"You're Dana in the flesh?! Actually, sorry, Lady Dana?!"

"Oh dear. There was no fuss at the restaurant I went to for lunch, but do people recognize me even here?"

"Restaurant? Oh, that guy's a bit eccentric...wait, I was just at Sasanqua! Come on, Cedric, you should've told me!" Allen stamped his feet.

If he knew about Dana, then did he know about Lacey too? Dana tilted her head and turned her gaze to the girl.

Allen wailed at Lacey. "How, big sis Lacey?! How do you know Lady Dana?! Tell me!!!" He was shaking a helpless Lacey back and forth.

I shouldn't say anything imprudent. Dana hushed up. Unlike me, the portraits of Lacey going around have her age, face, and features completely wrong. She actually has beautiful black hair, but they draw her with red hair just because she's the Dawn Witch.

She has such a pretty face, so she should've shown it more, Dana thought. During their quest, Lacey had always been clutching her large staff and had a black hood hanging over her eyes. Although she shared a name with the Dawn Witch, it wasn't obvious that they were one and the same.

While Dana pondered this, Lacey had finished explaining to Allen that they'd met in the capital, with some faltering. Allen then announced "I'm leaving your vegetables here! But since Lady Dana's here, I'll come by again tomorrow!" and went away...but then turned back, bowed emphatically to Dana, and then ran off.

The mansion went very quiet. Lacey explained the circumstances. "That was Allen. He comes to deliver vegetables often, and he's a fan of yours."

"Oh my."

"Actually, he's such a big fan that he wanted to name his little sister after you."

That was a bit hard to comment on, but Dana interpreted it positively and supposed that meant he liked it. There were lots of boys and girls who looked up to Dana and the rest of the party as heroes.

"He wanted to, so that must mean she ended up with a different name. Was

the name Lacey on the list of candidates?"

"Well, they were apparently thinking about it, and they kind of settled on a similar name..."

"Heh heh. Then he'd be very surprised if he learned you're the Dawn Witch."

"I'm not sure."

"I think so. I'd love to see the look on his face," Dana chuckled.

* * *

After the sun had set, Lacey and Dana decided to go down into the village. After all, they needed to get dinner. Lacey could manage something on her own, but making something that would suit Dana's tastes would pose some difficulty.

Of course, Dana wasn't exactly a gourmet. Lacey was just too austere. There had been a spread of cucumbers in the chock-full crate Allen had brought.

"How about this for dinner tonight?" Lacey had asked and offered a cucumber with some salt.

Dana had given it a thumbs-down. "Vetoed."

Lacey had gotten markedly better at brewing tea, but she still didn't have any aptitude for making meals. After all, this was the same Lacey who was satisfied with chomping down on raw carrots. She had assumed that most other people would be totally okay with biting into whole raw produce and had therefore suggested the cucumbers, but she found that she was mistaken. Lacey followed after Dana sadly.

"I could make dinner myself, but I would end up wasting ingredients. I hate wasting things."

"I think anything you make would be tasty."

"Shush, Lacey."

At a glance, Dana seemed like she could do anything, but her one weakness was that she couldn't make a decent meal. She had been another reason Wayne's cooking skills had improved in leaps and bounds over the course of

their quest.

"Eating out is expensive, so I don't like to do it. But I checked the prices this afternoon and it was comparatively reasonable." Dana was merrily humming a song, but when she accidentally walked wrong, she groaned and crumpled to the ground. "Ngh!" It was like her whole body was screaming.

That seems really painful. Lacey raised her eyebrows in dismay as she walked down the dirt road. They were headed to the restaurant, so Tee was staying home. It was its bedtime anyway.

Hoo, hoo! came a birdcall from afar. Insects were quietly trilling in the grass. The sun which had beaten down on them during the day had gone down completely over the mountains, and now a cool wind was blowing. It was like another world entirely.

If Lacey used ignition magic, they wouldn't need a light, but she didn't want to be conspicuous. Instead, Dana and Lacey each held a small lamp in their hands as they walked along. Lacey had been down this way many times before, yet Dana had a more confident stride. She was always bold and seemed to fit well at Wayne's side.

Lacey's pace abruptly dropped. The lamplight rocked, illuminating only her feet.

"This should be the place."

Lacey jerked her head back up when she heard Dana's voice. They had arrived at the only restaurant in the village. Just as Sasanqua's name suggested, there was a lofty camellia sasanqua tree standing gracefully next to the entrance.

Lacey slowly lifted the lamp. Its dim glow, along with the light of the moon, illuminated the perky green leaves. It wouldn't be long now before it would bloom with lots of lovely, eye-catching flowers with red petals and yellow stamens. The idea of enjoying a to-go lunch underneath its boughs was tempting.

The restaurant was run out of a quaint log building which complemented the tree well. Faint light could be seen through its windows. It had been some time since the sun had set, so there was nobody else around.

Lacey was worried that the restaurant might be closed already and tried giving the door a push. It was unlocked.

"Welcome," came an unwelcoming greeting. The only person inside was the proprietor, and there were no more customers around.

"Are you still open?" Dana asked.

"Shop's open till I go to bed. Sit wherever you want," answered the proprietor, who was sitting on a stool next to the counter.

His curt attitude made Dana blink a little. "Oh, really? Thank you," she replied simply, then exchanged a look with Lacey standing behind her.

It was free seating, but there were only two tables anyway.

The lone employee was the proprietor, Cedric, who wore thin-rimmed glasses and was reading a newspaper. Dana gave Lacey a glance and shrugged. Lacey knew what Dana wanted to say, but she knew that despite the proprietor's gruff appearance, he was actually quite amiable. Most of all, he played an important part in selling the insulated thermal bags.

"G-Good evening, Mr. Cedric."

Even so, Lacey was still nervous about greeting him. Was that enough? Would it have been better to not say anything? But... She fretted.

"Good evening, Miss Lacey." Cedric took his eyes off the paper and greeted Lacey.

"Um, yes! Good evening! Good evening!"

"No need to repeat yourself. Also, you there. You came in the afternoon too. Thanks for the repeat business."

"Oh, you remembered me."

"Yep."

He's not very cordial, but he certainly has an unusual sense of intimacy, Lacey awkwardly smiled to herself.

* * *

Dana sat down in a chair and looked around the restaurant. I guess it's okay,

she thought before casually removing her hat. There weren't any other customers, and although Lacey wasn't aware, Cedric had already seen her face and hadn't reacted at all. It felt silly to be wearing a hat at night inside.

"Here's some water for you. And a menu."

"Thank you."

"It's evening, so most items are sold out. Also, I'm astonished to see the Saint of Light come to this little village." Cedric spoke without a trace of surprise on his face, as detached as ever.

Lacey recalled that Dana had mentioned visiting during the day, so she decided to just watch and let Dana and Cedric talk to each other.

"You don't look all that astonished."

"There were other customers around during the day. I'm doing my best to express it now though. Also, today's recommended item is the hamburger steak."

Cedric was getting surprisingly involved, so Lacey got the sense that maybe he was cheerful at heart after all. The first time she'd met him had been when they'd surveyed the village together with Allen and Kargo. There had been apprehensions about structural damage after a storm had passed through the village, so Lacey had spent about half a day around him before.

When she'd completed the insulated thermal bag and miniaturized cooling chamber and Allen had suggested having Cedric use them at his restaurant, Lacey had jumped up with a small squeak. She would definitely appreciate having someone test out the utility of her artifacts, but the thought of imposing on him made her tremble. When she and Allen went to Sasanqua to ask, Cedric had simply said, "Sure," and nothing else, so Lacey had been unable to ask what his motive was.

While Lacey was reminiscing, Cedric had said to just tell him once they'd decided on an order and then returned to his stool at the counter.

Dana whispered to Lacey. "He's a strange person."

"Yeah," she replied simply. Allen had previously called Cedric an eccentric.

They decided to order the hamburger steak, as was recommended. It was served on top of a sizzling iron plate, steaming hot and drizzled with lots of sauce. When the steak was stabbed with a fork, it dribbled warm, savory juices.

The second she took a bite, Dana patted her cheek. "Yummy!" Lacey was in total agreement.

"Do you not come here that much, Lacey? It's absolutely delicious. I think it's far healthier than just eating raw cucumbers."

"I don't come by much, no..." She wanted to argue that cucumbers were great too, but restrained herself. Despite her misleading inclusion of the word "much," she'd only visited once before with Allen.

Dana made a pensive face. Lacey spoke bit by bit, mentally sorting things out.

"I was a bit scared of visiting the village at first, so it kind of became a habit...and besides, I usually cook potatoes for myself. I can do that, at least."

"Yikes. The best retort you can come up with is that you can cook potatoes? *Yikes.* Come to think of it, you were the sort of person to claim you could easily go days without eating."

"I am eating meals now."

"But you don't care what's on your plate, right?"

Lacey wanted to respond with "That's not true," but she couldn't say it very loudly.

Dana stared fixedly at Lacey, observing her complexion. "What about Wayne? He used to seem rather happy to make meals for you."

Happy? Before Lacey could break down why that sounded odd, Dana took a bite of piping hot steak. It's true, Wayne always does seem like he's having fun when he cooks. I don't know if "happy" is the right word for it, though.

He was overly helpful, and when he cooked for everyone, his eyes sparkled as he eagerly awaited to hear their opinions. When she closed her eyes, she could almost hear him now, asking *How is it, Lacey?* When she answered honestly that it was tasty, that made him grin from ear to ear.

Wayne's cooking was always warm.

"The food Wayne makes is special."

When Wayne smiled, it automatically made Lacey feel happy. But the food she was eating now was tasty too, of course. It was something Lacey wouldn't be able to make no matter how hard she tried.

When she gulped down the steak, it warmed her stomach. It was the taste of bliss. Lacey ate slowly, using her fork and knife. Dana had finished before her. She set her elbows on the table and laughed meaningfully.

"Wh-What is it?"

"Nothing. I just felt a little jealous hearing you call it 'special.' Anyway, the tree out front here is quite lovely too, so you should come more often. I don't know anywhere else you can get such a big piece of steak at such a low price." Dana ruminated at her own words and nodded, then leaned over the table toward Lacey.

Just as Lacey was about to respond in agreement, Cedric suddenly loomed near their table. "I'm glad you're enjoying the food, but you should know that it's thanks to Miss Lacey that I can cook steak at this late hour."

When they noticed the lean Cedric suddenly pop out of nowhere with his glasses reflecting a cold light, Dana and Lacey yelped. However, Cedric didn't seem to pay that any heed and just kept talking.

"Ground meat doesn't keep at all, but because I have the miniaturized cooling chamber that Miss Lacey created, I can cook it without a hitch."

Cedric remained emotionless, so it was difficult to understand what he meant. After turning over his words in her head a few times, Lacey finally realized that he was probably trying to say "thank you."

"And the fact that I can serve this at all is fully thanks to you, Miss Lacey. Here's some dessert for both of you." He placed two bowls of ice cream on the table.

"O-Oh my!" Dana placed her hands on her cheeks. Both the bowls and the accompanying spoons were freezing cold.

"We didn't order this," Lacey said with some confusion, repeatedly switching

her gaze from Cedric to the ice cream and back again.

"It's a special treat for the last customers of the day," he told her.

Is this really okay?

But, she thought as she stuck her spoon into the ice cream, it would be a waste to just let it melt. When she took a bite, a sweet taste spread through her mouth.

They didn't have to say anything—their expressions said it all. "I'm glad you like it," Cedric stated.

"Miss Lacey. Because of you, I can try more things, I've added to my repertoire, and I'm having more fun serving new dishes in the restaurant. I'd like you to take responsibility for that and come by to eat every so often. I'll give you a special customer discount."

"R-Responsibility...?" Before she'd even known it, Lacey's inventions had spurred changes in places she didn't even realize. It was a very strange feeling.

The ice cream and steak had filled her stomach. She felt toasty warm throughout, and she just kept getting warmer.

"You're seeking out some distant stars, Lacey." Dana chuckled. It was like a scene right out of a picture. Her lips relaxed into a smile. She took a sip from her cup of water. "HWAGH?! R-r-r-aghhh, erghhhh!!! I've been sitting for too long, I can feel it in my back...!" She trembled and threw her fists against the table. Even changing her posture while sitting was an issue. She was in a pitiful state.

"I-I'm sorry, Dana! I don't have any herbs right now! I can go back home and get some...!"

"I-I'm okay. It'll calm down after a while. Just wait, don't move me right now..." Dana was bent forward, halfway between sitting and standing. She flapped one hand feebly.

"You've got back pain? That looks like it hurts."

Dana stiffened up when she heard Cedric.

It was preposterous for the Saint of Light, who possessed the healing power of miracles, to have joint flare-ups. However, she didn't have the strength to

deny it. Dana bit her lip with a groan and braced herself as she endured the agony.

"You can wear a corset for back pain or you can warm your body up. I'm getting older and do a lot of work while standing, so I've been trying to change my posture more often," Cedric said candidly to Dana. Apparently he was no stranger to this kind of problem. Lacey hadn't expected to learn this about him now of all times.

"By the way, is it only your back that hurts? When it gets really bad for me, even my thighs start tingling."

Cedric gave Dana all sorts of other advice about her back, like doing moderate exercise within reasonable limits, or how to move without hurting herself. He was, in his own way, just as overly helpful as Wayne.

As she listened to what Cedric had to say, Lacey put her hand on her chin and meditated. When one's back ached like Dana's did, sometimes the pain would start to radiate even down to the thighs. Although it was possible that there was some kind of disease behind this, it was more likely that the back pain was linked to the nerves and was causing symptoms in the legs, which should have been fine.

There were forms of magic that could directly affect people, such as transformation or velocity magic. In order to use those, she'd gained a working understanding of the human body structure.

In effect, symptoms are always associated with something. "So basically..." Lacey murmured to herself.

Then she banged on the table. "I know!" She stood up out of her chair and exclaimed in excitement.

The other two stared at Lacey—Dana with tears still in her eyes, and Cedric blinking behind his glasses.

"What do you know, now...?" Dana looked like she might burst out crying at any second.

Lacey had just one answer for her. "How to make an artifact that'll solve your problem, of course!"

"The first thing we need to consider is the root cause of why your body hurts, Dana."

Bright, warm light streamed in through the windows. Inside the mansion suffused with morning air, Lacey stuck up her index finger. She was talking more briskly than usual and her expression was lively as well.

Dana had somehow managed to return to the mansion from Sasanqua while clutching her aching back. She was currently seated on a cushy sofa and giving her body a rest, repeatedly blinking as Lacey gave a whole lecture.

Despite the fact that the sun had already set long before, Lacey had been raring to go as soon as they got back last night. It had been tough convincing her to settle down and get some sleep first.

Next to Dana was Allen, with his arms folded, eyebrows knitted, and mouth pressed into a thin line. Just as he'd declared yesterday, he'd come first thing in the morning.

It would be inadvisable to wantonly spread word of Dana's poor health, but Cedric had found out already. One more person wouldn't make any difference —but that was just an excuse. The truth was that Lacey had been so surprised yesterday by how radically different Dana was that she wasn't sure of what to do and wanted someone else to be around. Allen's presence was a relief.

In between Dana and Allen was Tee, still sleepy-eyed, languidly leaning back against the back of the sofa...but at some point, it drifted off and started to contentedly snore "kyewww kyewww."

Lacey continued her enthusiastic explanation, but Dana couldn't follow what she was saying anymore. Had she always been like this? Dana compared her to the Lacey she remembered and felt utterly confused.

However, Allen seemed to be used to this. He was starting to act a little less nervous around Dana.

"Big sis Lacey gets kind of weird when she's motivated."

"Motivated..."

That certainly seemed to be the appropriate word to describe the girl who was panting with reddened cheeks and furiously gesticulating with her whole tiny body as she spoke.

Maybe this isn't a Lacey I don't know. Maybe this is just her natural state.

Dana had thought that she'd never seen Lacey like this before, but that might have been incorrect.

During their travels, there had been times when she happened to notice that Lacey was gone. When they all gathered around to set up camp or make a meal, the girl in the black robe would suddenly be nowhere to be seen. Then she'd eventually pop back in, looking completely ragged. Whenever Dana asked where she'd been, Lacey would dart her gaze around evasively as if she were afraid of making eye contact and simply explain herself with "I was practicing magic."

Lacey had been all by herself until then. Her head had been full of magic, and she had thought that magic was all there would ever be to her life.

But now, Dana was here, and so was Allen.

"So Dana, with this method, I think you can give your body a good rest and get yourself back into your best condition! The only definite thing it'll require is temperature!" Lacey looked at Dana with glimmering eyes.

Magic and inventing things were most likely the same thing to Lacey. When she made things, she made connections to other people as well.

For some reason, that made Dana feel a little happy. Nonetheless...

"Hold your horses, Lacey. We can't understand unless you explain at a slower pace."

If so, Dana wanted to watch where inventing things took Lacey.

She'd commissioned Lacey out of desperation, but had abandoned any hope of getting a satisfactory product, thinking it impossible. Now she felt differently. She was restless with anticipation. She was dreadfully curious, and without even thinking about it, her body (which had marginally recovered with the aid of Lacey's medicinal herbs) was leaning forward in interest. She didn't even

notice the very childlike grin on her own face.

I'm really starting to enjoy this.

Lacey blinked her eyes and placed the back of her hands against her cheeks, trying to get the flushing under control. "I'm sorry, I'll settle down. I was thinking about it all last night and just couldn't get to sleep." She had probably been too excited for morning to come.

Taking deep breaths didn't help her calm down at all, and her eyes were still glimmering. But of course, Dana didn't point this out.

"The first thing we need to do is identify your issues. Your back hurts, you have stiff shoulders, and you get headaches and dizzy spells. Do you know the root cause?"

There was only one cause that Dana could think of—the same thing she'd told Lacey before.

"Perhaps because my body parts are whiny troublemakers," she said with the steadfast smile of a holy woman. She didn't reply with "those shitty nobles" out of consideration for Allen, who was sitting next to her. Dana didn't have the courage to corrupt such a bright-eyed, innocent young lad. Allen noticed her glance at him for a moment and tilted his head in confusion.

"Yes, it's because of stress. So you need to prevent stress from building up in the first place—"

"I know that. I'm already dealing with the painful consequences. I'll consult with my body from now on." Even youth and physical strength had their limits, and the mental tax was eating away at her from the inside as well.

Lacey gave a nod. That was the key part here. "Stress deteriorates your physical condition. Everything can be traced back to a root cause, like how your back pain is referred down into your thighs via your nerves. So I think we need to figure out the intermediate steps and stop it in its tracks there."

Lacey pulled out a large sheet of paper. Judging by how cloth pieces fell as she moved it, this was probably pattern paper that she used to make insulated thermal bags and sachets. She set the paper on top of the table and scribbled on it.

There was a blank space between the words, and she also added illustrations. Under "stress," she drew a sad-looking person with a gloomy dark cloud over its head. Under "health problems," she drew a person crying. They were in a cute pop art style and were fairly well drawn. This was another unexpected talent of Lacey's.

Dana understood what Lacey was saying, but was mystified by the wide blank space between terms.

Lacey tapped the end of her pen over the blank space. "I think a lot of words can fit here."

"A lot of words?" This was getting more abstract. Allen frowned as he deliberated on it, desperately trying to stay on the same page.

"Dana, when you said your back hurts, Mr. Cedric gave you some suggestions, right? That's the kind of thing I'm talking about."

"Um, like getting more exercise? Come to think of it, I feel much more out of shape than during the quest..."

"Right. You'll have to be careful of that too, then. But I was thinking of something else. Why not try improving the quality of the other things you do each day that fit into this space?"

"What kind of daily things?" Dana tried to think of what that might include, but her mind felt foggy and she couldn't locate the right words.

It had been like this for a while lately. Whenever she wanted to focus, her attention would get divided and her work efficiency would drop. Even now, half her brain was preoccupied with figuring out how she would deal with things once she got back to the medical center. Her mind was totally disorganized and she would end up forgetting what she had been trying to think about in the first place.

"Tell me, Dana. Do you normally get enough sleep?"

"Huh...?" Dana blinked. Her naturally fine face and fair skin made it hard to tell, but upon close inspection, her skin was more sickly pale than fair, and there were faint dark circles under her eyes. "Yeah, I sleep. I make sure to get a minimum quota."

Just like with budgeting money, there were some things that couldn't be cut back too far. That was why no matter how busy things were, Dana made an effort to get at least a little sleep. She'd take frequent naps throughout the day to make them add up to at least the minimum amount. But was this really working? Now that Lacey had brought up the subject, Dana had a feeling that she wasn't waking up feeling as rested as she used to. She was always yearning to sleep more, the morning sun was detestable, and her body was heavy when she woke up.

Dana grimaced and went silent. Seeing this, Lacey wrote the word "sleep" in the blank space on the paper and added in a cute drawing of a person fast asleep.

"Getting rest isn't just about sleeping. The quality of your sleep changes depending on what you do beforehand. I read in a book once that if your sleep quality is bad, it can cause all kinds of health problems."

"So you're saying all of this can be solved if you cast some sleeping magic on me?"

"That could be one way of doing it, but if you rely solely on magic, the burden on your body will still add up. So I'm going to create an artifact that improves your sleep quality *indirectly* rather than directly. I think that right now, you aren't actually recovering while you sleep. It's like taking damage and then jumping right into the next battle before healing up."

Dana was a holy woman and was in charge of getting everyone else healed. This analogy helped get the idea across to her.

Allen had kept his mouth shut so far while deep in thought, but now raised his hand and asked a question. "How do you plan to increase sleep quality, big sis Lacey? All sleeping is is lying down in bed and shutting your eyes."

Tee had flopped over asleep on Lacey's lap, but now its snot bubble suddenly popped and it blinked open its bleary eyes. The way it could sleep so soundly

was enviable.

"Maybe, maybe not. You know, I've wondered about this for a while, but have you ever noticed how there are some days where you can lie down and go right to sleep, but there are other days where it takes a while?"

"I guess there are, yeah."

"What kind of days are those? And what times do you get sleepy?"

Allen shut his eyes and thought about it. Then his eyes flicked back open and he lifted his face. "I feel like I go to sleep right away when I'm worn out. As for what times...well, at night, of course...oh, but when it's cold out and I'm in front of a fire, I get drowsy. And Lane's still small, so her hands get warm when she wants to sleep."

Dana surmised that Lane was Allen's sibling. Strangely enough, young children's limbs would grow warm when they were sleepy. Dana knew this well, since she'd taken care of many children at the orphanage. When they were wrapped up tight in a blanket on cold days, they'd fall fast asleep with a relaxed look on their face. Recalling this brought a soft smile to Dana's face.

In short...

"You're going to create something that warms up the body before sleep?"

"Yes! And to accomplish that, I think a 'bath' would be best!"

"A bath...?" This wasn't something that the average townsperson would be familiar with. While Dana of course knew what this was, Allen had never heard of it before. He stumbled over the word when repeating it.

"Yes!" Lacey nodded happily.

Dana just couldn't keep up with whatever Lacey had in mind. She wanted to understand her, but it seemed that would be a challenge after all.

* * *

"Okay, Tee, that fruit looks like it's the biggest one. It should be good. Go ahead!"

"Nkwee!"

"Uwa-wa-waugh!"

Tee, gripping the treetop with its talons, used its beak to drop a large fruit. On the ground, Allen caught it. The fruit was large enough to fill his arms. It was shockingly large up close.

At the back of the mansion was a bountiful field where rustling palm trees grew and bore coconuts.

The spell that Lacey had cast on the coconut wore off, and the now-heavy fruit weighed down Allen's arms. "Oowah?!"

"Maybe that one's a little *too* big, actually... I don't know much about coconuts, but they're definitely not supposed to be that big, right?" Dana could only murmur. She was so stunned by the extraordinary herb patch and bedazzled by the colorful flowers, that it was all getting to be a bit overwhelming.

"After I infused my mana into the soil, the area around the garden went a little wild."

"You call this a little?"

Dana figured that she shouldn't pry any further. She narrowed her eyes, put a hand on her cheek, and sighed.

Lacey didn't notice this action. Instead, she examined the coconut that Allen was holding and lightly flicked her finger up and down. "I want to split it in half like this, if possible."

Not even Lacey had split a coconut before, it seemed. Her magic wasn't all-purpose—the formula had to be modified depending on the material makeup of the object to be cut. In simpler words, she needed to create "coconut-cleaving magic."

"Ummm..." Lacey twirled her index finger and devised the formula in her head.

Allen set the coconut on the ground, smacked his bicep, and threw out his chest. "You've got me here, so let me handle it. I've split coconuts lots of times! Although this one is a bit oversized. All right!"

Since he was asking to do the job himself, he must have been confident. Allen used a thick snapped branch to forcefully pry off the fruit's husk.

Dana had seen coconuts before, but she didn't know how they were peeled, so she observed with great curiosity. Tee had flown down from the treetop at some point and was now watching Allen's movements with its head tilted, making warbling sounds.

What Dana had thought was peel was actually, upon closer inspection, a thick layer of fibers. It was almost like tree bark was stuck to the outside of the fruit. When this was removed, the stiff exterior of a light brown fruit was revealed. It was much smaller than it had been before, but it was still about the size of two human heads.

"Yaaah!" Allen picked up a broad-bladed knife that had been leaning against the wall and raised it so that the blunt side, not the edge, faced downward. Then he swung it down with all his might at the fruit sitting on the ground. The knife hit it with a *thunk!*

He repeated this multiple times, gradually forming a cleft in the coconut.

"Do you have a pot I can use, big sis?"

"Wait a moment, I'll bring one." The moment he asked, Lacey zoomed away, then swiftly returned carrying a pot.

"Thanks," Allen said. Struggling with the bulk of the coconut, he swiveled the knife around and this time hit the fruit with the edge of the blade. A clear liquid spurted out, which he hurriedly directed into the pot.

"This is coconut water, right?"

"Yeah. Since we've got it, it'd be a waste not to use it." Allen grinned at Lacey.

A vast quantity of coconut water proportionate to the size of the coconut itself swirled around in the pot. Allen drained out every drop of water, then swung the knife down once more. The coconut split in half and opened up, revealing hard white flesh.

It was a big coconut, so they divided the rest of the work. The flesh was shaved off with a blade. One pot wasn't enough to hold it all, so they got

another bowl out. The shavings kept piling up.

"Don't strain yourself, Dana. Allen and I can handle this."

"Thanks, but sometimes it just makes me feel better to do something different. Those herbs helped my pain subside too."

So Dana claimed, but last night she had been thinking about the mountain of work to be done once she got back to the medical center and hadn't been able to get good rest. However, as she'd watched them work, her head had gradually cleared. She could hardly contain her enthusiasm.

Lacey held the coconut in place while Allen shaved away the inside. Dana slowly shaved the other half.

Tee waddled over to the trio out of curiosity, flapping its wings. It stared at the pile of coconut flesh, then took a small peck at it with its beak.

"Nkwoo?!" Tee shivered. It straightened its posture, then moments later flopped down. "Nkweeeeee"

It was enraptured. Tee glanced at Lacey for a sign. "You can eat it," she told it.

As soon as it got the okay, Tee ravenously pecked at the shavings at breakneck speed while making "kwee kwee" noises.

"Looks like Tee's enjoying it."

"The parts besides the water are tasty too." There really was a use for every part of the coconut.

By the time Tee had finished fattening itself up and lay down relaxedly in the garden, the inside of the coconut had been all cleaned out.

"So what are you doing with this, anyway?" Allen finally asked. They had been working without knowing what it was for.

Allen had been nervous around Dana and could only make small talk, like:

"I've got a newborn baby sister named Lane. She keeps getting heavier, so my mom's been complaining lately that her back hurts."

"Really? That's unfortunate. I can really relate."

But now he'd gotten completely used to speaking with her. Dana was much

happier to be talked to like this rather than be put on a pedestal.



As for Lacey, she rubbed the smoothened interior of the coconut and smiled with pleasure. "Thanks, you two. I didn't have exactly the right container, and it felt like it wouldn't be proper to use a pot." It was unclear what Lacey meant.

The three of them sat under the shade of a tree with rustling leaves. Lacey set the coconut shell on the ground and slid her palm over it. An abundance of water instantly formed, filling up the shell.

It was understandable that Allen would be so surprised that he forgot to breathe, but to Lacey, something this minor was a cinch. It was enough to make Dana question her own common sense.

Crafting a formula to generate water out of nothing and memorizing it would be so taxing that it'd be simpler to just go and draw water like normal. Magic really comes to her as easy as breathing. Dana gave a small sigh. Being around Lacey makes me doubt my senses.

"Now here comes the real test." Lacey plopped something into the shell.

Whatever it was drifted down into the water, and ripples formed on the surface around it. Then the water quivered with soft waves. After some time—not very long—as they watched the choppy surface of the water, they noticed that it was giving off a gentle steam.

"The water's boiling...!" Allen suddenly realized and gulped.

Lacey had just put in a rock. That was all. Dana and Allen watched dumbfounded as piping hot steam rose up.

"H-How? All you did was put in a rock... Oh, now I get it, it was a volcanic stone. Sheesh, you gave me a heart attack there." Allen had been leaning forward, but now gave his astonished face a small slap and sighed in relief. Volcanic stones were a type of mana stone that were full of heat.

"Whew," Allen breathed as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. But Lacey had an uneasy look on her face. When she saw this expression, Dana realized something.

"That's not it, Allen. It would take a much larger chunk to boil water with a volcanic stone."

Bigger mana stones were more powerful. Volcanic stones were basically stones imbued with fire magic. They would grow smaller as they radiated heat and eventually end up as cinders and vanish. They had an opposite essence from glacial stones, but behaved similarly.

The mana stone that Lacey had immersed in the coconut shell wasn't large at all. It was only about the size of two thumbs put together—nowhere near strong enough to boil water.

In magical terms, water and fire were conflicting elements. Instead of spending all the effort to boil water with magic, it would be faster to just bring over kindling and boil water in a pot. Even Dana, who had only dabbled a little in magic, knew that. A mage as skilled as Lacey could make up for the elemental disadvantage with sheer technique, but she hadn't used magic—just a mana stone.

"It's the same method as exterminating slimes."

"Slimes...? Oh, I get it! That's what you did!"

"I don't get it at all..." Allen was still confused. "Hrmmm..."

Lacey put water in the other shell half that had been put aside and demonstrated it again.

"Slimes are very weak monsters with almost no power to speak of, but conversely, our attacks barely work against them. Adventurers of old tested all kinds of methods against them. One of those methods was casting a spell on the slimes that would rapidly oscillate water. They found out that doing this would make the slimes disappear for some reason. So nowadays, oscillation magic is the standard method of exterminating slimes."

Lacey stroked the water's surface with her fingers. The water vibrated even more fiercely than before and disappeared in a flash.

"It's actually because slimes are almost the same as water, so raising their temperature to the max through oscillation makes them evaporate. It's possible to do this with fire magic as well, but it's just more magically efficient to vibrate existing water than to create flames that don't already exist."

"I'd hate to be one of those slimes..." Allen had a point, but fighting monsters

was historically tied to human development. Humans and monsters were inextricably linked together.

"I considered making an artifact akin to a magic stove burner to boil water, but fetching water and boiling it with fire would be too much hassle before bed, right? And putting it inside would be a fire hazard, so that limits where you'd be able to put it. I thought that maybe just putting in water and tossing in a magic stone like this would be simple enough."

Lacey then pointed at the inside of the coconut shell and gave a shy smile. "Although I don't have many containers here, so we had to start with making that."

It all seemed so obvious when Lacey explained it, but Dana knew she could never have come up with this. She quietly exhaled and exchanged looks with Allen, who had a similar expression on his face. The freckled boy was making a strained smile halfway between exasperation and astonishment. He probably felt the same way as Dana.

Neither of them would ever be able to be as good as Lacey or think up an idea as clever as this.

Dana had the wrong idea about Lacey this whole time. She had thought that while she was a hard worker, she also just had a tremendous amount of natural talent as a mage. However, her true essence was different. Lacey was undeniably a genius, but not just in regards to magic. That was just one facet of her potential.

Given the opportunity, Lacey could meld a wide range of knowledge to invent something new.

Even if the individual bits of expertise were nothing special, she could draw upon the vast knowledge within her like a book and combine it. She was better than anyone else at this.

The time she'd spent on their quest, her dedication to magic, and her extensive reading experience all shaped Lacey into who she was. And in the future, Lacey would come to be involved with many more people. As she experienced more things, her field of knowledge would grow even broader. Though Lacey herself didn't realize it, she had already taken her first steps on

the way.

How would she change in the time to come?

Dana simply lamented that she couldn't observe Lacey's evolution up close. The girl was as skinny as a twig and constantly nervous, but she was kind. Thinking of her pulled at Dana's heartstrings.

While she was busy steadying her breathing, Allen and Lacey talked about the temperature of the hot water in the coconut shell. Dana hurriedly wiped the corner of her eye with her fingertips.

"Say, can I give it a feel too? Yeah, I think maybe it should be a little warmer."

"Really? I think it'd be best to have it at body temperature. And if it's too hot, you'll get scalded."

"I think about this temperature is fine too," Allen agreed.

Everyone put their hands into the water and chatted briskly with a smile on their face. Flapping its feathers, Tee played around in the field and got mud all over itself.

* * *

Surprisingly, how other people perceived Lacey was often a far cry from how she perceived herself.

Aaaaaagh, I hate myself so much... Lacey placed her hands over her face as she recalled what had happened a few hours ago. I was explaining things to them...so confidently...!

"Waa, aaa, aaaaaaghhhh..." The fingertips hiding her face quivered. She was so ashamed of herself that she was trembling. She didn't want to dwell on this, but her mind kept flashing back to every single word she'd said. "Just leave me in peace already!" It was driving her crazy.

Why did I act so pretentiously...?! At the time, she had just been so impatient to create and communicate her thoughts. But it was over with now, so there was nothing she could do about it. She puffed out a big breath and decided to forget about it. Allen had gone home in the afternoon, and Dana would leave Plume Village tomorrow.

Dana and Lacey had gone to Cedric's restaurant on the second night as well and eaten a hearty meal. Although Cedric had a surly expression, he really was quite amiable. The drippy omelet rice he made was exquisite.

When they got back and changed into their pajamas, Lacey couldn't help but compare her appearance to Dana's. They were both in night gowns. Since they were wearing similar clothing, it was easy to spot the differences in their forms.

When Lacey's gaze drifted toward Dana's chest, she quietly glanced away.

"Something wrong, Lacey?"

"No, nothing..."

Everybody had their strengths and weaknesses. She decided not to think any harder about it.

Tee, who didn't need to change clothes, was wearing its favorite nightcap and chirping "kwee kwee" as it prepared its bed. Of course, Lacey had made this too. She'd realized lately that she might like sewing more than she thought. It was a wonderful thing to have more likes.

Tee said a good night "Kwee!" before quickly sliding under its favorite blanket. A few minutes later, it was snoring "Nkwoo...nkwoo..." Meanwhile, Lacey and Dana looked down with anticipation at the steam rising out of the coconut shells that had been placed on the floor.

The coconuts in Lacey's backyard were more oval-shaped than normal, so they didn't roll around on the floor and stayed put without anything to stabilize them. The girls had hesitated to show their bare feet in front of Allen, so this would be Dana and Lacey's first foot bath.

The two of them sat next to each other on the bed. Dana dipped her toe into the water, gently disturbing the surface. She gulped, then pushed her whole foot in. Lacey followed suit.

"Fwaaah..."

It wasn't clear whether this vocalization escaped from Dana's or Lacey's lips. A pleasantly warm sensation gradually spread from their feet to their whole bodies. They wanted to keep soaking forever. They shivered as they thoroughly

savored the marvelous sensation.

She almost became enthralled, but Lacey pulled her feet out before Dana and wiped off the moisture with a towel she'd had ready. After that, she rushed to the kitchen and brought two mugs full of warm water.

"Here, Dana." Lacey had wanted to put milk in, but they'd already brushed their teeth.

"Oh my." Dana blinked and took the mug with both hands. She slowly drank it down and faintly exhaled a warm breath. Lacey and Dana had the same ultramellow looks on their faces as they tucked themselves under the covers.

There were plenty of rooms in the mansion, but they were currently both in Lacey's bedroom. "It's my last day here, so let's just sleep in the same bed," Dana had said, and after Lacey consented with some anxiety, she readied two pillows.

"Being next to you reminds me of traveling together with you and the party."

"Yeah..."

"It brings back memories. Say, I already told you that I'm working at the medical center, but how about you, Lacey? I know that you started an anything shop. But I don't know anything besides that. I want to hear more."

So she said, but Lacey didn't know what to talk about. It wasn't that she disliked the idea—she just didn't know how much to say. What if I blab all about myself but she doesn't think it's interesting? she worried.

"Come on, tell me, Lacey."

But when she heard Dana's syrupy voice, words gradually started to tumble out of her mouth.

"I was engaged. I was going to marry a noble, so I thought I would let go of magic."

"You?! Let go of magic?!"

"Yeah. But I realized that he was cheating on me, so the engagement was called off. Wayne helped."

"I swear Wayne's always hovering around you."

"After that, I used my wish that I was owed for eliminating the Demon King. My contract with the nation was voided and I got the name Aster."

"So that's what happened... That's a lot."

"I felt so much lighter."

"Yeah."

"But I was still so scared, it was unbearable."

"I bet."

"Although I was happy too," Lacey reflected deeply as she lay on the pillow next to Dana's, looking up at the ceiling. There was no way she could actually see it, but she felt like she was under a sky full of stars. The mattress was soft like an open field.

Dana acknowledged everything Lacey had to say and reacted with exaggeration. Lacey had never talked to Dana so much before, not even on their quest. This was the first time.

Eventually, the words that Lacey didn't think she'd be able to say came smoothly out of her throat. "I'm really happy that you came, Dana."

"Me too. I was very, very happy when I saw your letter inviting me over any time." Dana continued in a murmur. "I suppose it's a bad habit of adults to overthink what's convenient for someone else without asking and then miscalculate how distant they should act."

Being an adult sounds tough, Lacey thought. She wasn't at all clever enough to consider the distance between herself and other people. But even Lacey would become an adult in a little over two years, so now she felt nervous.

However, she then heard Dana's very cheerful, kind, and gleaming voice.

"Lacey, you can do things nobody else can. I envy you. I want to see more of what you'll make."

Lacey felt that anyone was capable of what she could do. Nonetheless, she was happy to hear this from Dana. The warm words sank deep into her heart.

The pair slept next to each other on the bed, breathing gently. They sank into such a deep slumber that they didn't know when they had drifted off. A slumber so deep that they didn't have any dreams.

* * *

When Lacey woke up, she could hear songbirds chirping outside the window.

Basked in sunlight, Lacey stretched on the bed. The spot beside her was empty.

She looked around the room in surprise and spotted Dana from behind, who had apparently already risen. Dana opened her hand and closed it, repeating this several times. When she turned around, she had a shocked expression on her face.

"Hey, my body feels really refreshed! I haven't felt like this in ages!"

Lacey patted her chest in relief when she heard this.

"Although..." Dana continued. "I think the foot bath did most of the job, but I think part of why I feel so refreshed is that I got to talk a lot with you."

Lacey was bewildered by this. As she pondered how to reply, her gaze darted to the left and right—but then her eyes went wide open as she was caught in a tackle hug. "Eek!"

"Please keep being my friend. Thank you."

"Ah, um..." Lacey didn't know what to do. Still, she stretched her hands gently around Dana's back. "Okay...!"

The body embracing her tightly was soft, smelled nice, and made her heart pound just a little.

* * *

Although Dana had said her whole body felt refreshed, it was still just a temporary remedy. Lacey gave Dana lots of her special medicinal herbs and warned against using them too much. Relying on medicines all the time would still put a burden on her body.

Once Dana finished packing, she put on her large cloth hat to hide her face

and went down into town. Lacey went along to see her on her way.

"Hey, Dana, are you sure this isn't too much?"

"Didn't you say you'd let me decide? I may be a cheapskate, but I hate not paying for things I need. Besides, it'll come back around to me, so don't worry."

Hearing this, Lacey's eyebrows turned upward in distress. "Too much" had been Lacey referring to the fee she'd received for this job.

While they were eating breakfast, a hushed battle had unfolded between the two of them.

First, Dana had asked Lacey how much her fee would be for the job. Lacey had responded saying that the mana stone was misshapen and she didn't have any other use for it anyway, and the coconut had grown in her backyard voluntarily, so she didn't mind not getting paid. But since she'd gotten money from Brooks for his problem, it would be unfair not to charge. Thus she apprehensively said that she'd charge just for the cost of the mana stone. That was when Dana erupted with anger.

She started by lecturing Lacey on how it was a sin to not accept wages that one was owed, clashing with Lacey insisting that this was the price she thought was fair. Ultimately, they decided that as the client, Dana should determine the price of the work done. They wouldn't have been able to quarrel like this when they first reunited, so this was also a testament to how much closer they had grown.

The price that Dana settled on was three gold coins.

In Lacey's opinion, this was an eye-popping amount. That being the case, Dana amended the terms and asked if she could take some insulated thermal bags as well. Lacey naturally agreed and gave her as many as she could stuff her luggage with.

"I'll use these for my own purposes. The fee includes them, all right?"

"I guess that's okay...?" Lacey wasn't sure what Dana's "purposes" were or why she was chuckling.

"Anyway, these insulated thermal bags certainly are curious. What did you

make them out of?"

"I use fylachtó bark. I received a lot of it."

"Oh, the stuff that shares its name with Duke Fylachtó, the lord of this area?"

"Yes. Maybe. I hear it can only be found around Plume Village." Lacey remembered Duke Fylachtó's name. She recalled that he was a man with a sleek, majestic beard.

With Dana's luggage in tow, the two of them strolled along toward the village's exit.

"It's really been a long time since I slept as well as I did last night."

"I'm glad. But don't overwork yourself."

"Yeah. I know. Also, weirdly enough, my legs feel incredibly smooth. Is that maybe an effect of using the coconut shell?"

"You might be right. Maybe I should try making soap and ointment out of coconuts."

"Tell me if it works."

"Of course."

"…"

"..."

The farther they walked, the sparser their conversation became. Tee, who had tagged along to see Dana on her way, seemed to be acting considerately. Nesting in Lacey's arms, it stayed quiet and primly kept its beak shut.

"Um, Lacey..." As she walked along the firm dirt road, Dana made up her mind. She lifted her face and stopped in her tracks. "I've been wanting to thank you for the longest time. I only learned once our quest ended and I got back to town. I didn't hear about it in time, and I figured you'd done it without mentioning it on purpose, so I was at a loss."

"Dana?"

It must have been something she'd been mulling over for a while. Dana's words spurted out in a deluge.

Lacey was confused. She blinked repeatedly and wrinkled her brow. *Thank me? For something I didn't mention?* Lacey had no clue what she was talking about.

"Um, I...!" Dana's shoulders tensed up and she gripped the cord of her luggage tight. She was close to saying it.

"B-Big sis Laceeey! Lady Danaaa!" A voice shouted toward them. "Heeey!"

Allen ran up to them huffing and puffing. When he caught up, he lowered his hands to his knees and tried to catch his breath. He gave a long exhale. Then he took note of Dana's big bag of luggage and glared at the pair. In fact, he was scowling at them with discontent.

"I went to the mansion, but there was nobody there... I thought you'd be here. At least let me see her off!" he exclaimed at Lacey. Then he turned to Dana. "Ah, I mean, please allow me to see you off!" He hurriedly changed his speech register.

Dana had a completely astonished look on her face, but then quickly burst into laughter.

"Did I say something weird?!"

"No, not at all. Thank you, I'm just happy to hear it."

"I guess it's all right then. Hey, Cedric! You're late!"

Allen turned around and shouted to the cook in an apron, who was approaching at a pace somewhere between a power walk and a stroll.

"Allen, it's not nice to overwork the elderly," he replied. The distance made his voice hard to hear.

"You're not elderly! You're middle-aged at best!"

A long-distance argument unfolded between the pair.

"Why is Mr. Cedric here too?"

"Huh? Cause I thought the more people to see you off, the better it'd be! Should I not have?" Allen's facial expression said that he thought this was a totally normal expectation.

"Well, I suppose you're right, but..."

Lacey understood what Dana wanted to say. Yes, the two of them had visited Cedric's restaurant for dinner, but that was only for two days. She was worried that calling him out all this way based on that was asking too much. Dana and Lacey exchanged glances.

Cedric, who had strenuously made his way to where they were, stood up straight with his tall and skinny body. "A new visitor to the village said my food was good and ate it up. That's something to be joyful about. Come back again sometime." Despite his surly face, his words were amiable. He put out a hand for Dana to shake. As usual, what he said didn't match his expression.

Dana was bewildered, but still shook his hand. "O-Oh. Thank you. I really enjoyed the meals."

As they stood there, rubbernecking villagers stopped in their tracks on their way to work and poked their heads out of their houses. A noisy, chattersome crowd gathered.

"Who's that? Haven't seen her before."

"Looks like she's a friend of Lacey's."

"Oh, so she's visiting."

"No, it looks like she's on her way back already."

Umm, umm, what should I...? Lacey didn't know what to do. At a loss, she turned her head to the left and right.

Lacey didn't know all of the villagers, but the reverse wasn't true. Everybody in Plume Village knew Lacey. But of course, they didn't recognize Dana. Her face was hidden with her large cloth hat, so they didn't realize that she was the famed Saint of Light.

Still, the villagers all called out to Dana. "Come back again!" "Have a safe trip!" "Be careful out there!"

At first, she was surprised, but then it hit her. This was the culture of Plume Village.

When Lacey had first come to Plume Village, she'd come in surreptitiously,

hiding herself.

Whenever Wayne came by, he used concealment magic, and Brooks had come and gone like a whirlwind, so she hadn't noticed. But whenever the fox-like merchant visited, everyone called out "Welcome back!" when he arrived and "See you again!" when he left. Even though Lacey didn't go down to the village very much, she was still familiar with this.

Allen was right: the more people to see her off, the better it would be. The people of Plume Village all said farewells together and welcomed people in freely. At first, they had eyed the peculiar new resident named Lacey with doubt, but in due time, people had come to accept her with open arms.

Lacey was plain happy. She didn't know what it was, but it was like something warm had seeped into her and was filling her with an emotion she just couldn't hold back. But that was just how Lacey felt. She didn't know what Dana's opinion was.

She anxiously looked up at Dana. Although Dana's face was partially obscured, she was definitely smiling cheerfully. She understood what the village was like. That made Lacey all the more happy.

Her lips were curved into a slight smile, but by degrees it seemed that she couldn't hold back anymore. Dana finally broke into a loud laugh. "Good lord, this village is really something incredible. It's lovely."

She wiped tears of laughter from the corners of her eyes and quietly exhaled.

"So Lacey, I was talking about how I wanted to thank you. It's about the donation you made. You donated a really large sum to the orphanage, right?"

She didn't say exactly how much, probably because there were lots of eyes on them at the moment. But Lacey did remember making a donation. She'd contributed almost all of the reward money she'd received for defeating the Demon King to orphanages around the nation. Just as Dana had.

Back when they had all been chatting around the campfire sharing what they would do once the Demon King was gone, Dana had said that she wanted to use her powers as a holy woman and get proper compensation for it. Then she would earn lots of money and spend it to enrich the lives of children in her

hometown and throughout the nation. Lacey had heard that Dana had made a wish to the king for an even bigger cash bonus. However, she hadn't used that money for herself.

"Yes, I did. Because I thought your dream was really wonderful, Dana."

Lacey had been an orphan. She had a greater aptitude for magic than anyone else, so she had been bound to the nation as a mage. Lacey sometimes wondered how things would have been if there was someone like Dana there for her in her youth, but ultimately, she didn't really know.

Nobody could alter the path they'd already traveled in life.

"I wanted to thank you for it, but I wasn't sure if it would be right. But let me say it anyway. Thank you, Lacey."

"It's not something I did because I wanted your gratitude. But if you feel that way, then here's my response: You're welcome."

They shook hands and laughed.

"I don't do anything that doesn't make me money," Dana then quietly whispered into Lacey's ear. "But I'm in a fantastic mood today. I love you and this village. Besides, I got a big advance payment from you. It wouldn't be fair to not do anything in return. And I need to give a proper greeting to the people who are looking after my dear companion..." She turned to the assembled villagers. "Hello, everyone!"

Dana forcefully threw her hat into the air. The moment the sunlight hit her pale green hair, a handful of gaping villagers who had been wondering what was going on exclaimed out loud. "It's the Saint of Light!" whispered one person, and the murmurs spread out like a ripple.

"I'm Dana, the Saint of Light! Since I'm here, I'm happy to meet you all, and may you be abundantly blessed in the future!"

"Wow!" The villagers gasped in surprise.

Light shone from Dana's palms. It was a gentle light that enveloped one and all.

Lacey had felt this sensation before, but the villagers's eyes went wide in

astonishment. Tricia, who had lately been complaining of an aching back, was there as well, carrying Lane. Her back straightened up. She was so shocked that she couldn't even say anything. She circled around, trying to take a look at her back.

Dana was the only person Lacey knew of who could use such powerful restorative miracles. That was why she had been chosen for the hero's party.

"D-Dana, you..."

"This is part of my thank-you. Besides, my sacred power's been accumulating while traveling since I haven't used it. I need to discharge some, or else the nobles that come to me will start getting entitled. I only heal them a set amount."

"Okay..." Lacey couldn't argue with that and conceded.

Dana had a broad smile on her face. She let her long, voluminous hair flutter in the breeze and made a big wave of her hand.

She was waving goodbye, but it almost looked as if she were saying "I'll see you again."



"...and that's what happened about two weeks ago."

"Dana can be surprisingly flashy sometimes. Brooks just does stuff like that unconsciously, but Dana seems to do it intentionally. Since she's running a medical center now, considering what she wanted to do after our quest ended, maybe she showed off on purpose as a kind of advertisement."

He was probably recalling one of the headaches she'd caused him as the party leader. Wayne, who had come by Plume Village for the first time in a while, groaned as he sat in his chair and sipped from his tea cup in a genteel manner.

"After that, the villagers barraged me with questions about how I knew the Saint of Light. Although they were placated after I told them that we'd gotten to know each other in the capital, like what I said to Allen."

"So the Dawn Witch and Saint of Light are passing acquaintances, huh?" Wayne asked skeptically.

"It's not a lie. Besides, the Dawn Witch is a mature woman with red hair. I'm a little runt who just happens to share her name."

"What are you saying that for?"

"Nothing," Lacey breathed curtly and faced away. Whenever Lacey imagined her ideal adult self, the discrepancy between that and her real self just made her depressed. She would be an adult in a little over two years. That might be enough time for even her to grow a little.

"'Goodbye' and 'I'll see you again.' They're different phrases, but they're a bit similar. Maybe it's best to choose the one that leaves a gentler feeling."

"Hm?"

Lacey was thinking about when she'd seen Dana on her way. For some reason, it didn't seem like a farewell. But still, she felt a little lonely too.

Seeing Lacey look so wistful, Wayne rubbed his shoulder. "In that case," he said, "You won't mind me saying 'I'll see you again' next time I head out?"

"Huh? I don't mind. I mean, you have your own room here and all. This

mansion is lovely, but it's a bit too big."

"All right..." Wayne didn't seem wholly satisfied by how casual her response was.

From Lacey's perspective, Wayne was squandering all of his vacation time on visiting Plume Village. She wished that he could at least treat the mansion as a second home and relax a bit more.

"Enough about that. So why *did* Dana take so many insulated thermal bags back with her? She said it'd 'come back around to her,' right?"

"Oh, about that..."

Lacey had received an update from Dana later amounting to "I went ahead and borrowed your name." With a knotty look, Lacey explained the contents of the letter to Wayne. In turn, Wayne's naturally handsome face was marred by a twitch.

"That's intrepid of her. She's trying to catch two or three birds with one stone."

"I guess. Yeah. I told the merchant who keeps coming around about it, and he was thrilled that the Aster mark was gaining renown."

"He's got his own thing going on."

In short, Dana had hinted at the connection between her and Lacey to the nobles. She was a close friend of the much-discussed Aster.

She had implied that she could provide access to new products in advance, roundaboutly bragging to the nobles who came to her. Knowing Dana, she had calculated how to preclude any offense that might be taken and surreptitiously applied strong pressure. That was her forte. They could picture her laughing smugly.

She had given the nobles the impression that she was a pioneer of trends, thus flipping their relative positions so that she was superior. The ability to quickly obtain intel was one criteria by which the status of noble households was measured. That was why nobles were obsessed with trends.

Thus Dana had reaped her rewards and maintained her status as a holy

woman. The nobles would pipe down with their unreasonable demands for a while.

The most recent letter from Dana lay in the desk drawer in Lacey's room. In flowing handwriting, Dana cheerfully described how she'd gotten the upper hand over the nobles. Lacey had read the letter over and over.

Few people knew that the anything shop Starseeking was responsible for making the magic artifacts with the Aster mark. But from now on, Dana would share teaser information and act as PR to spread word of the Aster artifacts.

At the bottom of the letter was the phrase "See you." Lacey repeated the words out loud. Their conversation would be carried on the backs of the postal dragons and delivered to each other.

And it would happen many more times in the future to come.

Chapter 3: The Boar Returns

A chilly draft blew through the freezing cold air.

The stylish brick building felt cold to people who weren't used to it. This was the only medical center in the city of Friepurae. Dana walked down its hallway with steady, clacking footsteps. A man called out from behind her, his desperate voice beating against her back.

"Saint! Saint! Lady Dana! Please wait!"

Dana took a few steps forward before stopping, then sighed under her breath. She turned around, wearing a gentle, soothing smile, but anyone who knew her well would probably rate it as a very weird expression. Her eyes weren't smiling, to say the least.

"Oh my, if it isn't Count Lomigos."

"O-Ohhh! You know my name, Lady Dana?"

"Why, naturally! I remember the names of our very important repeat visitors!"

"My word!"

"Is there something troubling you? Has the condition of your leg worsened again? The reception desk is in the other direction. Did you get turned around?"

Dana smiled widely again at the recurring guest. Lomigos had a bulky build, and the over-bundled clothes he wore puffed him up even more. He had probably come running as soon as he spotted Dana. His cheeks were flushed and his breathing was ragged. He held an ornate cane in one hand.

The count panted as he wiped his sweat with a handkerchief, then put on his most genial smile. "Indeed, my leg is acting up again. However, I'm here today on a different matter. There is something I earnestly wish to request of you..."

By this point, Dana had determined that there was no value in listening to what he had to say. Oblivious to this, the count continued on in a jovial manner.

"I have heard that you are on intimate terms with the Aster artifact maker. I would very much like to be introduced to them!"

"Oh dear." He hadn't considered the possibility of being rejected. Dana smiled even more widely at the man and lightly replied, "I must apologize, but the Aster artifact maker is extremely shy. I believe that if you were to meet them, they would cause you some offense. I do beg your understanding."

In plain language: "No way, asshole."

"Ha ha," the count laughed.

Dana laughed with him. "Ha ha, ha ha, ha ha..."

"W-Well, I'm certain I wouldn't be offended." Amid the cold, hollow laughter, the count repeated "Surely you exaggerate," his face twitching.

"Oh no. There have been other gentlemen besides you who have said the same thing."

"B-Besides me?"

"The mission statement of Friepurae Medical Center is to treat all with an equal mindset, so surely virtuous nobles like yourself would not suggest that they alone be given special treatment."

Dana recalled how the nobles had acted up until recently. They called her Saint, but at heart, there were many nobles who saw Dana as their inferior. The man standing before her, Lomigos, was one of them. His eyes were darting around—it seemed that he was indeed trying to talk her down.

Well, what shall I do?

Dana's usual strategy had been to flatter them appropriately, entice them, and then send them back feeling good. She hadn't known who her enemies or allies might be.

As she gave it some thought, she recalled the figure of the shy mage who had wished for her to not accumulate stress.

Dana's lips naturally formed a smile as she impulsively spoke her next words. "There are some among them who are particularly trying."

"Trying?"

"Yes. People who don't need care have been visiting the center quite often lately. Despite receiving treatment, they claim that the effects have worn off, so it's put me in quite a difficult position. Some of them have even come from far away simply so they can brag that they're close to the Saint."

Lomigos's face grew paler with each passing sentence. His short fingers trembled.

"God understands all. I'm simply worried that a tongue that spreads falsehoods might eventually be ripped from its throat," Dana said leisurely. "By the way, Count, you seem to be dressed quite warmly. Do you dislike the cold? You've come from quite far off, haven't you?"

"Ah, er..."

"Oh yes, the Aster artifact maker has recently invented a new 'foot bath' procedure. I'm sure that you know of the practice called a bath. Rather than fully immerse oneself in a tub, one soaks their feet up to their calves in hot water, thus warming up the entire body. If the cold displeases you, Count, then do consider... Oh my, I forgot that your leg is injured. I had thought—"

"I-I just recalled that I have urgent business to take care of! Excuse me!"

Lomigos interrupted Dana and skittered off in such a hurry that he forgot to use his cane. Dana watched him go with a bored look.

"Are you sure that was okay?"

"Yes. We've just lost a client," Dana replied, arms folded, to the girl who had appeared out of nowhere like a shadow.

Lomigos had been an obtrusive visitor for a long time now. He came all the way from a far-off locale and even used a prop cane. The lengths he went to were astonishing. But he was lavish with his money, so Dana had overlooked his behavior.

"But I have the right to drive away any clients who add to our workload. Besides, I've never heard anything good about him. Apparently, he made a big mistake with the branch family he'd been nestling up to and now he's looking for a new patron, but count me out of that." She snorted. Then she felt reassured that her decision had been correct.

If Dana had been her old self, she still wouldn't have blabbed about Lacey's identity, but she probably would have dodged the question and said some cajoling words so that Lomigos would visit the medical center again. However, she couldn't bear the idea of repeating these temporary distractions over and over until one day she went down in flames alongside this over-bundled noble.

In any case, Lacey really does have an immeasurable influence.

Sooner or later, Lacey would be pulled into the conflicts between nobles. Although she was keeping her name and face secret, the power of her magic artifacts was greater than she realized.

Lomigos's behavior earlier was suspicious as well. There was no telling what a rat might do when backed into a corner.

"I may be overthinking this, but it might be a good idea to reach out to her."

"To who?" The girl was confused.

Dana gave an amused smile. "To Lacey, of course. There's only one person it could be."

* * *

"Damn it! Get the carriage moving! Hurry up and get it moving! Can't you hear me?!"

"Y-Yes, my lord!"

Lomigos opened the carriage door with irritation and yelled at the coachman. His cheeks were flushed, and his over-bundled clothes bulged. The children of Friepurae who were used to playing in the snow would think that he was a walking snowman.

"I've been going to all the trouble to visit this backwater place. What gives her the right?! Just because she's a little pretty, she thinks she can do whatever she wants! Saint, my arse! She used to be just a commoner!"

Lomigos remembered that he had tossed aside the cane he was supposed to have somewhere. *It doesn't matter*, he thought as he frowned at the scenery

passing by the window. I'm never coming out to this freezing hamlet again. His territory was relatively close to the capital.

"The artifact maker with the Aster mark..."

First, there had been the sachets. Then came the insulated thermal bags. These curious magic artifacts were flying off the shelves in the capital and Friepurae. However, nobody knew who had made them. He'd heard rumors that the Saint—who he'd already invented a number of excuses to become a regular patron of—was close with Aster. Thus Lomigos had come as fast as he could, but it had all been for naught. He stamped his feet.

"Damn, it's all their fault! If not for them...!" He bit his short nails. Lomigos felt that everyone in high society was looking at him with frigid stares and disdain, despite the fact that he had always shown them a gleaming smile with no trace of displeasure.

It made him feel nauseous for there to be people above him. The more people beneath him, the better. How could he increase that number?

At the moment, high society was abuzz with rumors of the anonymous artifact maker.

"The Aster artifact maker. Their sachets were first sold primarily in the capital. The same went for the insulated thermal bags, with the exception of Friepurae where the Saint lives. The artifact maker *must* be somewhere near the capital. I swear I'll bring them under my control. I'll leave no stone unturned!"

* * *

"Achoo!"

"Lacey, do you have a cold? Don't tell me you slept with your stomach exposed."

"Of course not, Wayne," Lacey put a hand to her stomach, suddenly doubting herself. "Of course, right?"

The midsummer heat had come and gone, and the backyard field was now full of dead leaves. Lacey had gathered up thin bamboo and tried making a broom. Basically, anything could be found growing all over her backyard now.

The quiet whistling of the wind heralded the usual change in seasons. Lacey swept up the crinkling leaves with her broom. Tee seemed quite happy to be sprawling out on a pile of leaves.

Behind them, Wayne was boiling a large pot over an open fire. "Making oil from coconuts is a pretty interesting concept..."

As he sat on a log and watched the fire, he took a look at the uniformly white, melted contents of the pot. Using the oversized pot in the kitchen wouldn't leave much elbow room, so they'd brought it outside instead to multitask while sweeping up the dead leaves.

"That wasn't my idea. Dana came up with it first. Although it was fun to think about since there are a surprising number of possible uses for it," Lacey spoke offhandedly. From her perspective, all she'd done was taken the hint that Dana had given her before leaving about "maybe my legs feel so smooth after that foot bath because we used coconuts" and rolled with it.

"Seriously, you..." Wayne started, making an exasperated expression, but then sighed. This always happened. "Even if you come up with an idea, actually making it into a real thing is tough for most people," he murmured. But this didn't reach the ears of Lacey, who was cheerfully sweeping up the dead leaves with a broom.

"Hey, what are you doing there?"

"I'm cleaning up the leaves on the ground. It's not quite time for leaves to fall yet, but the seasons are all mixed up in this field, so some of the trees are getting a head start."

"That's not what I mean. Why not just use magic?" asked the hero who was busy stirring a boiling pot full of coconut flesh so that it wouldn't burn. Wayne looked good with the Holy Sword, but a ladle matched him just as well.

Holding the broom handle, Lacey repeatedly blinked in puzzlement. "Magic?"

"Well, you said you used magic when you clean the house. Why not just instantly gather up the leaves with wind magic? I'm not capable of it, but it'd be easy for you, right?"

"It would probably be easy, but I won't do it," she demurred. "If I did that, I

wouldn't be able to see the shapes of each leaf. I think there are times when it's better to do things with my own hands rather than use magic."

Up until recently, Lacey had considered magic to be nothing more than a method of attacking. She'd learned otherwise when she saw Wayne's magic and discovered that there were so many more possibilities.

Using magic for everyday tasks was certainly convenient. However, even in the future, Lacey probably wouldn't rely on it for everything. She knew that there were things that could only be understood through hands-on experience.

Lacey had thought that her shoddy explanation would be met with skepticism, but Wayne was readily persuaded. "Makes sense."

Wayne was flexible and quick on the uptake. He was smart, so he quickly comprehended the meaning behind Lacey's unclear words. That was why she was so dependent on him. But for some reason, thinking about Wayne too much would make Lacey's chest tighten and her heart skip a beat.

No, no, I'm acting a little weird.

She understood why her chest was tight. That could easily be explained as the disappointment she felt at herself for explaining things so shoddily, or something similar.

But she didn't understand what came after it. Lacey had been thinking about Wayne an unusual amount lately. He was a precious companion who'd been by her side all this time, so that seemed perfectly normal. But on the other hand, there were times when she felt an emotion so painful that she struggled to breathe.

"Am I...in..." Lacey trembled.

Am I infected with something?!

She didn't say this out loud because there was a worrywart ex-hero right by her.

She was regretting not asking Dana to give her a checkup, but then again, she might be making a mountain out of a molehill. Lacey's internal conflict raged on.

"Hey, Lacey," Wayne spoke to her as he checked that the stewing flames were at the right temperature. "Do you want anything?"

"...Why do you ask?" This was out of nowhere. Lacey was naturally puzzled.

It didn't seem out of nowhere to Wayne, though. "Well, it's obvious..." he responded impassively.

Just then, a strong breeze blew. Lacey hurriedly tugged the brim of her hat with both hands to stop it from flying away. The broom fell to her feet with a clack and rolled around, dancing in the wind.

Wayne blinked in surprise as he watched. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, somehow I didn't get blown away... Tee? What's wrong?"

"Kwee! Kwee kwee!!!" Tee, who had been nesting comfortably in a pile of leaves, had jumped up animatedly. It tensely looked around with a distressed expression, then suddenly slanted its brows.

"NKWEEEEE!!!"

It was like it was crying out "Here I am!"

"R-Really, what's got you like that?" Lacey blinked at it, mystified. Just then...

"GRR-000000INK!!!!!!!"

There came a familiar voice. Or more accurately, a familiar grunt.

Its wings spread wide, Tee's eyes shone. He's back! It flapped happily.

The trampling footsteps grew louder, accompanied by a "Grr-oink! Grr-oink!" grunt. It was the boar, returning after its absence.

The boar charged in, making all kinds of noise. Lacey tried to greet it with "Oh, welcome back," but the boar didn't stop for her.

In the time that the boar had returned home to its family, the field had radically changed. Trees that had been there were no longer standing, and conversely, other plants that hadn't been there were now shooting up all over. This was all due to Lacey's unparalleled mana, but the boar didn't know this. He tried to hit the brakes, but his feet skidded, and his large brown body flew into the air.

"Grr-oink?!"

Oh dear.

The boar, spinning around, had a large cloth bag on its back. Before they had any time to wonder what it was, the boar crashed into the pot that Wayne was stirring. To be more precise, it crashed into the open fire underneath. *Bwoosh!* Sparks flew, and then...

...the boar went up in smoke.

"What?"

Unbelievably, the boar had jumped into the fire with all its might.

The pot that had been sitting over the fire had been knocked aside, but Wayne skillfully caught it with a damp cloth. Meanwhile, Lacey and Tee stared dumbfounded at the crackling sparks. The glow of the flames bounced off their faces.

The fire flickered as it burned. The boar would likely be cooked to delicious perfection.

"Never mind that!!!" The situation was so overwhelming that Lacey's thought processes had screeched to a halt, but there was no time to space out. "Wh-wh-wh-why?! Seriously, why?! Why is he roasting himself?!"

"Calm down. He's a feral pig. A flame this small means nothing to him. I bet it's just like getting in a warm bath."

"Huh? Oh, I see. Right, I forgot..."

Monsters each had an elemental alignment. Tee, who was a phoenix, was fire, and slimes were water.

The creature which they simply called "the boar" was actually a kind of monster known as a feral pig.

The one difference between animals and monsters was whether their heart was made of mana stone or not. Mana stones circulated mana of a matching elemental nature throughout the body, which allowed monsters to mutate into more powerful varieties.

Feral pigs were fire-element, and their most notable characteristics were their large tusks and the tough fur that covered their bodies. Although there were individual differences, they were saturated with mana down to each individual hair. They couldn't be hurt by just any old flame.

That was why the boar, whose belly was getting toasted over the open fire, had a rueful look on its face but wasn't in any hurry to move.

Wayne calmly set the pot on the ground and stepped away from the flame. "See? Told you it's fine," he said to Lacey as if this were an everyday occurrence. Nonetheless, Lacey was still in shock, so she placed a hand over her heart and took slow, deep breaths. For the time being, everyone took a moment to sigh in relief.

Though the boar had a resistance to heat, there was probably a limit to how much it could take. "Come over here already, that's dangerous," Lacey called to it.

"Grr-oink." You're right, agreed the boar. And then...there was a pop.

Some substance loudly burst and scattered. The boar wriggled around. One small, white bit of it flew straight toward Wayne, but he flexibly caught it between two fingers.

"Hot!" Still pinching whatever it was, Wayne shook out his palm.

"Grr-oink-oink-oink-oink-oink?!"

"Be patient, I'll get you—"

Lacey swiftly took her staff out of her bag and tossed it up. When she caught it in midair, it had stretched out to be much larger. "I'll use magic!" The staff could grow or shrink however Lacey wanted it to.

At her feet, Tee spread its wings, took a deep breath in, and then spit it back out. "NKWOOOOO!!!"

A wind current was generated. Tee flapped its wings and directed the current toward the open fire.

The opposite element of fire was water. Lacey couldn't risk hurting the fireelement boar. So if I'm going to use water magic, I need a way to avoid hitting the boar!

Tee, who was a phoenix, was a natural at manipulating flame. The wind current that it had generated swirled around the open flames, stretching out long and narrow into the sky. Then Lacey pointed her staff at it and rapidly formulated a spell that glided out of her mouth. Sustained by these two conditions, a blob of water gushed out from the end of her staff.

The blob of water, floating in the air, grew soft and round like a soap bubble and sucked the slender flames into itself with a whirl. As they swirled inside the thin membrane, the flames gradually grew smaller, and with a snap of Lacey's fingers, the soap bubble popped.

A sudden rain drizzled down from the sunny sky. Relieved now that the flames were gone, Lacey heaved a long breath out.

"Kweeeeeeeeh!" Tee moved its legs frantically as it ran over to the boar.

"Grr-oink grr-oink!"

"Kwee kwee!"

"Grr-oink-oink."

Apparently the boar wasn't severely injured. Lacey patted her chest in relief.

Then she suddenly remembered and turned around. "Right, you too, Wayne! Are you okay? You said it was hot. Did you get a burn?"

"No, it's nothing much to worry about. But..."

Wayne frowned and slowly opened his clenched fist, showing Lacey the puffy white thing within.

"What's that?" Lacey asked confusedly as she stared at the thing in Wayne's hand.

"Not sure..." Wayne responded.

A peaceful afternoon passed, accompanied by jubilant cries of "kwee kwee" and "grr-oink grr-oink" celebrating their reunion.

* * *

Wayne and Lacey decided to name the puffy white stuff "popcorn."

The stuff that the boar had carefully transported in a cloth bag on his back was dried corn, a favorite food of his species. It was a souvenir from his home.

However, even the boar hadn't realized that the corn would pop when exposed to flame. When Lacey and Wayne used a pot to heat some of the remaining corn, it popped and popped.

They were astonished that corn kernels could change into puffy white things, but upon apprehensively giving them a taste, they found that they were kind of *tasty*. Everybody looked at each other and placed a hand to their mouths in shock.

They planted the leftover kernels in the field, and by the next day, stalks with huge, swelled kernels had popped up. Lacey's field was beginning to become almost monstrous. Drying the mature corn basically meant absorbing the moisture out of the kernels, so Lacey worked her magic.

Thus Lacey, Wayne, and the pets brought the dried corn down to the village. They were headed to Sasanqua, the only restaurant in town.

Ever since Dana visited, Lacey had gotten into the habit of occasionally dropping by Sasanqua. While Cedric, the proprietor, seemed surly, he was always eager to experiment with cooking. Lacey had learned that he was unabashedly delighted with her insulated thermal bags. He had told her that the next time she made something interesting, he wanted her to bring it to him.

"You know, I'm here, so we don't have to go all the way out to a restaurant." For once, Wayne was complaining. Sidestepping him, Lacey knocked on the door of Sasanqua.

"Welcome. Oh, who's that?"

Cedric was sitting at the counter with an open newspaper and glared at them from behind his thin-rimmed glasses—or at least, he looked like he was glaring. But Lacey knew that at heart, he genuinely was glad to see them. She quietly bowed her head.

Tee and the boar poked their heads out from behind Lacey's legs, making "kwee kwee" and "brr-ee brr-ee" noises. They were animals—or monsters, actually—so Lacey had thought twice about bringing them into a restaurant at

first. But Cedric had badgered her about "Where'd your little birdie go?" so she now took Tee along without stressing about it.

"Hello, Mr. Cedric... Um, I brought something interesting for you to see today. Also, this is my friend."

"Oho. If you think it's interesting, it must be something terrific." Cedric then glanced at Wayne. "Oh, so that's your boyfriend."

Most of the villagers knew that there was a lad from the outside who visited Lacey. Wayne was a blond-haired, blue-eyed, handsome young man. However, since the hero's face was well-known, he usually used concealment magic. He should have appeared to Cedric as the most average-looking youth he could imagine.

"Um, he's not my boyfriend."

"I see. Hello and nice to meet you, boyfriend."

Lacey tried to correct him, but Cedric wasn't heeding her at all, so she gave up. Getting adamant about it wouldn't change his mind.

"Nice to meet you too." Wayne took the hand that Cedric offered and shook it, but his response was unusually crabby.

Lacey was somewhat puzzled by this. She was certain this was the first time the two of them had met, and Cedric was acting perfectly normal. She didn't understand why Wayne would be so touchy. Thus she simply chalked it up to her imagination.

"So is that what you have to show me?" He turned his gaze to the fuzzy silk ends of corn that were heaped in the baskets they were carrying. There were a lot of ears in Wayne's basket and only a few in Lacey's basket.

"Yes. They need to be cooked a little, but I was hoping to have you try some of it too, Mr. Cedric."

"All right, there aren't any customers right now anyway. Let's go to the kitchen."

He didn't need convincing. Cedric swiftly propped open the door and held out an arm, guiding them into the restaurant. Lacey and Wayne stepped inside, followed by Tee, and the boar entered last.

"Grr-oink."

"I'm not going to eat you, you can come inside too."

"Grr-oink-oink." The boar peacefully trotted in.

After that, Lacey borrowed a pot and oil from Cedric to make popcorn.

The sound of swelling and popping surprised Cedric enough to make his glasses slip down his nose. But when he apprehensively stretched his hand toward it, picked up a kernel, and put it into his mouth, his usually sliver-thin eyes opened wide.

"Miss Lacey."

"Yes?"

"What did you say this is called?"

"For now, since it makes really loud popping sounds, I was thinking of calling it 'popcorn."

"All right. Then today, the shop is closed. We're going to gather up everybody and hold a popcorn-tasting session!" Cedric exclaimed with his eyes strikingly open, exhibiting a tremendous presence despite how skinny he was. The rest of them were dumbfounded.

And so the popcorn party began.

* * *

"I want more salted popcorn!"

"This sweet stuff is way better, Reeve!"

The twins were stuffing their cheeks full of popcorn from cups.

Behind them, a curly-haired girl was holding an empty cup. Yorma suddenly noticed this and offered her more popcorn, his face bright red. "Here, take this!" Reeve watched them, still stuffing his cheeks.

The girl bluntly turned Yorma down, telling him "I like the salty stuff better." Yorma hunched over on the ground in shock. His twin gently patted his back,

consoling him.

Sasanqua was decorated with garlands inside and out. Lacey didn't know where they had been pulled out from, but they were pretty and colorful. There was a line of tables set up with mountains of popcorn everywhere.

Granny, the leader of Plume Village, was sitting cute and squatly in a large chair, chuckling with delight. Taking a closer look, the chair wasn't all that big—Granny was just small.

Besides Allen's family, there were also lots of villagers who Lacey had seen around but didn't know by name.

She'd put one popped kernel into her mouth, but she felt a pressure in her chest from anxiety and couldn't swallow well. Like always, she was shaken up. She shifted her gaze from left to right and was finally able to gulp the kernel down.

Some people had even brought out instruments and were dancing to the music. This was less like a tasting session and more like a festival.

H-How did it get to be like this?!

"This popcorn is fine eaten plain, but it would be more fun to try different seasonings. Let's start by exchanging opinions," Cedric had said, and all the villagers came at once. They had pulled out tables and chairs, put up decorations, and brought along drinks and homemade finger foods, working together to get things started right away.

"I heard Miss Lacey made another interesting thing," somebody had said, although there were too many voices at once to tell who it was.

"Why didn't you tell me right away, big sis?!" Allen had fussed.

Lacey felt like they were getting the wrong idea, and besides, she hadn't *invented* the popcorn. She tried explaining this to Cedric while he was busy setting up, but he flatly retorted with "You're the one who grew the corn and dried it." She wasn't wholly satisfied with this.

The boar, who was the inspiration for this, was swinging his hips to the music's rhythm and kicking his legs about, all while the villagers whistled at him

and cheered him on. He was much better acclimated to this festival than Lacey. As a reward for his dance performance, he gobbled down on a mountain of popcorn.

I guess that's fine...

There were plenty of people around to cook, so the only task Lacey could busy herself with was setting the tables. She weaved her way through the crowd to wherever she was called.

This suited her better than standing in the spotlight. Since she might as well, Lacey tried the popcorn while she carried it around, but whenever she took one bite, she just wanted to have another. Both sweet and salty were tasty. However...

The cooking area, which had moved at some point from Sasanqua's kitchen to outdoors, was brimming with ardor. Lacey could only watch with the corners of her mouth angled downward.

"Obviously salty is more tasty!"

"No, caramel flavor's better! Obviously sweet is better!"

It wasn't Reeve and Yorma speaking. This was an argument between two grown adults.

Specifically, it was Wayne and Cedric. They were holding pots, dripping with sweat, and shoving their foreheads against each other contentiously, baring their teeth. They were both cooking huge batches of popcorn.

"Salt! It's all about salt! You don't get it, Mr. Boyfriend. Don't you know that a little bit of salty stimulation makes the tongue want more?"

"I'll give you that. But sweet just tastes better. That's the objective truth."

"That's silly. Life's not all sweetness and light. Adding a pinch of salt in sometimes is key to making things more enjoyable! It's the spice of life!"

"Well, I'm all about syrupy sweetness! Excuse me for living!"

Allen munched on popcorn as he watched them yap at each other.

"Are they really talking about popcorn?" Lacey asked.

All Allen could respond with was "Probably."

Eventually, the argument turned to other matters.

"I hear that you're looking after Lacey while I'm not around! I'd like to see what kind of skills you've got!"

"With pleasure! I'm always happy to get new customers! Take a good taste!"

Sparks flew between the two men of disparate generations. Lacey wasn't even sure what they were talking about anymore.

This subsequently devolved into a competition using the coconut oil Lacey had brought.



In the end, Cedric, who had made salad and cake entremets raised his fist in triumph, whereas Wayne, who had made a honey-infused drink that went down smooth, crumpled over and banged his fist on the ground in frustration. Lacey wasn't sure of what had happened, but apparently the outcome had been decided.

She finally understood why Wayne had been so uncharacteristically crabby toward Cedric earlier. It was probably because Cedric had threatened his secret pride as a chef.

Wayne was a noble and had only started cultivating his cooking skills during their quest, so he'd learned quickly out of necessity. He was naturally flexible, which made it easier to look convincing, but he was a long way off from Cedric, who was a born chef. Besides that, he had his pride as Lacey's personal cook, but naturally, Lacey hadn't realized that.

Wayne should have been howling in disgrace, but when Lacey saw him again after looking away for a moment, he was talking to Cedric and getting culinary advice. He had a serious look on his face, but then one of them made a joke and they laughed together, slapping each other's back. That was just the kind of person Wayne was.

* * *

The festivities lasted well into the night. The children had all gone home, and now the adults were sipping alcohol with plenty of appetizers to go with. The boar, tuckered out from dancing, slept belly up alongside Tee.

As it grew darker, there were fewer orders and she didn't have to constantly run around anymore, so Lacey just spaced out and watched the villagers.

"Do you do much drimking?"

Lacey was startled by the sudden voice and looked around. At first, she couldn't spot who the voice belonged to—but then there was Granny, standing small and quietly, looking up at Lacey with her hands folded behind her back. Her pure white hair was divided into two symmetrical bundles, and it was hard to tell whether her creased face was smiling or not.

But Lacey got the feeling that she was probably happy.

"Drimking...oh, drinking? No, I'm not old enough yet."

"Is that so? You act like you're mature enough. How old are you, them?" Granny spoke languidly, her syllables slurred as usual.

"I'm fifteen, but I'll turn sixteen soon." Lacey had been told that she looked young for her age, but this was the first time she'd been told that she acted maturely. She was a little surprised.

"Is that so?" Granny nodded, then looked up at the completely darkened sky. The garlands were tied to the hurricane lamps with string and were swaying in the wind.

"It's been a long time since we've done this, so you must be astoumded, Miss Lacey. It used to be, back when the village chamged its name to Plume, we all regularly gathered to watch the stars. But as the village's fortunes declimed, these evemts went by the wayside. Now we're having one agaim. Maybe because you're here, Miss Lacey." Granny gave a pleasant laugh. "It's good. Very enjoyable. You've blown new life into Plume Village, Miss Lacey..."

Lacey felt like this wasn't really true. She had just been one of many catalysts. But Granny probably meant this from the bottom of her heart, so Lacey wasn't so ignorant as to argue.

That prickly feeling was always there. It had scratched at Lacey's heart ever since she'd received the name Aster, driving her crazy.

Lacey's expression looked like she was trying to hold something back. When Granny saw this, she raised her white eyebrows. "Oh dear."

Then soon after, she laughed. "Ho ho, ho ho!" she chortled as she spread and closed her feet repeatedly in a hopscotch rhythm, disappearing back into the festival.

* * *

The tables and chairs from the afternoon had been moved, and in the middle of them, a billow of fire burned.

Tee and the boar jumped to their feet when they saw the fire. It was their element, after all, so it delighted them. They ran around speedily and

approached Lacey.

"Tee."

"Kwee?" Tee looked up, as if saying You called?

The moment when she had given it the name Fotia was still fresh in her memory. Lacey thought for a few moments.

"Noi."

The boar looked around, wondering who she was talking to.

Lacey called to him once more. "Hey, Noi."

The boar realized that this was his name and sprang up. "Grr-oink!" He was so overjoyed that he started to dance.

There were monster wards set up around Plume Village. Normally, Tee and Noi wouldn't be able to approach at all, and were only able to do so because Lacey was close by as a substitute for a tamer.

But now that he had a name, things were different.

"GRR-OOOINK!!!"

A name was a sign of trust.

Noi's cry shimmered as it echoed through the endless sky and gradually faded.

A quiet reply came from the far side of some distant mountain. It sounded like the gong of a large bell.

Lacey realized that her lips had curved into a gentle arc without her noticing. It tickled her immensely.



The bustle of the festival gradually dwindled. This might have been why a shred of loneliness caught in Lacey's chest and stirred up a fleeting thought within her.

Meeting people and getting involved with them. What a terribly strange thing this was. It made her feel happy.

But at the same time, it made her all the more frightened.

"Miss Lacey, is there any more corn?" Cedric asked.

"Huh? Ah, there might be some more at the mansion. I'll go check!"

"It's fine. It's getting late, might as well wrap things up."

"But there are still people here! I won't be long, Mr. Cedric!"

She promptly started running. Maybe she was afraid of it ending. With every step she took, the people's voices grew quieter.

Instead, the chirping of bugs grew louder. She could hear their clear trills. She continued straight on and reached the river. If she kept walking alongside it, she would reach the mansion. She had forgotten to bring a lantern, so after checking to see that nobody was around, she lit sparks at her fingertip. When she flicked them, they dotted the sides of the path in little spots like fireflies.

She glanced up ahead and saw Wayne quietly standing on the riverbank.

Something large alighted on his outstretched arm. It was a postal dragon. They could deliver letters anywhere, even in the dark.

"Wayne?"

When Lacey called out, the mini-dragon quickly took off. It tore through the night sky, relying only on the faint starlight to guide it.

"Did you get mail?"

"Yeah, sorta."

Lacey had thought that Wayne was still at the festival.

Wayne quickly flipped the envelope over and checked the sender. Lacey wasn't sure if she should ask who it was from. He put the letter into his pocket.

"Anyway," Wayne began, his eyebrows raised upward, "what are you doing out here by yourself?"

She was still a little curious about the letter, but it was more important to respond to Wayne right now. "Huh? Well, I was going to go get the last of the corn..."

"It's night. I'll go. Go back to where all the people are."

"Even if there were monsters or bandits along here, they wouldn't really make a difference to me."

"True enough. All right. We can go back to Sasanqua together, and then I'll go get the corn by myself."

"Isn't that worse?"

"Don't nitpick," Wayne grumbled. He suddenly made a sharp whistle through his fingers. Startled, Lacey made a right-about-face and stepped forward. Wayne caught up to her with long strides. Laughing in unison, they returned down the path they had come from.

"You know, this is a good village."

"Yeah."

Lacey's magic hadn't worn off yet, so the path was still dotted with faint lights as the pair walked along it.

Every so often, they turned around and looked up at the sky. Tiny stars quietly fell, leaving trails in their wake.

* * *

When Lacey had first come to Plume Village, the cold was just starting to set in. The seasons had shifted into spring and summer, and now cold autumn was coming around once more.

As the trees and the smell of the air gradually changed, making the world feel chilly and nostalgic, the girl who had once hunched up, clutched her staff, and hid her face at every little thing had at some point begun to face forward and steadily walk down her own wide path.

Of course, that was one big difference, but actually, Lacey wasn't the only person who was changing.

The boy with orange hair who formerly had prominent freckles had grown much taller and gained strength since meeting Lacey.

Allen had turned thirteen.

"Dad, I have a request."

The flame of the lamp set on the table flickered. Allen was sitting in a chair, his fists clenched tight. He lifted his face, mustered his resolve, and spoke to his father in front of him.

The other members of the household had already gone to sleep. Kargo's gaze focused on Allen.

"It's not like I hate working in the fields. But I think I want to do something else, something that only I can do..."

This was a momentous confession for Allen, but all Kargo did was fold his arms and exhale quietly.

Allen had been thinking about this for a long time now.

Allen was a responsible eldest child. He helped out on his father's farm often and saw it as his job to take care of his younger siblings.

However, was this really the life for him? Of course, these were all important tasks, but his younger brothers were able to help out with their father's work more than before. Both Reeve and Yorma were as rowdy as ever and often gave everyone else headaches, but they knew where to draw the line.

Thus, Allen had started to wonder what his own role was. This little feeling in the back of his mind had swelled in size before he knew it, and he'd been thinking about it for longer and longer periods, but he still swung his farming hoe. Because that was his job.

The catalyst that changed this was meeting Lacey.

"With this method, I think you can give your body a good rest and get yourself back into your best condition!"

Allen kept remembering how Lacey had spoken to him and Dana with glimmering eyes.

Inventing things was similar to farmwork. It was an unflagging, persistent effort of trial and error to make something satisfying.

When Plume had been flourishing as the feather-decoration village, Allen had only been eight years old. Everyone always seemed busy making lots of decorations. In time, all this was forgotten as a new "normal" took over, and even the feelings of loneliness were driven into a corner of his memories.

I want to do something that only I can do, he thought. But that just wasn't possible. Anyone could do what Allen could. And he believed from the bottom of his heart that doing physical labor for his family was something important. But little by little, that smoldering feeling grew more intense.

That was why he finally spit it out. He immediately regretted telling his father. He didn't even know what he specifically wanted to do. He felt like he wanted to invent things along with Lacey, but he also felt that that wasn't exactly it.

His emotions were like a jumbled mess of yarn all tangled up.

When he tried unraveling one string, the first thing he figured out was that he was embarrassed. He was trying to grab onto something bigger than he could hold, screaming out without a plan. He felt like a toddler. He wanted to retract what he'd said to his father immediately.

What am I even saying?

The backs of Allen's ears became painfully hot. He wished that he could be forgiven for his own words. He wanted his father to laugh and say that this was ridiculous. He wanted this conversation to end right now so he could just go back to his ordinary life.

But Kargo calmly acknowledged him. "All right."

Allen's tightened fists trembled.

"Tell me, Allen. You want to help Miss Lacey, right? You don't want to do something on your own. You want to assist her however you can."

Hearing someone else say it made it sound so right. The words sank into his

heart.

"I...could help big sis Lacey?"

"Yes. And that's not a bad thing by any means. But you can't become like Miss Lacey."

Allen knew that. He couldn't use magic, and the only advantage he had was that he was a bit taller than his peers. Everything else about him was average.

"If that's how you really feel, then I...honestly do feel really embarrassed at myself."

"You don't have to be. Reeve and Yorma have gotten bigger. The two of them together can manage your portion of the work. We owe Miss Lacey a lot, and she'll be an immense boost to the village. Allen, if you want to help her, then I'll support you both as your dad and as a resident of Plume."

"Okay," Allen managed after a pause.

"Inventing things just like Miss Lacey isn't everything. I have a feeling that Miss Lacey doesn't have a good mind for finance. She may not have any interest in money. If that's the case, we don't have to make a big deal out of it against her will. But at the very least, Allen, you may be able to help Miss Lacey so that she isn't doing business at a loss."

Lacey had entrusted the wholesale of her wares entirely to the merchant who regularly came around. He had been doing business in Plume Village for a long time, so he could be trusted to an extent. However, he was not a villager himself.

Allen wouldn't have been able to come up with this on his own.

He wanted to help Lacey. Before he'd realized it, a clear goal had formed in his mind.

Allen bowed his head to Kargo with all his might. He put in so much energy that he bumped his head on the table, making a *thud* and shaking it.

Seeing this, Kargo's face, deeply lined with echoes of past laughter, formed a wry smile. "Good luck," he simply said to his son.

He was treading down a new path. That would require a lot of courage.

But as long as he had a path, he would go down it—straight forward, never looking back.

* * *

"Good company makes the road shorter. We're all in this together, as they say!"

"Never heard that."

The wheels of the carriage rattled as they spun. Occasionally they went over a large pebble, making the whole wagon shake. Allen exclaimed out loud at the jolt strong enough to lift him off his seat, but the merchant simply cackled. What a strange laugh he had.

The man was as fox-like as ever. His thin eyes were tightly squeezed into an arched shape. But put another way, he showed no openings—or so Allen realized while sitting next to him. He was dressed in such colorful clothing that it was hard to believe he was a merchant, and while the cold hadn't started in earnest yet, he had a large shawl wrapped around his shoulders.

He was probably younger than Allen's father Kargo, but still much older than Allen himself. Even though he looked to be in his mid-twenties, he had been doing business in Plume Village for many years now. This was the first time Allen had been around him for so long, though. That, added to the fact that the carriage was loaded up with goods that Lacey and the other villagers had entrusted them with, made Allen terribly nervous.

After discussing things with Kargo, Allen had decided to start by helping the merchant sell merchandise. When he told his family that as a result, he wouldn't be able to help in the fields for a while, the twins had at first given each other a look and then thumped their chests, telling him "We'll handle it!"

Allen had spoken to Lacey before exiting the village as well. She didn't know what emotions had led to this, so she had been confused.

"Re~ed flo~wers in hand~ Oneee of them, twooo of them!"

"…"

And at present, Allen was sitting next to the merchant, riding a carriage down

a bumpy road.

He was familiar with the nursery rhyme that the merchant was singing, but the man couldn't carry a tune. Though Allen should have known it, it sounded like a different song to him.

"Hey, do you have to sing that?"

"Yes, naturally. We're taking roads with monster wards set up wherever we can, but you never know what'll happen, so we have to announce our presence by singing. Feral pigs with a brood avoid going near humans. Come on, sing it with me."

"...Re~ed flowers in hand~"

"Well, the road's so bumpy that we're probably announcing our presence with all the rattling anyway, like it or not."

""

"You have a wonderful voice, Allen! Hyah hyah!"

Allen already felt like he wouldn't be able to get along with him.

The capital was around two days away by carriage, going at a steady pace. Just thinking about how much time they had left together made Allen's head hurt. He hadn't felt this anxious since his little brothers had learned the joy of running and sped away in opposite directions out of sight. He felt like he was hanging out with a drunkard.

The day passed by as they crisscrossed different roads. They needed to rest the horses along the way, so they couldn't rush through in a single leg. Taking care of the horses, checking the cargo, preparing food and bedding; there was plenty to do.

Allen was used to spending all day taking care of his younger brothers, so he was very quick-witted. He moved swiftly and efficiently, which made the journey surprisingly smooth.

Then, around the time when it seemed like they would soon reach the capital without incident...

"Allen, here. Wear this, please. Hang it low over your face so it's not visible."

"Huh? Uh, what?"

"I'm doing it too, see?"

The merchant had taken off his colorful clothing and had changed into drab hues. He'd handed Allen a hooded robe.

"We're meeting someone here. Okay, come along. Get off the carriage."

"Huh? You want me to get off? But..."

"Oh, you got here quick, Ryugé!"

A well-built man who had apparently been waiting at the side of the road waved to them.

After a while, Allen figured out that the name Ryugé was referring to the merchant. He'd known the man for years, but he only just realized that he didn't know his name. Of course, Kargo probably knew. But since there was only one merchant who visited Plume Village, just "merchant" was good enough for conversational shorthand.

"Yes, I have a good companion with me this time."

"Hmm." The man—who looked like a warrior—gave a lax response and looked down at Allen. But since Allen had already pulled the hood of the robe over his head, neither of them could see the other's face.

For some reason, the merchant handed the man money. Then the man climbed onto their carriage, took the horse reins, and started to clip-clop away.

"Huh? Ah, wait, huh?! Why?!"

"Settle down. Let's walk along nice and slow. Haste makes waste, as they say."

"I've never heard that! Our carriage! Our cargo!"

"Just calm down. It's fine, it's fine." The merchant spewed completely unreassuring words and patted Allen's back. Upon closer observation, he had the minimum travel essentials, which the two of them then carried.

It was half a day's trip to the capital on foot. Allen took the lead. He had to. And soon enough, they were readily reunited with their cargo.

When they reached the capital and timidly passed through the giant gates, there were throngs of people. To Allen, who had barely been outside the village before, this was stunning.

"Is today a festival or something?"

"Of course not. Oh, that was fast."

"Are you Manson? I left it here for you."

Allen took a look and saw that the crates which had been loaded onto the carriage were sitting on the side of the road.

The voice that had called out belonged not to the warrior-like man, but a muscular woman instead.

"Manson? Not Ryugé?" Allen blinked.

The merchant ignored him and thanked the woman. "Come along, Allen, do a good job of carrying them!" he said with a smile as he lifted a crate. Allen copied him, unsure of what was going on.

"Hey, Lanze! I got a prime spot. You better thank me!" This time, a bearded man called out.

"I'm grateful as ever," the merchant smiled blithely. His name was different again.

"Wh-What's going on?"

The merchant and the bearded man laid out the wares on top of a cloth spread out at the side of the road. Allen imitated their movements, keeping his hands constantly busy, but of course he didn't know what he was doing.

There was just too much to take in. Still, Allen recognized each and every one of the wares that they were setting out right now. Lacey had made them, and whatever she couldn't complete, the villagers had helped out with. Some of them were ones that his father and mother had sewn while already busy with other work.

That was why Allen set them out quickly, but carefully. All of these had been made in the hopes that someone would use them well.

Since he knew the feelings that had gone into making these, he contemplated them as he placed each one. The merchant glanced over at Allen with narrowed eyes, but he was so preoccupied that he didn't notice.

It's hard to believe that these are going to be sold here... It was his first time in the capital, and there was a frightening amount of people. Allen was still wearing the robe that the merchant had handed him with the hood hanging over his face. He was dressed very suspiciously. In spite of this, the people walking along the capital's streets passed by without paying him any attention. Perhaps there were just so many people around that they'd become indifferent.

Are they even going to look our way? Allen thought with a shudder. After all the time big sis put into inventing these, and all the work everyone put into making them...

There had to be a better way to sell these. What would he do? Allen thought about it and bit his lip in frustration. Just then...

"Wait, are those Aster ...?"

There came a woman's voice.

They were on a large avenue lined with shops. She was probably on her way back from shopping. Allen turned around and noticed the young woman, who was holding a large bag, murmuring out loud. Someone else who heard her repeated what she'd said. Allen heard the word "Aster" multiple times over, along with, "aromatic artifacts," "insulated thermal bags," and "could there be new items...?"

"H-Hey, mister, are these Aster artifacts? They are, right?"

"Huh, what? Um, ack..." Allen was caught by surprise and couldn't form a proper response.

"Indeed, of course they are." The merchant grabbed Allen's shoulder, pulled him backward, and answered in his stead. "New products, even!"

That very moment, shrieks sounded from all sides. The sound was so startling that Allen covered his ears. People streamed toward their wares, one after another. It was like a battlefield. Products were flying off the shelves.

"I'm so happy! I've wanted one of these since forever! It smells so good..."

"Insulated thermal bags! The flower embroidery on this one is so cute! I'll buy it!"

"Th-Thank you for your purchase...! Thank you, th-tha..."

"Are you okay, Allen?!"

"I-I've never been in such a big crowd before. I'm honestly freaked out! Wahhh! Thank you for your purchase!"

He wanted to shout for help, but the situation didn't allow for it. The bearded man, the merchant, and Allen were all shouting out, taking money, handing over items, and dealing with the next customer.

"Out of the way, all of you! Move!"

A man was forcing his way through the mob of people. He seemed to be a soldier in some noble's employ, and was yelling furiously despite the shrieks coming from all around. "You merchants! Come with me!"

When he heard this, the merchant smiled. His eyes squeezed even narrower than usual. He snatched off the shawl wrapped around his shoulders and twisted it around the soldier's face. "Oops, my hand slipped!"

The soldier gagged as it smothered him, but the shawl wasn't that thick. Allen thought that it wouldn't have any effect, but then the soldier started to violently sneeze.

"Wha-kshoo, bweh, hetchoo!"

It looked like he was having a very bad time. After forcefully pulling off the shawl, the soldier's face was dripping with tears and snot.

"Ahh! I'm so sorry, it seems that when I ate lunch just earlier, I got lots of pepper all over my shaw!"

This was an infantile excuse. Even Allen's little sister ate tidier than that.

"You snide little—kshoo, achoo!"

"Oh, you can take the shawl. It was an unlucky accident. I hope the noble you serve won't be slighted by this little mishap. And as it so happens, it's time to

close up shop!"

Now Allen understood why the merchant hadn't removed his shawl earlier. He looked around and saw that more than half of the items were sold out already. The bearded man had already bunched and tied up the cloth that had been set on the ground, ready to hightail it.

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"S-Stop!"
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"Please do come again~!"

They beat a hasty retreat. The soldier frantically chased after them, and this time, the bearded man threw a cloth at him.

"Bwuh-hweh!"

Allen was feeling increasingly sorry for the soldier.

He was just as nimble as the merchant. He slipped through the waves of people, and once he bounded outside the city walls, there was the carriage that had been snatched from them.

"Okay, okay, let's get moving!"

The two of them jumped onto the driver's seat. By the time the merchant grabbed the reins and got the horses moving, the bearded man was nowhere to be seen.

It had all happened in a flash.

"Um, what was that all about ...?"

"Extreme popularity comes with problems of its own, you could say." The merchant grinned, then explained.

Lacey's magic artifacts had garnered a massive following.

Now that their cargo load had lightened, the horses seemed to be moving a little faster than they had been during the first leg. Even so, Allen kept looking behind them as they moved into the woods.

"The first time I saw her artifacts, I knew they would sell. I hardly imagined that I would have to sell them like this, though!"

The profile of the merchant, whom Allen had thought to be shifty, now

appeared rather trustworthy when lit by the rays of the setting sun. The merchant's eyes narrowed in the light as they clip-clopped down the road.

"Having such incredible goods on the market is a wonderful thing. However, it's inevitable that counterfeits and rip-offs will emerge. The trade guild protects us, so there's little need to worry. Therefore, the greatest danger is actually the customers. There are some people we can't say no to—I'm not saying who, but I'm sure you can guess."

The man whom he had agitated with a dash of pepper to the face had a sword buckled at his hip and an ornate coat of arms on his breastplate. He was definitely connected to some noble. If one of them gave an order, none of them would be able to disobey.

"That's why I'm exercising caution where I can. Changing out carriages and associates so that nobody knows who the seller is or where they're from."

"And you change your name too?"

"Yes. My name is Lanze. All the other names are phony. Usually I don't sell so obviously out in the open like that, but I thought you might like to see. It's a good idea to occasionally switch up strategies."

"Yeah. It was kind of...really..."

I want this! Can I get one of these? There had been girls, women, and men as well. Allen recalled their happy exclamations of My wife will love this! and the glittering eyes of the young women.

"Really...hard to describe."

"Isn't it? That's what makes it so irresistible," Lanze said, breaking into a smile. Seeing this, Allen felt ashamed of himself for having thought that there must be other, better ways to sell the items. Lanze was much more experienced than Allen and was being very prudent about how he was selling the artifacts that Lacey and the villagers had entrusted to him.

"They were all saying something about Aster."

"It means 'star.' There's a star mark subtly placed on all of Miss Lacey's artifacts as her personal brand. Everyone's looking to buy Aster products."

"I knew that she was amazing, but I don't think I fully understood until now."

"I'm just so excited to see what she'll come up with next. Popcorn, coconut oil, foot baths... I'm scrambling to come up with a sales strategy for them. I'm so busy, I can hardly juggle it all." Lanze's expression softened. He was putting all his effort into doing what only he could do.

In comparison, I'm just... Allen's spirits sank. In fact, he was so frustrated that he couldn't bear it. He was immensely disappointed with himself. However, expressing this out loud would be even more unbearable, so Allen just stared at his hands as he sat in the driver's seat.

Lanze didn't glance at Allen at all and simply held on to the reins. The wheels rattled as they spun. The evening sun quietly set.

"That's why," Lanze continued, "when Kargo told me that you would assist me, I was very thankful. I don't even tell my *name* to anyone I don't trust. I'll be depending on you."

The merchant had given him his name not as Ryugé, not as Manson, but as Lanze. Allen belatedly contemplated this and then nodded heartily. "Okay!"

* * *

"And that's what transpired."

Lanze, wearing his usual sort of colorful clothes, proudly told the story to Lacey.

As she received the profits minus the service fee from him, Lacey could only make a vague, unreadable expression.

"I didn't pry, you understand? It seemed that Allen wanted to assist you in some way, Miss Lacey. Oh dear! I'm such a loose-lipped person, so if I appreciate something, my thoughts just slip right out of my mouth!"

"They slip out...?" Lacey wasn't sure if that was a praiseworthy trait or not, but if he hadn't told her, she might not have realized. She had heard that Allen was going out to sell goods, but she regretted that she hadn't given any thought to why he was doing so.

If he was doing this out of goodwill toward her, she wanted to thank him. But

if Allen was acting surreptitiously so that she wouldn't find out, she would have to pretend that she didn't know anything.

Lacey vowed that she would return the favor one day in some form, but at the very least, she could say something to the person standing before her right now. She straightened out her posture and made eye contact...but she was ultimately too nervous and ended up looking down right away.

"Um, Mr. Lanze, thank you! I should've said it before. You've always delivered my merchandise with care..."

It made Lacey happy to have the artifacts she'd made go to a good home. She didn't want all the effort that the villagers had contributed to go to waste either. Lanze was a very essential, very important individual.

"Also, I know it's much too late, but I didn't know your name until now. I'm so sorry!"

This was in spite of the fact that she'd met and done business transactions with him many times before. Sometimes Lacey felt embarrassed and ashamed at how she couldn't accomplish basic things.

But she couldn't stay embarrassed forever. She clenched her fists and lifted her face with determination. The hat on her head shook.

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance! My name is Lacey! I run an anything shop!"

"Yes, I'm glad to know you. I'm Lanze, just a humble merchant."

They each gave their names and bowed. Lacey didn't lift her head back up afterward and kept it down, though, so Lanze couldn't help but laugh.

"Really, it's quite all right, Miss Lacey. Even if you had asked, I likely wouldn't have told you. I only tell my name to people I can trust. Besides, I hardly know how to react when the renowned Dawn Witch is bowing to me."

Lacey jerked her head up. She was so stunned that she couldn't make a sound.

Lanze had the same smile as ever upon seeing her reaction. "There were five members of the hero's party that vanquished the Demon King. Wayne, the

hero, remained in the capital. The Steel Warrior Brooks returned to his hometown and founded a new school of martial arts, and the Saint of Light Dana is currently busy running her newly established medical center. There was reportedly another one, an elf, but you know how elves are. They're rarely seen in human territory. And not much is known about their kind. When you're in this trade long enough, you hear all sorts of rumors."

Lanze, his eyes still narrowed, tapped his finger to his ear. Lacey was still shocked that he knew who she was and could only stare up at the young man.

"As for the Dawn Witch, I hear she dissolved her ties to the nation and is currently in hiding somewhere..."

"Huh? In hiding?!" Lacey blurted out. As always, Lacey was uninformed on the latest gossip, so she had no idea what they were saying about her after she left the capital, nor had she given it any thought.

Lanze opened his eyes ever so slightly. "Oh dear, is that not the case?" He tilted his head, not expecting this reaction, but he quickly caught on. "It's true that you aren't using an alias, nor do you seem to be disguising who you are. Your appearance differs from the rumors, so few people would think twice about it unless you proclaimed your identity outright. I was dubious as well at first. I had heard tell that there was a short, black-haired girl hanging around the hero's party. I wouldn't have imagined that was you, Miss Lacey."

He was right. Lacey had thought that she didn't care if anyone found out. Of course, she would prefer it if she could keep quiet about it, but in theory, it wouldn't be any major inconvenience if people found out.

But right now, her mouth was clamped painfully shut and all she could do was nod her head.

The closer she got to people, the more afraid she was of them learning who she was. Lacey had honed her magic for the sole objective of defeating the Demon King, but her skills could also hurt humans. She was like a wild beast hiding her sharp, pointy fangs. She didn't want the people of Plume Village to find out. Imagining the smiles of Allen and everyone else crumbling apart scared her to no end.

"I know I'm asking for too much. But please, don't tell them."

"They won't hear a word out of my mouth. Yes, yes, I'm famous for being tight-lipped!" Lanze thumped his chest.

Lacey wasn't able to point out that this was the exact opposite of what he'd said earlier, but tried to put a smile on her face. It was a very strained smile.

The fox-like man simply told her "It'll be all right." She wasn't sure what he meant by that.

Their conversation left off there. Tee and Noi, who had been guarding the field, had just come crashing in.

"Kwee kwee kwee!"

"Grr-oink-oink-oink-oink-oink!"

"Eek! There are two of them now?! W-Well, I'll be on my way nooow!"

Lanze and Tee got along very badly. Tee had already had its revenge, so there was little to worry about, but the terror that it had instilled hadn't faded from Lanze's memory.

This was Tee and Noi's idea of a welcoming reception, but from the shrieking Lanze's perspective, it was something else entirely.

Tee and Noi chased after him as he retreated, getting gradually farther away. Lacey cracked up laughing a little. Still, she could feel the chilly wind whistling by.

Her happiness and fear were like two sides of a coin. One might easily flip over into the other.

Another chilly gust blew past.

Chapter 4: The Name of the Dawn Witch

The place was very noisy.

The conversations between people were more grating than the extravagant music. Wayne quietly exhaled.

Atop the table set with an immaculately white tablecloth was a medley of large plates heaped with food. There were the sounds of tableware clinking and people chuckling.

"Would you care for more wine, sir?"

Wayne was holding an empty wine glass in one hand. Now that he noticed, he was regretting not leaving a little bit in the bottom. That way, he wouldn't get bothered by others so much.

"Sure."

As terse as his response was, it was clearly understood by the waiter, who slowly poured wine into the glass after Wayne set it down on the table.

This is making me feel like I'm somewhere far away.

Social events for nobles were generally like this. Wayne was the second son of a count, so he should have been used to it. But after drinking with Brooks in the sea town of Thalattadini and stuffing himself with popcorn in Plume Village, those felt much more natural to him now. There was nothing he could do about it, but it still felt very confining.

To fit the occasion, Wayne was wearing clothes more closely tailored to him than his usual gear, and he had also disengaged his concealment magic. The blond youth tugged at his lapels and sighed. The ladies attending the social event stole looks at him from behind their fans and whispered to each other.

"That gentleman is the hero."

"He's every bit as handsome as the rumors described."

Still, this is really uncomfortable... Wayne thought to himself, anxious beneath

the weight of both fawning praise and lingering stares. However, when he spotted a pile of popcorn on one of the large plates, his expression immediately softened. His chest grew warm.

He decided to try the salad that was within his reach and found that it had a familiar taste as well—coconut oil. Maybe the cookies on the next plate over included it too.

"Mmpff!"

"Is something the matter?"

"No, my apologies. It's nothing."

He'd spotted a woman graciously eating popcorn with a spoon and almost burst out laughing. Of course she would do a thing like this. Noblewomen wouldn't eat in a way that would sully their gloves.

There were other people around having conversations along the lines of:

"Say, have you heard of foot baths? I thought it absurd to expose one's feet, but upon trying it for myself, it took away the swelling in my feet that has tormented me for years now."

"My, is that really so? The Aster artifact maker proposed the method, correct? I've been quite curious about it since hearing from Lady Dana."

To Wayne, it sounded like they were probing what the other knew. That was likely exactly the case. Focusing in, he could see that the women each had an insulated thermal bag hanging on their arm. He couldn't help but be skeptical at how far this was from their intended use, but this was what it was like in the capital. Things had probably gotten even crazier since Dana had started her keen endorsement.

Since there wasn't enough supply to keep up with demand, owning an artifact that Lacey had made or knowing someone who did had turned into a kind of status symbol.

Amid all this, the host of the social event was speaking particularly loudly. Was he loud by nature, or was he raising his voice so that he could be heard?

Wayne narrowed his eyes balefully and steadily approached the man,

Lomigos. He was the noble who had run away from the Friepurae Medical Center after Dana had gotten passive-aggressive with him.

Lomigos was vainly swelling his snowman-like body and throwing out his chest, chatting pleasantly with the people around him.

As he was the host, the nobles were smiling uniformly, but their eyes had a frigid look in them. Lomigos seemed to be aware of this and was speaking even louder, but in Wayne's opinion, it looked to be futile.

"The count appears quite desperate," came whispers.

Wayne felt that the onlookers who were blithely mocking someone else were the more ridiculous parties in this situation, but that was just what nobles were like. Nobody would approach someone who was in decline. They couldn't stand to potentially have begging hands reaching out to them in desperation.

However, a surprising number of guests were attending this event hosted by Lomigos. As a diversion, as a means of scoping out what was happening—there were likely a variety of reasons, but the biggest one of all was something else.

"I promise that I'll obtain all of Aster's goods!" Lomigos proclaimed with exaggerated gestures, laughing along with the people near him. Wayne, watching Lomigos through a break in the crowd, scowled at him.

"After all, I'm very close to Lady Dana, the Saint of Light! I've visited her medical center many times, and she has proclaimed me to be a valued client! It's the truth!"

The nobles, who spoke with faked expressions, all looked the same.

"Ohhh, you know Lady Dana? I've heard that she's on friendly terms with the Aster artifact maker."

"I've bought a full set of aromatic artifacts. Every one of them is marvelous."

All of the responses were acted out.

Lomigos clenched his round fist and shook it in the air as he proclaimed, "Listen, everyone! I've had my eyes on Aster's goods for quite some time now. I've been tracing them from where they've been sold and have been calculating where they're manufactured...but I shan't say more than that."

"My word, you're going to leave us hanging right at the part we're all curious about?"

"Ha ha ha. If I revealed that, I wouldn't be the first to reach them."

"Very true!" There was a burst of laughter.

This was a waste of time. Wayne sighed and was about to just leave the venue, but Lomigos spotted him with eagle eyes. He cut through the crowd and came up to Wayne.

"Hero! Why, if it isn't the hero! I had sent an invitation to the house of Cielanic as well, but I can hardly believe you actually showed up! Please, please do enjoy yourself! There's much more on the program!"

"No, I have other business to attend to. I apologize, but I must leave early."

"Egads! But there are the finest of music and delicacies to be found here!"

True enough, they were all excellent. Lomigos was trend-savvy, which was why there was even popcorn.

However, popcorn served on a fancy plate just felt jarring to Wayne. He couldn't relax at all here. Glittering golden decorations shone all around the venue, which just depressed him. It was plain gaudy.

"I'm sorry, but I really must go."

"Then take a souvenir! There are souvenirs for all guests! Hey, you there! Yes, you!" Lomigos raised his voice arrogantly. The servant who had been spoken to jumped up in surprise. Wayne felt sorry for him.

"Er, yes?"

"Stay alert! Bring the items at once! Please wait just a little longer, honored hero. I managed to procure enough Aster goods for all attendees." His voice, which had momentarily been full of anger, took a completely different tone toward Wayne. "There are few items in circulation, so I had commoners sell me some in their possession. Oh, of course the transactions were done right at the spot where the items had been purchased, so rest assured, they haven't been used," Lomigos bellowed. "When I obtain the Aster artifact maker, I will guarantee a greater supply and will firmly instruct and guide them to deliver

their stock to nobility, not to commoners—"

"That's enough." Wayne couldn't put up with this. He'd uttered the words before he knew it.

"Eh? Um, esteemed hero ...?"

"Don't assume that what you want is the same as what everyone else wants." Commanding words naturally surged out of his mouth. "That kind of thinking will eventually lead to your downfall."

"What...?" Lomigos froze up with his hands still sycophantically pressed together.

Seeing this, Wayne had a feeling that maybe he said a little too much, but nonetheless he turned around and walked away. Lomigos, who was pinned to the spot, didn't try to stop him this time.

Wayne exited the manor at a brisk pace, then recalled the letter he had received.

A very heavy sigh escaped his lips.

* * *

"Hey, did you say more than you should've?"

"I didn't."

"You definitely did!"

"I insist that I didn't," Lanze replied slickly. Allen glared at him as the carriage rattled along, shaking them along with it, but Lanze was probably completely unfazed. In fact, he was merrily whistling a tune. Allen's brow furrowed even more.

Lately, Allen had been allowed to hold the reins too. He was getting used to vending, and he was happy to be gradually learning new skills, but...

"You must have! Big sis Lacey has clearly been acting weird! She gets super tense whenever I say I'm going to the capital, balls her fists up, and tells me 'Good luck!' It's abnormal for her to cheer me on so fiercely! But when I ask her what's up, her eyes start to dart all over the place. Is she raising goldfish in

them or something?!"

"It's funny how her emotions are very transparent sometimes."



"Yeah, true...hold it! Quit dodging! Lanze, you totally said something to big sis Lacey, didn't you?!"

"Hyuk hyuk."

"What kind of laugh is that?!"

Allen had completely stopped being formal with Lanze and was behaving true to himself. While he thought of Lanze as a respected adult, he just wasn't showing it in his attitude. After all, Lanze had always acted like this. He reacted blithely to Allen and would always slide around whatever grievances he brought up.

"Look ahead, Allen, we're almost at the capital. Hold tight to the reins, if you would, please."

Allen was accompanying Lanze in the first place to help with his business. His expression swiftly changed. "Got it." He nodded firmly before preparing to put on his robe.

After a few of these visits to the capital, Allen had learned that Lanze was using every method at his disposal to sell Lacey's products. The first time, they'd transferred the carriage and all its cargo to another person, but on some days, they just went right on through. Today they were just delivering. Allen and Lanze handed over the goods to another merchant and received money in exchange.

"We don't have to sell all of it directly. Selling it ourselves does yield greater profits, of course, but we're selling our time as well. Keep in mind that there are many methods of selling."

"Okay."

With that said, the reason Lanze had so many options to choose from was probably that he had lots of connections. This wasn't something Allen could imitate anytime soon.

"What will you do? I'm going to go look at cloth to bring Miss Lacey. It's the same place that I brought you to before. Would you prefer to roam around the capital today? I believe it could prove educational."

"I guess I'll do that, then."

"Then let's meet back in front of the inn when the sun is directly overhead. We can get lunch at the same time."

"All right."

"Be careful not to get lost."

"I won't!"

So Allen shot back, but he actually was a little nervous. He'd been born and raised in Plume Village, so he wasn't used to the sheer number of people here.

After watching Lanze walk off, Allen decided to first learn the roads. He started by checking out the nearby streets and beating them into his head. He repeated this painstakingly to an almost unnecessary degree.

Allen had learned lately that this kind of work unexpectedly agreed with him. He could easily memorize numbers, faces, and even things he had been completely unfamiliar with before. He just hadn't noticed this because he already knew everyone in Plume Village.

While he did this, he also observed the city folk. They certainly seemed more sophisticated than the Plume villagers and seemed to be more conscious of certain things like their clothing. The street stalls hollering to attract the notice of customers, signs on shop fronts, and the people who stopped to look at them all gave Allen ideas.

Maybe I'll remake the sign I made for big sis Lacey. Appearances really were important.

Although Lacey's workload was consistently increasing, she had lamented that she wasn't getting any more clients. Remembering this, Allen decided on what he'd do once he got back.

Around when Allen started to feel like it was time to go meet up with Lanze, a large, familiar man came by. When he saw the sword buckled at the man's hip and the coat of arms on his breastplate, a shiver ran down Allen's spine. It was the soldier who'd had a sneezing fit after Lanze wrapped a shawl full of pepper around him.

Allen wore a hooded robe over his clothes whenever he was in the capital. He prayed that the man would pass him by and made himself as small as he could. But when he saw him, the man let out an acrid growl. "Hmm?"

Allen wasn't a mage or anything of the sort, so he couldn't change his face. He'd tried to be extra cautious, but it had backfired and he'd ended up looking more suspicious instead.

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"Hey, you... Hey!"
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The second the man spoke to him, Allen broke into a run.

"Wait!"

Of course he wouldn't wait just because he was told to. There were a few other soldiers out on patrol, who the man called out to and drafted one after another.

Allen could feel his heart in his throat. *Oh crap, oh crap!* These people were the "greatest danger" that Lanze had talked about. Allen glided through the city streets.

"Catch him! Whoever catches him will get a reward!"

Allen was no criminal, but in no time, even citizens were getting involved in the chase. Everyone was startled as they watched him run by.

He recalled what Lanze had told him on the road about how Lacey's magic artifacts were hard to come by, and thus certain parties were using more desperate measures.

A large business needed an even larger patron in order to succeed. Plume Village was a small settlement and had nowhere near enough power to oppose a noble. It would be completely at their mercy. That was why he couldn't let himself get caught.

"Over there! Gather by the south gate!"

"Just how many people are in this city?!"

More people had gathered at the soldier's command.

Allen's breath was terribly hot as he let out a curse. His limbs felt heavy from

running around so much and his heart felt like it was on fire.

But...

"Good luck!"

Although Lacey's jaw had dropped open in bafflement when he'd first told her that he was going to start helping Lanze out with his business, now she was cheering him on again and again. She'd said it again before their latest excursion, and there were a lot of things he wanted to say back to her, like "Why are you always so fierce about it?" or "I'm just doing what I want to, it's got nothing to do with you."

But each time, he held his tongue.

He secretly swore that with the energy she was giving him, he'd find something that would help her move forward.

"Hraaah!" The voice telling him good luck resounded powerfully deep within his heart.

"Eek! What are you doing?!"

"Sorry!"

Allen jumped over a stack of cargo on the roadside and apologized to the person he'd startled. He took a sharp right, then a left. He kept making sudden turns, twisting through the crowds.

He'd naturally become very good at tag after chasing his frisky brothers so much. His running speed was the real deal. Allen consulted his mental map. He'd assiduously beaten the streets into his head for just an occasion like this.

"What the— Damn! Why's he taking this route?"

"The little scamp's an escape artist!"

"Sorry, but today's my first time!" Get a better grasp of your own city! Allen internally ridiculed them.

"Get around him and cut him off! He's just a kid!"

Allen wasn't about to just let that happen. He envisioned the city's layout in his mind.

The city isn't flat.

It was just like Lacey's insulated thermal bags. They were drafted from ordinary pattern paper but came together into a three-dimensional shape.

Allen kicked off a window frame and ran up a wall. He jumped up onto a roof, prompting the men below to cry out frantically.

Nobody could catch up to Allen. He had all the flat and vertical paths stored in his brain. Even banding together, the soldiers couldn't overtake this average boy from the rural countryside.

As he breathed, the air that was coming in through his nose felt unusually cool.

What a relief. He'd made it. He'd lived up to her faith in him.

He was about to burst out crying and tightly bit his lip. Just then, a strange jolt hit him. It felt like something had been thrown at him and bumped him lightly, but he couldn't see anything.

"Over there!"

"Waaah! Damn, they're way too fast!"

* * *

Although Allen thought it peculiar, his priority was getting away as fast as possible. He met up with Lanze and they immediately left the capital.

As the horses raced, he checked the robe he'd been wearing, but there was nothing on it. Still, he was nervous, so he discarded the robe by the side of the road.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lanze."

In hindsight, he should have acted more confident when the pepper man had laid eyes on him. There were plenty of people around the capital wearing similar clothes to Allen. It was his suspicious movements that had given him away.

"It's my fault for leaving you by yourself. I'd rather compliment you on outrunning them. There have been vile rumors about a noble lately—I believe it

was Lomigos. He's been forcibly buying up goods from our customers, which is quite the nuisance," Lanze said, then added in a murmur, "It may be time to stop trading in the capital."

Allen frowned as he listened. Turning to look over his shoulder, he could see the capital growing smaller in the distance. For some reason, although the city had seemed so big, grand, and impressive when he first came to it, he didn't think so anymore. *That's not important right now though.* He faced back forward.

The horses' hooves scuffed against the road as they moved onward.

* * *

Lacey restlessly paced back and forth at the village's entrance. Forward, backward, and then forward again.

"Miss Lacey, I think they should be here soon, but it's possible they'll be late. I'll tell Allen to drop by your mansion as soon as he gets back."

"Th-That's not it, Mr. Kargo! It's not like I'm terribly worried or anything, I just, ummm, was getting some exercise so that I'll be hungrier before I visit Mr. Cedric's restaurant!"

This ludicrous excuse didn't even make sense to Lacey herself. Kargo stifled a smile and replied, "Oh, all right." Lacey felt embarrassed and instinctively hid her face under her hat.

She was worried about Allen, but since she wanted to be considerate of his feelings, she felt that she couldn't let him know this. Allen would be coming back to Plume Village along with Lanze today. Tee and Noi had come along with her out of curiosity, but they seemed to have gotten tired of watching her repeat the same movements and had promptly gone off to play. Lacey recalled how they had looked up at her, chirping and oinking with half-bored faces.

Maybe he's right, it would be fine to just wait at home. If she went home, they'd come by the mansion anyway to report the sales figures. Coming down into the village herself would only make a few hours difference.

She walked around in a circle and raised her head when she thought she heard them, only to be disappointed when it wasn't. She kept repeating this

while Kargo watched with a wry smile.

After quite a few iterations of this, she heard the sound of a carriage and raised her head. This time, it was definitely them. Allen and Lanze came down from the driver's seat.

"Welcome back," Lacey called to them.

"Big sis Lacey, were you waiting for hours again? Don't you think you're worrying too much?" Allen said with exasperation.

"Urk..." Lacey didn't have a good response and clammed up. Meanwhile, Lanze and Kargo—the two adults—were looking at each other and holding back laughter.

"Um, er, I'm not worried, exactly, but it's more like, well..."

Like Allen had suggested, her eyes were darting around as if they were minnows while she tried to find the right words to say. Lacey pressed her index fingers together bashfully, then suddenly lifted her face and patted Allen's back.

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"Wh-What?"

"Allen, did you meet a mage somewhere?"

"A mage?"

"Yes."
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Lacey had noticed that there was investigation magic tangled around the boy. It's a very crude spell, though.

One light pat from Lacey had easily fractured the formula and made it fall off. It made a cracking sound as it broke apart, becoming just fragments of mana that dripped and vanished into the ground. If Lacey had cast it, she would have weaved the formula thinner than thread so that it couldn't be detected. There was no point in investigation magic if the person it was cast on noticed it.

"I ran into some soldiers, but a mage? I don't think I did..."

"Oh."

It was only natural that Allen would be at a loss. In the first place, one couldn't tell just from appearances whether someone was a mage. Since the

spell hadn't been there when Allen set out from Plume Village, it must have been cast on him when he was in the capital.

But would you really cast investigation magic on any random boy you met in the capital? Lacey's brow furrowed as she looked down at the minuscule remnants of mana.

"Big sis?" Allen looked at her worriedly. Just then, the sound of numerous horse hooves echoed down the road.

Not many people came by Plume Village. It was all the same visitors, usually traders. That was why Kargo and Allen were much more disturbed by this abnormal occurrence than Lacey. Kargo shot Allen a look, which Allen immediately comprehended. He headed away toward the village center.

"Hey!" One of the men on horseback shouted at Allen from behind, but a man as round as a snowman ponderously stretched out an arm and signaled for the other man to stop.

"Never mind him. Don't make a fuss."

The snowman-like man dismounted and haughtily surveyed the village.

"What a dingy town this is," he spat.

Lacey felt more bewildered than offended at his words. With her hat pulled down low on her head, she looked at the man. Judging by his arrogant attitude and sumptuous clothing, this fat man was probably a noble. That meant that the men accompanying him were likely his personal soldiers. They were wearing the same uniforms, so they weren't mercenaries.

In the time that the noble and his soldiers were taking a look at the town and disparaging it, Allen returned with a large group of people. Granny was there too, carried on a villager's back. Since the noble had brought soldiers, they were naturally alarmed.

Watching as more people gathered, the noble spat again. "Must country folk act like this?"

Several villagers scowled indignantly. Meanwhile, Granny gently came down from Allen's back and solemnly stood up front as their representative. She was

far too vulnerable. But against a noble, commoners had no choice but to act submissively.

Lacey kept her gaze trained on them and stretched her fingers to the miniaturized staff in her bag so that she would be ready anytime in case something happened.

Granny put her arms into her ample sleeves and bowed.

"I'm the leader of Plume Village. I can see that you are a noble. Would you do us the courtesy of telling us why you're here?"

"Hmph, why I'm here, you ask? It would normally be unthinkable for me to even speak a word to you simple country folk. Very well. In recognition of your achievements, I will grant you the honor of knowing my name. I am Marlado Lomigos, and by His Majesty's grace, I hold the status of count!"

The villagers whispered among themselves when they heard the word "count." The corners of Lomigos's mouth turned up in a smile, and he looked terribly pleased.

Before Lacey knew it, the majority of the villagers had gathered. Lacey quietly slipped into the crowd. She watched Allen's expression uneasily.

"Yes, your achievements! I already know that this village is where the Aster goods are produced! Stand down and yield the rights to me!"

"Y-Yield the rights, you say?!" Lanze uttered in surprise. After hearing him, the villagers started to buzz. Even Granny's wrinkled face twisted into an apprehensive look.

Lomigos seemed to be closely observing them with great pleasure. As the murmurs grew louder, he let out an "Oh dear," pursing his lips, blinking, and suppressing a grin before explaining himself. "Excuse me, 'rights' was a poor choice of word. I'm not that cruel."

Everyone breathed sighs of relief. The magic artifacts that Lacey made were no longer just her own. They were the business of the entire village, and the residents were trying to reclaim their pride from when they were called the feather-decoration village.

Lomigos promptly continued. "I will simply be overseeing the future production of Aster goods. I can't bear how disorderly the distribution is. I shall grant you my protection from this point forth. In exchange, you will create and present to me goods according to my specifications."

Whispers spread. The villagers exchanged looks when they heard Lomigos's words, trying to digest and interpret what he had said. There was something off about it, but they didn't know how to respond.

It didn't take long for the whispers to change into chaos. Nobody at all understood the situation.

The one exception was Lacey. She simply observed Lomigos calmly. His strategy had been effective. He began by throwing down a condition, and after the other party became agitated, he relaxed it a little. Though it was basically the same as the initial condition, this pretense made it emotionally easier to accept.

This is a pickle...

The noble by the name of Lomigos had said he had come for Lacey's magic artifacts. While Lacey herself didn't think the items she made held *that* much value, she didn't want the villagers to get wrapped up in all of this. She pondered if there was any way to peacefully resolve things. Meanwhile, Lacey wasn't the only one who had noticed the fallacy in what Lomigos had said. The first to step out in front of Lomigos was Kargo.

"Wait a minute!" His face, lined with echoes of laughter, was now tense and he had one arm stretched out defensively in front of Granny. "Isn't that essentially contracting us into being slaves? Why do we have to let a noble we've never seen or met before oversee what we make? Plume Village doesn't need protection. I'm sorry, but please leave!"

"Hah! You don't have the right to refuse!"

"Slaves" was a very strong word, but it was very close to what might actually happen in Lacey's estimation. Judging by Lomigos's expression, he would demand excessive production speeds and monopolize all the profits as a protection fee. The villagers would only receive a pittance. Lacey had seen many villages while on the quest. This was by no means an uncommon

situation.

However, whether the villagers would accept it being thrust upon them was a different story.

"Like hell!" somebody shouted.

"Yeah, we're not gonna stand for that!"

Angry voices rippled out. Everyone started to shout, giving their support to Kargo.

This isn't good! Lacey suddenly realized, looking around. Behind Lomigos stood men with drawn swords. "N-No, calm down...!"

"Silence!!!"

Lacey raised her voice, but Lomigos raised his even higher, overpowering them all. The huge snowman had gone red in the face and there was even steam coming off his head. He looked like he was about to melt. Suddenly realizing that he was huffing and puffing, Lomigos took a deep breath. Then, sweat still dripping down his face, he feigned a composed tone and smiled.

"This village—you called it Plume, yes? I never would have guessed that a place like this was distributing the Aster goods. It took a great deal of time and effort, but I uncovered it at last. And it was all thanks to that orange-haired brat." Lomigos pointed a short finger at Allen.

The villagers automatically turned their confused gazes to Allen and stepped a little bit away from him.

"M-Me...?" Allen blinked repeatedly, his brow wrinkling.

Lomigos sneered. "I put out an order to cast investigation magic on the brat if he was spotted in the capital. That fox-faced merchant has been very scrupulous about how he peddles his wares. If he was that desperate to stay anonymous, then he must have some dark secret to hide. Shall I report this to Duke Fylachtó?"

Fylachtó was the noble who governed the area around Plume Village. The merchant had taken precautions not because he had any dark secrets, but rather to deter people like Lomigos—but Lomigos seemed to have the wrong

idea.

However, bringing the duke into this further complicated matters. Plume Village paid their taxes to the duke as was proper, but the tax amount was determined solely based on the number of people counted in the census. If Plume Village had a new source of income, that might change. Therefore, they couldn't discount Lomigos's threat.

Lacey was somewhat acquainted with the duke and knew that he wasn't that sort of person, but from the perspective of the Plume Villagers, the duke was even more lofty than Lomigos. The children looked up in disquiet at the adults who were knitting their brows and making bitter faces.

Lomigos surveyed the villagers with satisfaction. He was fully certain that his threat had been effective.

Amid all of this, Allen's usual cheery expression had vanished from his face. Instead, he was quaking. His body was trembling a freakish amount. He tried to stabilize his right arm by grabbing it with his left hand, but even then, he couldn't stop.

"It's my fault... It's all my..."

Lomigos's words had deeply injured Allen. The thought that these men had come because of *him* made his still childish face grow pallid.

Lacey quietly narrowed her eyes and then slowly approached the boy.

"I'm getting tired of this. Hey, you soldiers. Nobody will care if one or two of them die. Play with them as you will. You can pick the old woman if you like."

Lomigos spoke to the escorts behind him. Many heavy swords scraped out of their sheaths. Kargo immediately spread his arms wide to protect Granny behind him. Screams rang out at the same time, but when they met the glares of the soldiers, the villagers frantically covered their mouths.

Despite this, Allen raised his voice. "Stop it! Don't hurt Granny or my dad!"

He was gasping for breath and crying. He was straining his voice from deep within his throat, thinking that it was all his fault. Even so, he was trying to make his way through the crowd.

It was too upsetting to watch.

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"Wait, Allen."
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"B-Big sis Lacey..."

Lacey knew what kind of feelings had led him to go to the capital, trying to look ahead with his still childish eyes and move forward.

That was why she stopped Allen. She tugged his arm and stared fixedly at him. When he turned around and showed his face full of tears, she grew even angrier.

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"Hic— Huh? B-Big sis...?"
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Her hazel eyes were exactly the same as ever, yet the timid girl who always smiled hazily was nowhere to be seen. Everybody who knew how she normally looked felt a shiver when they saw her now.

Allen was no exception. He felt pure fear from the very pit of his stomach. He looked at Lacey in a daze, flapping his mouth and trying to say something that just wouldn't come out.

"Allen, you didn't do anything wrong."

"Huh...?"

That was why he didn't understand what she was talking about.

Lacey slipped past Allen.

She was now holding her enlarged staff in one hand. She made her way through the crowd of villagers and stood defiantly before the soldiers, her face lifted up.

"That's enough, all of you," she said soberly.

Her voice wasn't raised at all. However, strangely enough, everyone there clearly heard what she was saying.

* * *

Marlado Lomigos was supposed to have everything handed to him on a silver platter.

He wagged his tail to those above him and used the people below him as a stepping stone. He was a greedy man, but from his own perspective, this was simply the secret to success in life. This was how he had made his way in noble society.

Lomigos felt that he didn't need to attract people to himself—he could accomplish the same things by making connections with people higher up the ladder. He mocked anyone who didn't understand this as a tremendous imbecile.

However, his life had crumbled in a flash.

Lomigos had been one of the hangers-on of the Dejafaim ducal house, but the oldest son, Raymond Dejafaim, had committed a deplorable offense.

The rumors said that Raymond's womanizing had grown so dire that he had gotten involved with the princess despite having a fiancée. Whether this was actually true or not was irrelevant—a rumor repeated enough times would eventually *become* an accepted truth. Raymond, who had incurred the king's wrath, had woefully been disinherited. It was a foolish tale.

However, the terrifying part about noble society was that this did not simply end as a foolish tale.

The fall of House Dejafaim was swift and magnificent. Lomigos, as one of its hangers-on, had clung to it like a leech. He believed that this was the right choice, even if he was mocked for being a mindless follower.

To make matters worse, House Lomigos was a branch of House Dejafaim. He'd thought that this made it a perfect target to latch onto, but as tightly as he had stuck to it, he fell with it all the faster.

That was why he had been so engaged in the rumors of the Aster artifacts. Believing that he had finally caught hold of them, Lomigos had impatiently traveled all the way to the village himself. If they tried to resist, he could just threaten them with brandished swords. These ignorant rural commoners wouldn't be able to talk back to that—or so he thought. Those were just facts. They *should* have been facts.

"That's enough, all of you."

It wasn't a very loud voice, but it echoed in his ears with tremendous dignity.

The girl before him was wearing a large hat and plain garments. The only unusual thing about her was that she was gripping a disproportionately sized, old-fashioned staff, but for some reason, Lomigos couldn't take his eyes off her.

"What an impudent brat. Get back!" someone immediately shouted at the girl standing in front of Lomigos, pointing a sword at her. It was the pepper man. Though Lomigos was unaware of this, this was the soldier whom Lanze had wrapped his pepper-spiked shawl around. The pepper man was confident that since he was dealing with a mere girl-child, a simple flash of his weapon would be enough to make her run away in fear.

Just then, a shiver ran through Lomigos's entire body. He had seen a glimpse of the girl's hazel eyes hidden beneath her large hat.

"Stop! Don't lay a hand on her!" he shouted before thinking.

The pepper man stayed his sword without knowing why, but the girl showed no trace of fear.

Lomigos was now convinced. "That's the Dawn Witch!"

Everyone's focus immediately centered on Lacey.

The Dawn Witch Lacey, one of the members of the hero's party. The public believed her to be a tall, red-haired beauty, but Lomigos knew otherwise. The Dawn Witch had been engaged to Raymond Dejafaim.

It was mere coincidence that Lomigos knew what she looked like. One time when he was visiting the Dejafaim house as usual, he'd heard that Raymond's fiancée was present as well and had seen her in passing. That was before Lacey had set out on the quest to defeat the Demon King. Lomigos remembered her as a timid, gloomy child with black hair and scrawny limbs.

A few years had passed since then. She had grown taller and wasn't quite scrawny anymore, but her face still had traces of how it used to look. Her voluminous black hair billowed in the wind. Her powerful eyes vividly reminded Lomigos of something.

"Don't assume that what you want is the same as what everyone else wants."

Wayne Cielanic...! He had been the impertinent youth who had admonished Lomigos at that evening party. His lady-killer looks and sloping nose were infuriating.

Lomigos had restrained his emotions and acted deferentially, but the youth hadn't paid him any notice. He should have chased after him when he turned around and left, but the words and gaze of the slender, handsome man had left Lomigos unable to move, as if his legs were pinned to the spot. The youth had staggering gravitas.

The girl presently in front of Lomigos was exactly the same. She appeared to be no different than any other girl, but Lomigos couldn't budge his legs. He keenly understood that he was no match for her.

However, there were plenty of people who refused to acknowledge this. The pepper man was one of them.

"That's absurd! There's no way that this little girl is the Dawn Witch, a member of the hero's party!"

"I-I told you to stop!"

The pepper man ignored how Lomigos was frozen stiff and suddenly grabbed Lacey by the neck, lifting her slender body with ease.

* * *

"Ha. You really are nothing but a wench. Count Lomigos has lost his nerve..." The man laughed repeatedly, grabbing her collar and lifting her such that her tiptoes grazed the ground.

A long breath like a sigh came out of Lacey's mouth.

"Hm? Yee— Aaah— WAAAAAH!"

Lacey had uttered in a mere instant an incantation overlapped so many times that most people wouldn't be able to make it out. Just as the man raised his eyebrow dubiously, the hand with which he was holding her burst into flames.

The sudden fire, which had been caused by neither spark nor any obvious means of combustion, caused the man to abruptly let go of Lacey. The furious flames on his arms quickly died down, but there were scorch marks on his iron

gauntlets which shouldn't have been able to burn.

"Yeek..." The man let out an inarticulate cry and sank to his knees. Lacey coldly looked down at him. However, that wasn't the end of it.

Lacey solemnly regained her footing and gently stuck her staff into the ground.

A moment later, the ground split.

Cracks radiated out from where Lacey was standing. They briefly stopped growing, but then an instant later, dirt and rocks explosively went flying, and searing flames spurted out of the crevices. Fire blazed and scattered sparks all around her, but Lacey's expression remained serene, the hem of her clothes fluttering.

A wave of commotion spread among the soldiers.

"Leave this village."

This was a warning. She pointed her staff fixedly at the soldiers—and at the count who called himself Lomigos.

Lacey had made up her mind that if they fled, she wouldn't do anything more, but...

"Have at her, soldiers! A mage is defenseless while casting! Forward!"

Lomigos ordered, spittle flying from his mouth. Although they were shaken up, the soldiers got their horses that had been spooked by the flames under control and attempted to follow orders. Nobody wanted their weary murmurs of "I wish I had a choice about this" to be overheard.

"I already finished casting, you know." The majority of Lacey's magic didn't even need to be chanted.

All of the fire wound itself around Lacey's staff. The tornado of heat grew larger and coiled itself around like it was a dragon. When Lacey exhaled, the shock waves blew away her hat and the fire dragon opened its jaw, swallowing the noble and his soldiers and their screams as well. Then, at the very same time, the dragon dispersed like the wind.

"This is my final warning. Leave this village."

It had all been just an illusion. But it wouldn't be that way next time. Lacey was ready to take whatever risks were necessary to protect the others.

Though she hadn't inflicted any pain, she had instilled fear. A good number of soldiers slid off their horses onto the ground and just looked at Lacey in a daze.

Silence echoed.

"Yeek..." What broke it was the sound of fear twitching in someone's throat. "Aaah, waaah, eek... You monster...!"

It was a shriek from the man sunken down at Lacey's feet, the only one who had avoided the fire dragon.

She was used to both overhearing this and having it said directly to her face. The man screamed loudly and rattled in fear, dragging his rear against the dirt as he drew farther back. "W-Waaah!"

Lacey had thought that the troops were preparing themselves to face her, but taking their cue from the man, the rest of the soldiers quickly turned around, jumped on their horses, and sped away.

Lomigos watched this slack-jawed for a while, but then speedily tumbled after them. "W-Wait! Don't leave me! WAAAIT!"

"What, really?" What a disappointment that had been. Even low-level demonkin would've made for a better fight. "Oh. That's right, I have to put everything back the way it was."

While the flames that had swallowed the soldiers had been an illusion, everything else had been real. Lacey repaired the cracked earth in the blink of an eye and lowered the barrier she had placed around the villagers just in case.

"I'm sorry for startling you all," she said with a drained laugh. Then she noticed how they were acting.

Everyone was looking at Lacey with an eerily silent gaze—including Allen, who she had stood up for.

"That's the Dawn Witch!"

Lacey hadn't denied what Lomigos had said. That was basically the same as confirming it.

"Ah..." Maybe if I say I'm not, I can still change their minds. Feeling their attention on her, Lacey's expression stiffened. She anxiously bit her lip as she thought.

When she had first come to this village, she hadn't feared what anyone might say about her. Even if they learned that she was the famous Dawn Witch and became scared of her, only watching her from a distance, it wouldn't have concerned her. She probably wouldn't have cared any which way.

But in time, she realized that this was a terribly immature attitude. As she got closer to them, the more scared she was of them finding out. She was afraid of them abandoning her. It made her want to cry out at them, "Don't go away!" In the end, she was no better than a small child projecting her own feelings onto them. That was why she wanted to deny what had been said about her. She wasn't the Dawn Witch—it had all just been some misunderstanding on the noble's part.

"I—"

"It's not true." You can say it. It'll be fine. You're just an ordinary mage who can use a little bit of magic. So it's not true.

It isn't.

Don't be afraid.

"I'm sorry..." She meant to say "It's not true," but in a stupor, she mumbled this instead. It was like the words had slipped out on their own. She had apologized with an absent-minded look. Immediately, Lacey's face contorted and she gripped her staff tightly. Then...

"I'm sorry!"

She apologized nonetheless.

She just felt so guilty. The people of Plume Village had been kind to Lacey, but she had chosen not to tell them the truth, essentially lying to them and deceiving them.

Nobody said a word.

Lacey kept her head bowed amid the silence. She wasn't sure how much time

passed. To her, it felt like a very, very long time. But in reality, it wasn't very long at all.

Someone stretched a hand toward the hat which had blown off and fallen to the ground when Lacey used her magic. It was Allen.

"What are you sorry for?" he said like it was no big deal. But actually, the boy was desperately feigning calm. Allen gulped down the trembling in his throat and lifted his face, ready this time. "Big sis Lacey, we figured out that you were the Dawn Witch ages ago."

"Huh?"

"Of course we noticed. I mean, you're Lady Dana's friend and you're named Lacey. It would be a real stretch if we *couldn't* put two and two together. But since you didn't say anything, we reckoned that you had some reason for it, so we kept quiet."

Allen handed her the hat, and Lacey took it.

"You're already part of this village, big sis Lacey. We all talked it over and decided we wouldn't pry."

Lacey blinked.

Her expression made Allen burst out laughing. Then he faced her with a broad grin. "That's the first time I've seen you so mad. I was a little scared. But when I realized that you were getting mad for us, I was happy more than anything."

The villagers nodded in firm agreement with Allen.

"Ah..." Lacey hugged her hat tightly against her chest. "Wah..." Sobs issued from her throat. "Wuhhhhhh..."

Huge tears dripped from her eyes. She crumpled her hat as she held it against her, but her expression was even more crumpled. Tricia wearily stroked Lacey's small back and the twins spun around them.

She couldn't put what she was feeling into words. She sniffled and eventually crouched down. Above her, she could hear lots of voices.

"Of course we knew."

"You didn't hide it very well."

"C'mon, I said it'd be okay."

"Lacey, you dom't have to cry so much."

They were all so warm. Lacey couldn't stop the tears of relief from flowing.

"Anyway, did you see that noble running away? You could practically see his curly tail!" someone shouted, and the people around guffawed. With the ice now broken, everyone let out cheerful voices and laughed together.

"Way to go, Dawn Witch! No wonder you beat the Demon King! That noble's no biggie!"

"How about you get Miss Lacey to give you a butt-kicking too? Maybe that'll get you to behave better."

"Gimme a break!"

Who could have expected a day like this to come? Lacey's only purpose in life had been to hone her magic. But now she was here, amid the crowd. She kept wondering if it was just a dream. She wiped her tears and stood up. Lacey tried to laugh along with everyone, but her face just looked like she was smiling and crying at the same time.

"Hey, I just remembered. Do you think that brown-haired lad who comes around to Miss Lacey's place knows who she is?" Kargo tilted his head, musing aloud the question that had just popped into his head.

Another villager heard this and responded, "His hair isn't brown, it's black."

"No," Allen shook his head, "Big bro is blond, right?"

They'd had this conversation before. They were all referring to Wayne. While they made it sound like there were multiple Waynes, that wasn't the case, of course.



As they continued to talk, the villagers realized that none of them had a clear grasp of what Wayne's face looked like. Lacey wasn't sure if she should explain this and kept her mouth shut, but nonetheless they were gradually approaching the truth.

"Big sis Lacey is the Dawn Witch...so maybe he's..."

They had basically gotten it.

The villagers looked even more startled than they had been when they'd learned that Lacey was the Dawn Witch, and they all cried out in unison. Lacey didn't know what to say to them. This time, she was *really* in a pickle.

* * *

"Blast that...that wench!"

Around that time, Lomigos's short limbs were frantically digging in his stirrups and tugging the reins. He was quite heavyset for his size, but his horse had managed to make it to the dim forest as dusk set in, and his soldiers had followed after him.

Lacey, the Dawn Witch.

At a glance, she had seemed to be a perfectly average girl, excepting the anachronistic staff she was carrying. Yet upon coming face-to-face with her, Lomigos had broken into a cold sweat that was still dripping even once he'd left her presence. If nothing else, his ability to kiss up to his superiors was rivaled by none. That was also why he was extraordinarily adept at discerning who he shouldn't disobey.

So what if she's the country's greatest mage?!

Even so, though he understood this, his pride refused to stand for it. She was a girl, and what was more, she wasn't even a noble—she was a commoner child. He'd even heard that she was an orphan. She was the embodiment of everything he scorned. The farther his horse ran, the more Lomigos's memory reshaped itself into something more acceptable. He convinced himself that he hadn't run away from Plume Village with his tail between his legs—he'd simply rushed off to make preparations.

"Curses! Can't this lazy horse run any faster?!"

"L-Lord Lomigos, what do you intend to—"

"You imbecile! Do I even need to say?! The Dawn Witch may have an impressive title, but she's nothing but a little girl. We'll return to my manor immediately and send all the soldiers to raid Plume Village!"

"B-But milord!"

Lomigos ignored the soldier's pleas and spoke in a low growl. "I'll gain their allegiance by force and make her thoroughly regret having ever opposed me!" he snarled, shaking with rage as he pressed on past the irksome trees in the way.

Just then, Lomigos suddenly spotted a plain-looking man standing in his path. He was probably a traveler.

"Out of my way!"

He had intended to trample the man to death, but his horse bent back in resistance. It was lifting up its front hooves and rearing as if it didn't want to go any farther. It was acting entirely useless. Strangely enough, all the horses of the soldiers accompanying him came to an abrupt halt as well.

"Wh-What the— Keep going, damn you!" Lomigos's eyes contorted with animosity. It was as if even his horse were mocking him.

The traveler, who lacked any notable characteristics to an almost unnatural degree, simply watched. After furiously reprimanding his horse, Lomigos shouted at him in irritation. "Move it! Unless you have a death wish!"

"That's quite a rude greeting." In stark contrast to Lomigos's behavior, the traveler responded serenely. Something about him seemed very off.

He spoke almost as if he knew Lomigos, but the noble didn't recognize this man at all. Regardless of how few notable features he had, Lomigos had a good memory of people. That was how he had recognized Lacey despite having only met her once before.

"Who is this man?" he ground his teeth, his anger mounting all the more.

"Oh, I guess I didn't disengage my magic."

The very moment after the man swiped his palm over his face, Lomigos and his soldiers' eyes popped wide open. They were trembling in a different way than before. The man's appearance had changed in the blink of an eye. No, to be accurate, they were just able to see him properly now.

The man was acutely familiar to Lomigos.

"W-Wayne Cielanic?!" he gaped, then quickly corrected himself. "A-Ahem, I mean, the venerable hero?!"

Changing the way he addressed him at this point didn't make a difference to Wayne's expression. He had a terribly icy look on his face, striking sheer dread into Lomigos's heart.

Wayne calmly spoke to Lomigos and the soldiers behind him. "I told you before that if you assume that what you want is the same as what everyone else wants, it'll eventually lead to your downfall, Count Lomigos. From now on, keep your hands off of that village and Lacey."

"Wh-Wh-Wha— Aaagh!"

Lomigos was so shocked that he fell off his horse. Luckily, since he fell on his rear, a thick layer of fat prevented serious injury, but he wasn't concerned about that—instead, he was thinking as fast as he could.

Wayne had been using concealment magic. It was a kind of magic that distorted the viewer's perception of the user into the most plain-looking appearance they could imagine.

He was wearing normal traveler's attire, but Wayne had the natural bearing of a hero. Even when he was just standing there, he had such a massive presence that it weighed down on everyone else.

Lomigos's horse hadn't just been loath to go farther—it had been afraid of Wayne. The same went for the retinue of soldiers, and even Lomigos himself.

Lomigos stood up and grasped for the reins, but the horse had abandoned him and run off.

Lomigos's mouth gaped and he fell back on his rear end again, getting his clothes covered with mud. His face gradually grew red and he angrily shouted

out without any thought to relative status or circumstances.

"Y-You have no right to say that! You may be the hero, and that Lacey girl may have been your old companion, but that doesn't give you any right to tell me what to do! I'm going to use that village to make my comeback in high society!

All the nobles want to monopolize those Aster goods!"

"All the nobles?" Wayne looked at him with a scornful look, as if he didn't understand. Actually, perhaps it was a look of pity.

Lomigos burst into an angry sweat, his fury escalating to a fever pitch, and tried to stand up so he could bellow even more. It was then that Wayne took a letter out of his breast pocket and tossed it down in front of Lomigos.

"Special delivery from Duke Fylachtó to you. Give it a good look. Plume Village is under the duke's protection from now on. He already knows about the Aster goods too. You're butting in where you don't belong."

The wax seal pressed into the envelope was unmistakably the duke's.

"Wh-What's the meaning of this?"

"It means that there are other nobles besides you who wrongly think they should have total control over commoners."

Lomigos checked the contents of the letter and discovered that Wayne was telling the truth. He couldn't accept this. But he had no other choice. He thumped his fist against the ground, causing it to sting with pain.

No, I refuse to give up. According to this letter, only Plume Village is under the duke's protection. The Dawn Witch isn't included. If I find the right buyer, I can sell information about that wench settling down in that dingy village for a high price...!

"And just in case..." Just as Lomigos's lips had curved into a secret grin, Wayne soberly added to his statement. "The letter only states Plume Village, but the duke is aware that the Dawn Witch lives in Plume Village. You know what that means. Understand that if any rumors about the Dawn Witch start to spread in the capital, your welfare will be in jeopardy."

Lomigos shook. He'd been completely seen through. But in mere moments,

he would be struck with even greater fear.

As Lomigos sat on the ground and looked up at Wayne, he observed an entirely different look on the man's face.

"Lacey is a dear companion to me. I personally recommend not speaking a single word about her in the future. If *anything* happens to her, I will use every means at my disposal to make you regret it."

Wayne's frigid tone made Lomigos's teeth chatter.

"Now get lost."

At the hero's command, Lomigos and his soldiers scampered away like baby mice.

Wayne was the only one left standing there. The young man cracked his neck, loosened up his tense body, and slowly gave a long sigh.

* * *

Lacey's interactions with the villagers changed a little more after that.

Actually, they hadn't changed at all. Maybe it was just Lacey's reaction to them that changed.

When Wayne came to Plume Village after Lomigos ran away, he had been rather bewildered by the villagers calling him "hero," but he accepted it with an awkward smile.

Meanwhile, they were all concerned about Lomigos. He had been turned away by force, but given his attitude, there was a possibility that he would come back later to threaten them with an even more powerful army. One day passed, two days passed, and Lacey even tried going to the capital with Allen and Lanze as their bodyguard, but it was completely peaceful. Things had been settled so disturbingly easily that it actually felt rather anticlimactic.

However, that didn't stop the anxiety from building. Lacey had strengthened the village's defenses with her magic. Upon his return, Wayne had mysteriously reacted to this with, "I don't think there'll be any problems, but it's good to do these things just in case." This left a strange impression in Lacey's mind.

She was determined to beat any encroaching forces to a pulp next time if

anything happened. A month of vigilance quickly passed by. In due time, Lacey and the villagers' tension eased and they returned to a tranquil everyday life, but deep inside, she still felt a little conflicted as to whether things were really okay this way.

She wasn't complaining about the peace, though. Lacey looked up at the autumn-heralding sky and gave a prolonged exhale, blowing out a white puff of air. The sky's color was evocative of the season.

Nonetheless, the field behind Lacey's mansion was still overgrown with spring, summer, autumn, and winter plants all at once, making it distinctly *un*seasonal. Tee and Noi, acting as if *they* owned the garden as they defended the crops from wild animals and monsters, seemed to be busy all year round.

My fingers feel kind of cold. Maybe I'll try making gloves next, Lacey thought absentmindedly with a watering can in her hands, her breath turning white. All of a sudden, a bell chimed from the bag at her waist. It was the sound of the magic artifact that was linked to the mansion's door and told her when there were visitors.

Who is it? It's probably Allen, but it's around time for Wayne to come back again too. I wonder which one of them it is? But when Lacey answered the door, contrary to expectation, her visitor turned out to be a cute, tiny girl.

"Hello. I have a really big problem, so I'm here to get help from the anything shop. Hey, can you listen to what I want?" The girl cocked her head to the side.

"Huh? U-Umm..." Lacey faltered as she looked down at the girl. She was once again reminded of how bad she was at handling unexpected situations, but that wasn't important right now.

* * *

The girl was a resident of Plume Village. Lacey had seen her before when Yorma had abashedly tried to offer her popcorn and was promptly turned down. The girl's curly hair was tied into two ponytails and adorned with acorn accessories. They were probably handmade. She looked around the same age as Yorma and Reeve, so she must have been six or seven years old.

Lacey invited the girl in and she gracefully sat herself down on a chair.

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"Hello, I'm Ellie. My father is Theobald."
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They knew of each other, but they'd never introduced themselves. The name Theobald rang a bell. He ran the only smithy in the village.

Although the girl was young, she was still a client. Lacey wasn't sure whether to be tense or not. She was really at a loss. But thinking about it again, the girl was a client first and foremost.

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"U-Um, Miss Ellie, what's your problem?"

"Just call me Ellie."

"Er, Ellie..."
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And right off the bat, she'd annoyed the client.

Just recently, Allen had remade the anything shop's sign so that it was even more prominent. "The signs in the capital are really amazing. After I saw them, I felt like I had to make yours better," Allen had said with a toothy grin. His latest work was quite impressive. Lacey had felt that the original sign was already great, but the new one wasn't just engraved—the letters had been made more charming and it also had a decorative border.

Lacey was desperate to live up to the sign and secure this new client. She clenched her fists. "U-Um, Ellie. You said earlier that you have a problem. What is it?"

"Yes. It's a really big problem." The girl was so glum that even her ponytails seemed to be drooping. This would very likely be a challenging request, but Lacey vowed that she would get it done.

"Could you tell me more?" Lacey asked Ellie, leaning forward over the table.

Comforted by Lacey's intense expression, Ellie's mouth curved into a smile. "This is an anything shop, so I can ask for *anything*, right?"

"Of course," Lacey nodded firmly. Although progress had been gradual, she'd fulfilled a variety of client requests. Thus Lacey had gained a sliver of self-confidence.

[&]quot;Oh, you're so polite... I'm Lacey."

Reassured by this, Ellie revealed the details of her request. "Then I can ask you for romantic advice, right?!"

Lacey was immediately defeated.

Ellie wanted romantic advice.

Lacey incoherently mumbled. "That's kind of, um, I'm not really sure, well..."

"What's wrong, why are you drooping all of a sudden?! I thought you were the Dawn Witch?!" Ellie yelled. But even if Lacey agreed to listen to her woes, it was dubious that she'd be able to give any decent answers.

"What's the matter?! Now your face looks like you just ate something sour!"

Lacey could only sweat nervously. This already seemed to be outside of her scope. "Well, but, you see, ummmmmm..." she started to reply in a trembling whisper. Then she recalled that Ellie had specifically come to *her*. She didn't want to say no and send her away.

B-But really, what should I do? What can I do?

Lacey was already intimidated about whether she could help at all, but suddenly, a voice played in her mind.

"I think the foot bath did most of the job, but I think part of why I feel so refreshed is that I got to talk a lot with you."

That was what Dana had said to her.

"U-Um, if it's okay, can I start by listening to what you have to say?!"

If she had her staff out at the moment, she would probably be clenching it with both hands. Lacey had gone bright red after emphatically replying. Ellie blinked at her repeatedly with a blank look, then squeezed her brows close together in a scowl. She was a very expressive girl.

"Well of course! I want you to sit up close and tight and listen to me, one girl to another!" Ellie proclaimed. "All right, let's go! Right now!" Thus Lacey was dragged along out of the mansion.

Lacey's energy had been drained and she was now just going with the flow. Tee and Noi watched as she went, chirping and oinking as if to say, *Sounds like* "So listen, Lacey. I've got a crush on someone..."

"A-A crush?"

Ellie had told her bits and pieces along the way, but now she sounded like she was speaking another language altogether. Lacey set her chin in her hands and scoured her brain for this vocabulary word.

It was okay. She knew the definition. It was just so irrelevant to her experiences that she couldn't think of it off the top of her head.

While Lacey was holding hands with Ellie, lots of villagers had spoken to her pleasantly, but the Dawn Witch could hardly say that she was just getting pulled along by a small child.

She wondered where exactly they were going, but along the way, they met Allen's twin brothers.

When he saw Ellie, the blood rushed to Yorma's face. "E-E-E-E-E-E-Ellie! Great weather we're having!" He flapped his arms. Reeve seemed to consider this normal.

Aha, so that's the story here. Even Lacey grasped what was going on. S-So Ellie wants emotional support for her crush on Yorma...? But wait, maybe it's Reeve she's interested in...! If that's the case, what do I do? Who do I support?! She was shaken up.

But Ellie just curtly replied "It's cloudy today" and walked past Yorma without stopping.

"It's really great cloudy weather!" Yorma shouted from behind. He wasn't defeated, but it was still quite a pitiable sight.

How far are we going? Lacey noticed that the twins were tagging along behind them now. They sped on forward. This path seemed rather familiar, though. Of course, Lacey had been on all the roads in Plume Village by now, so it wasn't a matter of having traveled the road before or not. Instead, the route they were taking felt altogether *too* familiar.

They arrived at Sasanqua, where brilliant red camellias were blooming out front.

It can't be, right?

"Oh hey, you're gonna get lunch?" the twins innocently asked. Ellie ignored them.

Just then, Cedric happened to step out of the restaurant. His thin-rimmed glasses and combed-back grizzled hair were the same as ever. His build was as slender as his eyewear, and he was standing up tall and straight. He blinked when he saw Lacey and the children.

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"Oh, Lacey. Welcome."
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"H-Hello, Mr. Cedric."

"What brings you here? Care for some lunch?"

Cedric's tone of voice was one of the things that had changed since Lomigos's visit. Kargo, Granny, and the other villagers used to call her Miss Lacey, but now they were just calling her Lacey. This embarrassed her a lot, but it made her happy.

"No, well, I'm not exactly here for that... H-Huh?"

Ellie, who had just been pulling Lacey along and moving at a fast pace, was suddenly hiding behind her. Despite her efforts, Lacey was tiny enough that there wasn't much to hide behind and her ponytails were sticking out. Cedric had noticed, of course, and narrowed his bespectacled eyes with a contemplative hum.

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"U-U-U-Um, umm, I..."
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It was very cute to see Ellie go bright red. For one brief moment, she seemed endearing.

"I like you, Mr. Cedric!"

The small child dropped a devastating grenade. Yorma was hit by the shrapnel and collapsed to the ground, losing all strength. Reeve consolingly patted his back. Cedric opened his eyes wide, and Lacey almost felt like she was going to faint.

There was a heap of acorns piled in front of Lacey. This was Ellie's thank-you gift.

Ellie had confessed her love, which was an immense feat that not even Lacey had ever attempted. Cedric's response to it had been very mature. "I'm happy to hear that. Thank you."

This wasn't quite an answer, but rather an inoffensive statement of his feelings. Ellie was overjoyed. Yorma was deceased. Reeve pulled some popcorn out of nowhere and started munching.

"Hey Lacey, since he said he was happy, that means Mr. Cedric doesn't hate me, right?! Does he like me too?! What do you think?!" Ellie was a ball of excitement.

Meanwhile, Lacey could only respond with things like "I'm not sure" and "Maybe." She was frantically trying to think over everything and converse. All that came out were vague statements, but Ellie seemed to be satisfied nonetheless. She then began some kind of strange ritual.

"What are you doing there?" Lacey stared.

"Come on, Lacey, you're a mage! Don't you know fortune telling and stuff?" The girl gave a scandalized look and raised her shoulders.

Mages and fortune tellers were completely different professions, but it wasn't really important to mention that. "I don't," Lacey replied honestly.

Ellie puffed out her chest proudly and told her what it was. "This is how you tell if there's love in your future!"

According to Ellie, there was a charm where you plucked flower petals and said "he loves me" and "he loves me not" in alteration. Thus she and Lacey each picked up a flower stalk and divined whether they were loved or hated. Ellie was ecstatic each time she got "he loves me" and wanted to do the same thing once over just to be sure. When she got "he loves me not," she would get frustrated and keep on trying until she got "he loves me" again. For some reason, Lacey played along.

He loves me, he loves me not. He loves me, he loves me not. They kept saying the same words over and over so many times that Lacey felt like her head would explode. By the time they'd gathered a whole pile of flower petals on a plate, Ellie seemed to be tremendously satisfied. "Thanks! Here's your payment for the job!" she'd said as she gave Lacey a heap of acorns. Was she a wild animal or something?

"And the job was done before I knew it..."

All Lacey had really done was listen. Ellie had confessed to Cedric all on her own, and Lacey had just nodded along during their conversation.

Nonetheless, Ellie had been smiling.

Now that she was thinking about it, Lacey noticed that a smile graced her own lips as well. She was sure that if not for the day she'd spent with Dana, she wouldn't have been able to fulfill Ellie's request. This thought made her feel happy. She lay down on the table and kicked her legs.

"Phew..."

After wriggling for a little while, Lacey let out a small breath. She stifled her smile and then turned her head to the side. Pressing her cheek against the cool table helped her calm down.

Oh, I can use the petals from Ellie in a new sachet, she thought as she looked at the pile of petals. She then flicked an acorn by the rim of the plate with her fingertips. The acorn fell onto its side with a wobble and smoothly rolled around the table.

There were still a few flowers left that hadn't been plucked.

"He loves me."

There wasn't any real meaning to it. Still sprawled out on the table, she stretched out her arm and plucked off a petal.

"He loves me not."

She'd spent so much time with Ellie that the words just rolled off her tongue.

"He loves me."

There were still petals left.

"He loves me not."

Who, exactly?

"You're supposed to do it while thinking about the person you like," Ellie had told her with a warm, full-lipped smile.

The person I like...

Lacey hadn't ever thought about that before. She'd just been so focused on improving her magic skills. She had absorbed lots of knowledge that seemed like it would be necessary, but she'd discarded the rest. In truth, she might have been envious of the starry-eyed girls her age talking about love and had just intentionally averted her gaze from that kind of thing.

Ellie reminded Lacey a little bit of how she'd been when she was younger—although she'd never been that candid.

"Wayne."

For some reason, his name naturally flowed off her tongue. Lacey had been like this all the time lately. Usually, her head was totally occupied by an eagerness to come up with her next big invention, but whenever she zoned out while watering the garden or eating meals, she'd end up thinking about him. She was dying to know when she'd see him next.

Pluck, pluck. One by one, she tore off the petals.

"He loves me not."

At last, there was only one remaining. The words she would say in alternation were set.

"He lo—"

"Lacey, what are you doing?"

"Hwheh? Wah! E-e-e-AAAAAAH!"

She crashed across the table with a clamor and became covered in petals. Wayne watched this with knitted brows. Lacey was filled with a peculiar sense of embarrassment.

"What's going on? Are you making more sachets?"

"I-It was for a consultation with a new client!" Lacey said irately, with her voice raised louder than usual and tears in her eyes.

"A-All right." Although he was a little confused, Wayne went along with it.

Lacey was relieved that her excuse had worked. For the moment, she frantically fumbled over the table to hide the evidence of what she'd been doing. One of the petals fell onto the floor, and Wayne picked it up.

"A red flower, huh? That reminds me of that one nursery rhyme. There's a song about divining whether someone loves or hates you by plucking flower petals one by one."

"I-Is there?"

"Yeah. Never tried it myself, though. I don't think you would've either since you don't know the song."

"Well-"

She couldn't bring herself to tell Wayne that that was exactly what she'd just been doing. She flapped her mouth open and shut, rendered mute.

"Well, on a different subject..."

So she forcibly diverted the conversation. She desperately racked her brain for something else to distract him with. "Who sent you that letter you got before?!"

She was referring to the letter Wayne had received on the night of the popcorn party. *I mean, I've been curious about it, but is this really the topic to switch to?* Lacey internally lamented her own poor choice.

"Letter? Oh, you mean the one from Dana."

"What? It was from Dana?" She was surprised. Both by the fact that Wayne had told her so easily and by the unexpected sender. "Why did Dana send a letter to you, not to me?" she impulsively asked with some vanity.

Lacey and Dana had been periodically exchanging letters since their reunion. Since Dana was keeping contact with Lacey, it would be perfectly normal for her to be doing the same with Wayne, as her fellow companion on the quest.

"It was Dana, though? Huh..."

"Wait, hold on! Just for the record, that was a special case. We're not regularly in touch with each other," Wayne added, suddenly flustered.

"Mm-hmm...?"

It being a "special case" raised even more questions, but Wayne didn't seem willing to tell Lacey anything more than that.

* * *

The two of them cleaned off the petal-littered table and decided to enjoy their customary teatime together. However, they quickly found that there weren't any tea leaves. Thus, they went to buy more in the village and bought some food while they were at it before returning to the mansion.

As they strolled back along the road, Lacey looked up at the white clouds stretching across the winter sky. She said she'd carry half of the shopping baskets, but Wayne was holding on to all of them instead.

"Say, Wayne, are you not going to use concealment magic anymore?"

"Nope. Everyone knows already."

"Your face twitched a little when the shopkeeper called you 'hero' earlier. You did reply, though."

"I'm not really good with that stuff. But I guess they don't mean any harm by it. It's like a nickname." Wayne had gradually become accustomed to the way things were in Plume Village as well. Everyone had agreed to keep it a secret that the hero visited their community.

"Hey, are you sure the villagers will be okay?"

"How so?"

"I only come around once in a while, and you never know what threats might come from outside."

Wayne was aware of the incident with Lomigos. *That's probably why he's asking*, thought Lacey. *He's concerned about them*.

"They were all grinning at first, but I think that at heart they were still a little scared. Lately, it feels like they've been getting back their real smiles, little by little. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not."

Peace was a wonderful thing, but they couldn't let that be an excuse to avoid reality.

"I think it might be a good idea for me to talk with Duke Fylachtó personally."

If Lacey's magic artifacts attracted bad actors, then she would have to ask for protection from an even greater personage. Lacey had already escaped the fetters of the nation, and this was like asking to be chained up again. But weighed against the well-being of the villagers, she was ready and willing to sacrifice her freedom.

"The duke already knows about you. He knows that you're making those Aster-branded magic artifacts too."

"Huh? What?! I did have an audience with him when I moved into Plume, since I thought I should give him my regards, but he knows about the artifacts too?!"

"I told him about it, although I didn't really want to step on your toes. Things would've gotten problematic if you'd been the one to tell him, plus I was in a bit of a hurry. Sorry to tell you after the fact, I forgot to mention it."

"No, it's okay, I'm grateful to have one less thing to worry about..."

If the Dawn Witch petitioned the duke for protection, that would be equivalent to getting new chains clamped on her. Thus, Wayne had acted as an intermediary and arranged for just Plume Village's protection. He had carefully considered Lacey's desire to live freely.

Wayne made it all sound simple, but, in reality, it had been tremendously hectic. He'd learned from Dana's letter that there was a noble named Lomigos who was acting suspiciously, attended the social event to find out more, then personally gone straight to the duke to request an audience and negotiate things—and that was in addition to his regular duties. But he had no intention of telling Lacey about this, and he hadn't said anything until now because he wasn't sure how to break the news.

To sum it up, he had done a *lot* this time.

"That's good. That means the duke's given explicit approval for my magic artifacts too, right?"

"Yeah, he'll back you."

Lacey recalled that he was a man with an impressive beard that suited him well. It might be difficult considering her status, but Lacey internally said to herself that she'd like to thank him one day.

"Wayne, I'm sorry."

"You haven't done anything to apologize for. If you feel like you benefitted, then you should use the opposite expression."

"Thank you. I'm really grateful."

"All right, I'll accept that."

She smiled a little.

They went up the slope and approached the mansion. It was as though they were approaching the sky itself. The closer they got to the endless expanse, the warmer her body felt, until the coldness of her breath no longer bothered her.

A frosty wind blew across Lacey's cheek. At the same time, it lifted the brim of her hat and swept through her long black hair.

"Agh, it's getting all tangled!"

"Hold on, you're trying to comb it out, but that's just making it worse. Wait a second."

Wayne, who was walking a little ahead of Lacey, turned back. He set the groceries on the side of the road and the two of them sat down together on a convenient log.

Wayne's hands were much larger than Lacey's, but they deftly ran through her hair. Before, she'd been completely fine with him arranging her hair, but this time, she had her eyes squeezed tight. Wayne was just too close. The sound of her heartbeat was deafening.

"All done," Wayne told her.

There was a weird sensation, though. Something was stuck to her hair. Wondering what it was, Lacey opened her eyes and stretched up her fingers to feel it.

"Darn, you noticed?" His face had that occasional mischievous look. Wayne took it off and showed it to her. It was a hair accessory with sparkling blue gems.

"It's for you."

He handed it to her. Lacey rested it in her palm and tilted her head. She looked at it blankly, apparently deep in thought. Wayne, who was sitting stoutly next to her on the log with his arms folded, looked at the accessory along with her.

A bird flapped its wings in flight overhead. Clouds moved across the sky and vanished.

"...Why?!"

"Took you long enough to react," Wayne said with exasperation.



"I asked you before if there was anything you wanted. Although a bunch of stuff happened and I didn't get to hear your answer."

Lacey thought back. That had been around the time when Noi charged into the open fire. He'd definitely asked her, and she'd asked why he wanted to know. She had a feeling that he hadn't told her, though.

The accessory in her palm had small, lovely gems that looked like they'd been carved out of a chip of night sky. It was cute, and she liked it a lot. But she had no clue why he was giving it to her, so she wasn't sure how to react.

"It's a bit late, but it's a birthday present."

That was why it took her a while to understand what Wayne was saying.

A breeze swelled and shook the leaves of the trees as it passed through. It blew from the top of the slope down to the outskirts of the village, carrying with it the smell of winter.

Lacey had been born in autumn. She didn't know when exactly, since she was an orphan, so she would make a rough estimate and add a year onto her age whenever it felt right. She distinctly remembered telling Wayne about this during their quest.

Now that Wayne brought it up, she softly folded her fingers over the accessory. But still, she wasn't sure. It wasn't really sinking in.

"You're sixteen now, right? Congrats, Lacey."

A whole year had passed by before she knew it. When she'd first arrived in Plume Village, Lacey had only been fifteen. She hadn't known what she was capable of and was just walking down a path she couldn't see, one step at a time. Chilly winter had come around, it had warmed back up, and the seasons had completed another cycle.

"It's a wonderful present, but when my hat's on, it won't be visible..."

"You won't get self-conscious about it that way, right?"

"B-But it's so cute, that would be a waste!"

"Then maybe it's time for you to graduate from wearing the hat?"

She'd gained one year of age. That was all, and yet it gave her an inexorable feeling.

She hadn't been conscious of it at all before, but now that she'd realized, it was overwhelming. Something filled her chest and lodged in her throat, and an emotion that she was terrible at interpreting slowly came after.

"Wayne, thank you."

She was really, really happy.

The backs of her ears were burning up. The accessory—which she was carefully holding so as to not crush it—was cool to the touch, but her heart felt warm.

"Th-Thank you!"

She'd already said this, but she wanted to convey it better, so she spoke up and said it clearly.

"Sure thing," Wayne answered, sounding very unlike a highborn noble. He was feeling bashful.

"I-I want to celebrate your birthday too! Please!"

"Sorry, but it already happened way back."

"Huh?"

"So you can do it next year, all right?"

"Okay. I will!" she asserted, sitting bolt upright. Then Wayne and Lacey's eyes met. They were already both blushing and simultaneously averted their gazes, so neither of them noticed the other.

It occurred to Lacey that the year felt like it had passed by in a flash, and at the same time, it felt like it had lasted forever. She rewound her memories and recalled how she used to be. The Demon King had been defeated, their quest was over, and her companions had each gone their separate ways. While she hadn't said it out loud, she'd felt like everything was over for her.

That was why she'd asked Wayne to burn her trusty staff.

She would become the unloved wife of a noble and the mage Lacey would be

no more. Her fiancé had called her staff filthy, but since she could change its size, she could have easily smuggled it into her new home. But she had made the request of Wayne so she would be able to say goodbye to it as Lacey.

However, Wayne had refused. He'd eventually given in to her persistence and agreed. But as it turned out, he understood what Lacey valued most even better than she herself did.

"For the longest time, I had thought everything would be over once we defeated the Demon King."

"Hm?"

Because that was the only reason Lacey was allowed to live. She had thought that once her focus in life was gone, the world would just be dull and gray forever. That wasn't what reality had shown her, though.

"But it just doesn't end."

She breathed in the sharp smell of winter. She could picture that around now in her diverse garden, Tee was probably wearing a suit of leaves and riding around on Noi.

She could overlook the entire village from the slope. People no bigger than specks were laughing and moving around, and red camellia flowers were blooming all around as if guarding the village. It was just blissful daily life.

"Of course it doesn't." Wayne, whose nose was a little red from the cold air, rubbed the tip of it and spoke. "Life goes on until you die."

Something swelled up.

The world rapidly changed color from where Lacey was standing. Tiny buds raised their heads and burst open. Hundreds of vivid flowers blossomed, spreading out forever and ever and blanketing everything. It was a field of flowers as far as the eye could see.

Lacey was about to let out a cry of surprise and wonder. But then she blinked, and the landscape was completely ordinary, the same as ever. Of course it was. It had just been an unusual figment of her imagination. The world hadn't changed at all.

And yet, something about it felt different.

"Wayne, can you clip this accessory on for me again?"

"Okay, but you're sure it won't get in the way?"

"I'm sure."

Wayne slid it in so that it fastened her braided bangs. The accessory with blue gems matched Lacey's black hair well.

"How's it look?"

"Needless to say, cute."

This hero was smooth with the ladies. Lacey involuntarily gave an embarrassed smile.

Meanwhile, Wayne had just said what was on his mind. She usually reacted nonchalantly to him telling her that she was cute. *That's weird*, he thought to himself, turning the other way. It was like his heart had just been squeezed tight.

"Is something wrong, Wayne?"

"No, well, kinda, I dunno..."

Just then, the bell at Lacey's waist jingled. There was a visitor.

They were almost to the mansion now and hurriedly ran the rest of the way. When they arrived, Brooks was there carrying a huge bundle of luggage.

"Oh hey, Lacey! And you're here too, Wayne!" He laughed heartily. He was one of the party members who had defeated the Demon King alongside Lacey. The size of his body and the volume of his voice were both quite abnormal.

"I figured you'd be of age around now, Lacey! I brought lots of booze! Let's all drink!"

"Huh? Um, sorry, I appreciate the thought, but I'm not old enough yet..."

"Oh, you aren't! My bad! It's okay, at least Wayne's here to help!"

"Don't sign me up for that. Give us a heads-up before you come next time, all right?"

Brooks slapped his forehead and made a tremendous sound, but he laughed cheerfully. "Wa ha ha!" He meant it as a light "oops" gesture, but the force of the slap was strong enough to blow a shock wave across Lacey's and Wayne's foreheads too. In any case, Brooks had apparently come to celebrate Lacey's birthday as well.

Lacey was feeling a mix of gratitude and embarrassment. Just as she was about to quietly put her hat back on, a mini-dragon gently flew down from overhead.

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"Huh? A-Are you...Piana?!"
```

"Pyuu-ee!" Piana energetically responded. It flashed its emerald green scales and landed on Lacey's shoulder.

Piana was a mini-dragon who had been taking an exam to join the Dragon Postal Service. It had been distressed because its bag had been stolen by monsters. Piana was now much bigger than it had been half a year ago when Lacey met it, and the bag it had so carefully held on to was currently slung across it. The insignia of the tamer guild which ran the Postal Service was sewn onto it: a likeness of a dragon and a letter.

"Did you...pass the Postal Service exam?!" Lacey asked with surprise.

"Pyuu-eeeeee!" Piana answered with even more energy, spreading its wings out. That seemed to be a "yes."

"Wow!" Lacey exclaimed again.

Tee poked its head out of the mansion to see what was going on and then squawked with delight. "KWUUUUUH!" Tee and Piana were friends. The two of them rejoiced together, making "kwee kwee" and "pyuu-ee pyuu-ee" noises.

"So if you came all the way here, does that mean you're Lacey's personal postal dragon?" Wayne asked.

Piana nodded in response. Then it seemed to remember something and jumped down from Lacey's shoulder. It collected its strength and once again

[&]quot;Pyuu-ee-ee!"

[&]quot;Wah, wow! I haven't seen you in so long! You've gotten lots bigger!"

cried "Pyuu!" while energetically spreading its wings. The button on Piana's bag popped open and an envelope sprang out.

Lacey hurriedly grabbed the envelope with both hands. It was addressed to "Lacey Aster of Starseeking" in pretty, flowing handwriting.

"It's a letter for me?"

"Pyaah."

There must have been lots of envelopes tightly crammed in the bag. With a flutter of its wings, Piana took off with its stuffed-full bag in tow. There were lots of people waiting for it to deliver their letters.

"Kweeeeee! Kyew!"

"Thank you, Piana! And congratulations! Come and visit for fun next time!"

The mini-dragon was gone in an instant, but a soft wind carried its cry from the far reaches of the blue sky. Even after she couldn't see it anymore, Lacey held her breath and kept watching where it had been.

"So who's the letter from?"

Lacey blinked, then checked the sender with a little smile. "Dana. We've been in touch a lot lately," she told Wayne.

Nothing had ended.

It was just like Lacey's all-season garden. Flowers blossomed, and when they withered, new flowers sprang up from the scattered seeds.

Life goes on until you die.

But that was just another flower withering. Someone else would continue in their place.

"G-G-G-GRR-OOOINK?!!!"

"HEY! YOU'RE THAT WILD BOAR!!!"

While Lacey had been deep in thought, another emotional reunion had started to unfold.

Come to think of it, the last time he'd come, they hadn't seen each other

because Noi had been frantically staying away from Brooks. Brooks had initially brought Noi as a delicious gift. Enough time had passed that Noi apparently had let its guard down and made a careless blunder amid all the commotion.

"Brooks, don't eat him. Absolutely do *not* eat either of them. You understand?!"

"OKAY, LACEY, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT!!!"

"Kwee kwee kwee kwee!"

"Grr-ooooooooooink!"

The two creatures had started to sob from fright. Lacey felt sorry for them.

"Brooks, I hate to repeat myself, but turn down the volume," Wayne sighed.

Brooks turned to face him. "Whoops." He rubbed his neck. "Sorry about that, Lacey. If I get loud again...FEEL FREE TO HIT ME!!!"

"You know, if Dana were here right now, she'd knock you into the stratosphere."

Wayne and Brooks's typical exchange got a giggle out of Lacey. But she soon noticed that Tee was looking dejected at her feet.

"It's okay," she knelt down and told it. "Piana will come again for sure. When it does, we'll give it our best wishes."

"Kwee!"

* * *

A year had gone by since Lacey had come to Plume Village. The hands of time just kept on ticking. Long enough for a cowardly mini-dragon to become a full-fledged postal worker.

What did the next year have in store? And the year after that?

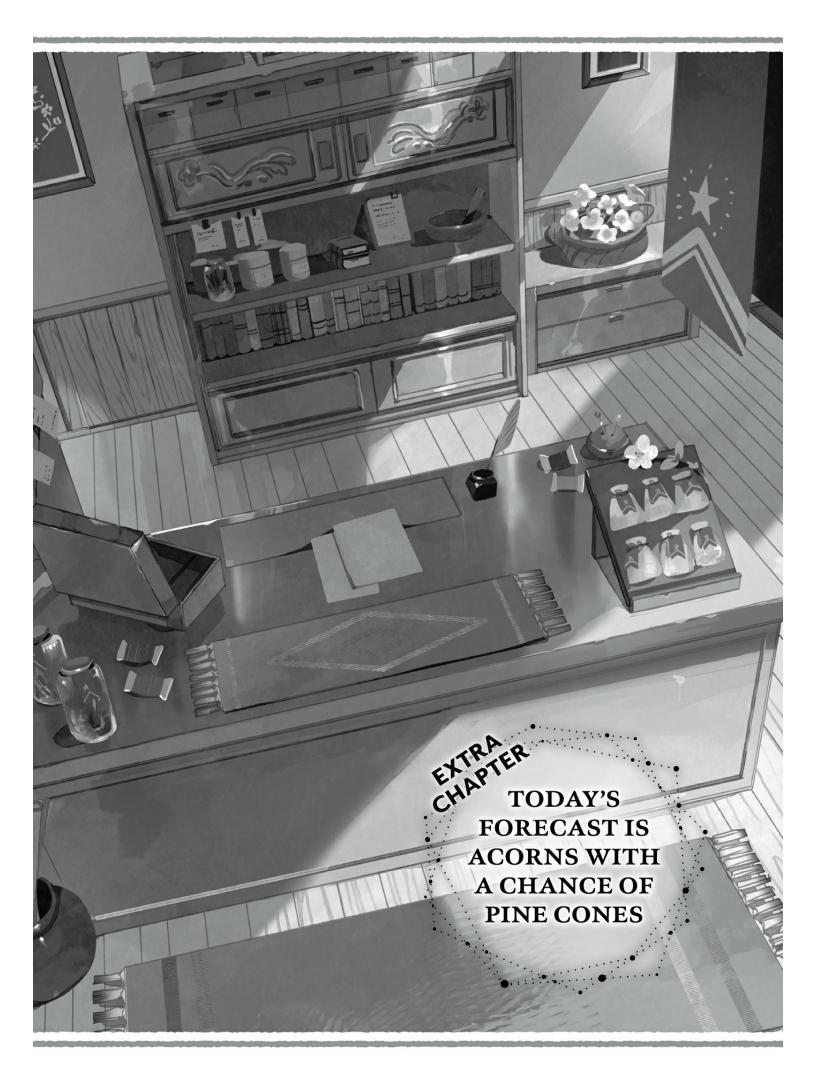
Thinking about it, there would be joyful days when she'd be too eager to sleep, and there would be unbearable days when she was anxious and scared. All of those changes would be dear to her, or so Lacey thought as she looked up at the sky. When she did, the hat she was wearing blew off in the wind.

"Ah..."

It had happened to catch an air current. It whirled around and rose up above the top of the slope, growing smaller and then disappearing completely. It made her a little sad. *But it's okay*. Lacey gently drew her fingers across her hair accessory, being careful not to mess up her neatened hair.

It was cool to the touch, but for some reason, it warmed her up inside. Lacey didn't understand why she felt that way yet. But one day, she would realize why.

Because she would keep on walking through the cycle of seasons and continue to write her own story.



Extra Chapter: Today's Forecast Is Acorns with a Chance of Pine Cones

Brooks had come to celebrate Lacey's birthday and drank tons of booze while boisterously laughing. Wayne accompanied him for just a little while. Lacey watched them with some envy as she sipped her own nonalcoholic beverage.

Time flies when you're having fun. Brooks stayed over at the mansion for the night, and the next morning, he yelled "MY DISCIPLES ARE WAITING FOR ME TO COME BACK!!!" and left.

He had come and gone in a whirlwind. Lacey and Wayne sent him on his way and then went down to the village. Brooks had eaten through all the food they'd bought the day before, so they needed to make another grocery run.

* * *

"Welcome, hero! Have a good time."

"Wow, it's the hero!"

Just walking around prompted greetings from adults and children alike. Wayne waved a hand to them with a strained smile. As usual in these cases, he had an embarrassed look on his face. Still, he wasn't getting crowded like he would be in the capital, so he seemed surprisingly comfortable.

Well, that's good, Lacey thought, but she was otherwise very agitated at the moment. Wayne was carrying everything they'd bought, so she'd at least stolen the bag of bread from him and was holding it tight. She couldn't tell if that warm sensation she was feeling was coming from the freshly baked bread or from her own neck.

A wintry wind was blowing past and making the air chilly, but Lacey was so weirdly nervous that she didn't even notice—the reason being that she didn't have her hat.

Furthermore, she'd had Wayne clip the accessory he'd given her onto her hair

again today. She almost wanted to scream for no reason or run away as fast as her legs could take her, but she gulped the feeling down and let the ponytail that Wayne had tied sway with each step.

It's okay. Everything's the same as normal. It's no big deal. There's nothing to worry about!

Just as she was telling herself this, Wayne spoke to her. "Hey, Lacey."

"Yeek!" She jumped up a little.

"Uh, I just wanted to say that the bread's still warm, so maybe you should keep the bag open."

"Y-You're right. It'll get soggy! It's okay. I know, I know."

"Hm?"

"Wh-What is it now?!" Lacey answered, a little teary-eyed as she flapped the bag open, and deplored her continued overreactions.

"Nothing, I was just wondering what she's doing there." Wayne, carrying bags in his arms, gestured with his chin toward what he was staring at. Lacey followed his gaze. There was a small, curly-haired girl squatting down and industriously moving her arms around.

"What are you up to, Miss Ellie?" Lacey slowly approached and called out to her.

Ellie's face snapped up. She patted the bottom of her skirt, stood up as tall as her short stature allowed, and huffed. "Oh, Lacey? Come on! I told you to just call me Ellie!"

"S-Sorry, Ellie..."

"I forgive you. Oh, the hero's with you too. Hello, hero." Ellie lifted up the hem of her skirt in a precocious little curtsy.

"Hello there," Wayne responded with a smile.

"So you want to know what I'm doing? Just take a look." Ellie, moving the conversation along at her own pace like usual, stretched her hand out and gestured toward their surroundings.

It was a completely ordinary road. It was a little distant from the center of town, so the houses were few and far between. Instead, there were a number of thick trees growing at the side of the road, and piles of crispy fallen leaves covered the ground.

"I'm looking for acorns." As she explained, Ellie's nostrils flared proudly and she bounced up and down a little. Her hair accessories were made out of acorns.

"Acorns..." Lacey then spontaneously repeated the word. "Huh? A-Acorns?"

"Yeah. It's a shame though. There's actually a better place where you can find tons of them. But it's a little far from the village and the monster wards are less effective there, so it's dangerous if you're not with an adult. My dad always goes along with me, but he's too busy today." Ellie gave an unhappy sigh and fingered the pouch that was strung over her shoulder.

Seeing this, Lacey thought for a moment. She looked right and left and then murmured. "Hmm..." Lastly, she turned around and looked up at Wayne, who nodded at her with an awkward smile.

"U-Um, Ellie, will any adult do?"

* * *

And so everyone gathered out front of Lacey's mansion.

Wayne and Lacey were there, of course, having unloaded their shopping bags at the mansion. There was Ellie, who'd met them with a dramatic arms-folded pose. Behind her was Yorma, making the same pose, and Reeve, who was cackling at them. Lastly, there was Allen, with an indescribable look on his face.

This was more people than they'd bargained for. It was quite a crowd.

"More people means we can gather more acorns!" Ellie asserted with her chest puffed out.

"Yeah!" agreed the lovestruck Yorma, sticking his arms out toward her and wiggling them.

"We're gonna go on a field trip and have a picnic, right? Heh heh, this is gonna be fun," Reeve giggled.

Allen bonked his head. "I'd feel bad about leaving you guys alone with these kids. Mr. Lanze is staying in the village today, so my parents said it's okay to come along."

"Okay. The more the merrier," Lacey consented. "Let's head out now."

Each of the children had a backpack. They'd gotten permission from their parents and come as fast as they could with packed lunches, figuring that it was better to go out earlier in the day. Wayne had similarly cooked up the ingredients they'd bought earlier into a packed lunch, bringing them to the present. Perhaps going on a picnic and gathering acorns were actually rather similar.

Lacey asked the children to lead the way and they departed from the hill that the mansion stood on. Tee and Noi stayed behind to guard the fields. Tee chirped "kwee kwee" as it watched them go, and Lacey waved a hand back to it. She then happened to notice that Allen was staring at Wayne with a complicated look on his face.

They proceeded whichever way that Ellie pointed toward, walking across gentle slopes with a clear view. This would make it easy to spot a monster before it attacked, which made it a relatively safe road for ordinary villagers. Nonetheless, Lacey and Wayne stayed vigilant under the fair sky and flanked the children as they walked along.

They ended up at a vast field of acorns. Of course, they couldn't actually be cultivated like that, but the whole place was so crammed with acorns buried among fallen leaves that it practically seemed like they had sprung up on the spot. The children shrieked with delight, stuck their hands up in the air, and charged on ahead. Lacey watched them, stunned.

"Ellie, take a look at this one! It's super shiny!"

"Heh heh! Who cares, you should see this one! Mine's got a cap!"

"Found one! It's a pine cone!"

One of the kids had already started to collect other items. *Oh well, as long as he's having fun,* Lacey thought with a warm smile. But Ellie swiftly came up to her and dragged her along by the hem of her clothes.

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"Huh? Um, aaah, wahhh..."
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"Why are you just watching? Start collecting, Lacey! We need as many hands as we can get!"

Lacey was getting pulled along so forcefully that her butt was sticking out ahead of the rest of her. "Wait, wait, Ellie! I can walk! I can walk on my own, so have mercy!"

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"All right. Okay, we're going to scavenge every last inch of this field!"

"Um, Ellie?"

"What is it?"
```

"This is a basic thing to ask, but what are we picking up acorns for?" Lacey inquired as she knelt down with Ellie and fiddled with an acorn she'd found. She was all too willing to help, but she wanted to know what the objective was.

If she didn't know what the end goal was, she wouldn't know what to do. From Lacey's perspective, it was a perfectly sensible question.

But Ellie blinked repeatedly. "Huh?" She seemed baffled that anyone would even ask this. She looked up at Lacey with her large, innocent eyes. "Well, they're *acorns!* Is there anyone in the world who doesn't love collecting acorns?"

"What, this is a worldwide phenomenon?"

Ellie made it sound as natural as the sun rising in the morning and the moon shining at night. But Lacey had never collected acorns before, not even once. She'd never even considered it.

Her memories of the past were a little gloomy. But she hadn't seen any need to tell Ellie about them before, so now she was at a loss for how to even bring it up. She flapped her mouth open and shut with a mixed look on her face, her eyebrows angled upward.

"Oh fine," Ellie then said with a pout and turned away, misinterpreting her expression. "Hmph. I guess adults don't understand what it feels like."

"What? Got a problem with that?"

"An a-adu— Me? You think I'm an-an adult? Hee hee. Eheheh, ha ha ha ha."

"Okay, I guess not," she said, after a pause. "But you're weirding me out."

"Ah, s-sorry." Lacey hurriedly pulled at her relaxed cheeks and lightly slapped them until they turned red.

Lacey was short, so she was often mistaken for being younger than she actually was. She didn't really mind that, but getting directly told that she seemed like an adult made her heart race. She'd never been told that before. It made her happy to experience a small sign of her growth.

But when she told Ellie the truth that she still wasn't an adult yet, the girl pouted again. "What are you talking about? I thought you came along here because you're an adult."

"Well... I thought it'd be okay since Wayne's here too."

"You're more of an adult than me, to say the least." Ellie then blushed. "I should've said it earlier, but thank you for bringing us."

"You're welcome..." Lacey answered, albeit with some faltering. Nonetheless, she tensed her hands, which rested on her knees.

"All right. Now I want to look for acorns too! Let's find lots of them!"

"That's the spirit!"

* * *

A short way away from the girls, one of the boys and the young man were staring vacantly at the fallen leaves, hanging out back-to-back.

Allen was keeping an ear out for his shrieking little brothers, but spoke to Wayne. "U-Um, hey."

"Hm? What is it?"

"Big bro...actually, big brother...that's not it either. Mr. Bro...yeah, no. H-Hero!"

"Wh-What?"

"I dunno what either, really. I just really don't know what I should do!" Allen spontaneously exclaimed, leaves crunching under his feet.

"Hey, come on," Wayne turned around, confused. "Do about what?"

"Well, I mean, it's just that...you're the famous hero," Allen blurted out with his face turned away, eyebrows furrowed.

"Yeah, true," Wayne said understandingly and bent down to look at him. It was a completely casual gesture from Wayne, but Allen blushed red and bit down hard on his lip, his fists trembling.

Noticing this, Wayne hurriedly rubbed the boy's back, trying to hide how he was acting from the others. "Sorry, that was my bad."

"Y-You look just like the portraits... Your voice is still the same as the big bro I know, but you look totally different. I just don't know what I should do."

"That's fair. I should've known you'd be at a loss."

"I know that if we had found out about you, there'd have been a big ruckus. But even though I more or less figured out that big sis was the Dawn Witch, I had no clue about you. 'Cause your face was different."

"Yeah, I didn't think about that. I can see that."

"And you're so good-looking that it pisses me off!"

"Not gonna comment on that."

Wayne repeatedly patted Allen's back. Allen pushed him away and stepped back. He fiercely wiped his tears with his sleeve and glared up at Wayne.

"So what am I supposed to call you, big bro?! Do I still just say 'big bro'?!"

Overhead, birds tweeted as they flitted through the air.

Wayne blinked, then laughed a little when he saw how red Allen's nose had gotten. "Yeah, of course you can stick with that."

* * *

Lacey turned around to see Allen shouting "Stop it!" at Wayne, who was pulling him and forcibly putting an arm over his shoulder. He was laughing louder than usual. *I wonder if something nice happened*, she wondered, tilting

her head.

The twins rushed over to their brother and Wayne picked them both up simultaneously, spinning them around. They were all getting covered with leaves.

Ellie, who had already filled her pouch full of acorns, got angry at them. "Sheesh!"

Next to her, Lacey began to feel like it was time for lunch and gazed off into the sky, lost in thought.

"This is the problem with boys. I wish they'd follow Mr. Cedric's example." Ellie paused, noticing her companion's expression. "Lacey? What's up?"

"I was just thinking that it's going to start raining soon."

Lacey was still looking up. Ellie emulated her and followed her gaze. Thin brown branches stretched up toward the blue sky. Fluffy white clouds floated past.

"I doubt it. The weather's fine."

"No, it'll rain." Lacey shook her head and spoke assuredly. "I can tell. I think Wayne's noticed too."

Glancing over, the cavorting boys had suddenly stopped and were now looking at the sky.

* * *

They put the acorn gathering on hold for the moment, and everyone started to snack on the lunches they'd brought along.

There were, of course, insulated thermal bags inside each child's backpack. As they filled their tummies with steaming hot bread and soup, rain started to sprinkle down onto the ground. They took cover in the hollow of a giant tree and listened to the sound of the rain gently falling.

"Ew, we're going to get drenched going home."

"It's okay. I think it'll let up soon."

"Really?" Ellie looked up at her with worry. Lacey nodded in response.

As the sound of the rain gradually grew more intense, fewer words were exchanged. But then one of the twins piped up. "Ah! The scales of the pine cone I picked up are closed again."

Reeve had quietly murmured this to himself all of a sudden, but the sound carried well in the rain.

"Maybe because it got wet? It'll open back up when it's dry," said Yorma.

"Oh," Reeve responded, staring at the pine cone in his palm.

Lacey recalled reading in a book once that pine cones closed on rainy days so that their seeds wouldn't get dispersed. She twirled her index finger.

"Wah!"

In the blink of an eye, the moisture was sucked away from the pine cone lying in Reeve's palm, making it dry out and open back up. The children trembled as they looked at the pine cone, completely shocked. Seeing their reactions, Lacey was struck by an impulse to play tricks.

She stole a glance at Wayne and recalled what had happened a year ago. When she had been crying, for reasons unknown, he had wiped her tears with magic. The tear droplets had floated and swirled in the air, as if telling her it was okay to live freely. He'd taught her that magic had more potential than just as a tool for fighting.

Just as he'd done then, Lacey waved her finger a little and made globules of water. Instead of tears, she used droplets of the rain that was coming down from above. The many drops grew larger each time they trickled down tree branches or plopped off leaves. They floated into the air and reflected the rainy landscape within them.

"Maybe the rain's not so bad after all," Ellie said softly. Lacey was happy to hear this.

Soon after that, the pouring rain cleared up, without a cloud remaining in the sky. As the group stepped out over wet leaves, they saw a huge rainbow stretching across the sky.

"It's so pretty," she mused out loud.

Wayne heard this and grinned. "All right. I can't make anything as impressive as you can, but..." He stretched out to one of the globules Lacey had made and clapped his hands over it. Then, when he slowly opened his hands up, the children let out shouts of excitement.

"Wow!"

The rainbow in the sky was reflected in the wobbling droplet. The children gathered around, clamoring at how amazing it was. Wayne crouched down to match their height. Even Allen was fidgeting and glancing over at him.

Lacey let out a sigh of admiration. "I really can't beat the original inventor."

"Hm?" Wayne glanced up at her from where he was sitting.

"Never mind," she shook her head and smiled.

* * *

Each child had their backpack stuffed full with more than enough acorns.

Thinking that this was probably a lot to carry, Lacey offered to ease the burden with magic. But Ellie refused with a look of pride. "The weight's good."

Winter days were short. In no time at all, the sunset was melting between the mountains in the distance. On their way back, there was a dense, lingering smell of rain, and everywhere was bathed in orange light. They had taken the same road on their way out, but it felt like they were walking through a completely different place. The grass that stretched as far as they could see glistened and swayed in the wind. It was like they were in a field of golden rice.

"Every time I see this place, I think about how pretty it is," Yorma commented. The twilight sky above was a chaotic blend of nighttime blue and sunset red.

The other twin was worn out from playing and was currently sleeping on Wayne's back. Allen had been carrying him earlier.

"But I bet that Lacey and Wayne got to see even prettier places when they were on their quest."

"Hey, Yorma. Call them big sis and big bro."

"I don't mind, Allen," Lacey assured.

"I do," Allen countered.

It wouldn't be long before they reached the village. The roof of Lacey's mansion was about the size of a thumb in the distance.

"Let me think," Wayne replied, adjusting Reeve on his back. At some point, Ellie had started walking alongside Wayne, grabbing onto the hem of his clothes.

Twilight continued to get darker. Tiny, ephemeral stars twinkled.

Wayne softly narrowed his eyes as he looked up at the sky. "They were all just as pretty as this."

* * *

By the time they'd dropped the children off at their homes, it was time to eat again. Wayne had apparently done advance prep for dinner before they'd left. He was so competent, it was almost frightening. Lacey made food for the monsters, and Wayne prepared their own meal.

While she was getting plates out from the cupboard, she called out to him over her shoulder. "Say, Wayne?"

"Yeah?" he answered, keeping his eyes on what he was doing. There was the sound of clattering tableware.

"We spent a year on the quest together. It wasn't all good times, but we went lots of places and experienced a lot of things. You said to Yorma that they were all the same. Do you really think so?"

They'd been through deep forests where no one else had tread, volcanoes with boiling hot lava, freezing tundras where the snow never ceased, and they'd even mounted dragons and traveled through the vast skies. The memories of her journey with her companions still vividly remained in Lacey's heart.

"Well..." He sounded like he was going to take a while to think, but his response was swift. "There was so much, I can't really rank them. Gathering acorns was a lot of fun too."

Even though she'd been the one asking, Lacey was happier than anything to hear him say this. After all, she felt the same way.

"But if I really had to say..."

That was why his next words gave her a jolt. She automatically turned around to look at Wayne.

Now she could see that he'd been looking in her direction for a while now. Wearing his occasional mischievous expression, his lips pointed into a smile. "The best part of it all was meeting you and our friends."

Lacey's breath stopped for a moment. Then she gave a wry smile and shrugged. "I agree."

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"Right? Okay, let's get to eating. Heeey!"

"Kwee!"

"Grr-oink!"
```

Tee and Noi came running in when they were called. They were so energetic that Wayne had to lift the plates he was holding away from them. "Whoa, careful!" This was a normal scene, but at times, Lacey found it to be irresistibly dear.

Lacey quietly rubbed the accessory she'd gotten from Wayne. She should've been nervous without her hat, but in time, those feelings slipped away and vanished.

Little by little, Lacey would continue to change. Still, there were things that would remain the same. She would feel happy at some times and scared at others, but she was still excited for what was to come.

Nonetheless, everything would be okay.

Lacey's Starseeking was just beginning.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Hyogo Amagasa. Thank you for picking up a copy of *Lacey Longs for Freedom*!

This is my fourth novel, but it's the first time I've had a volume 2 released. Even while I'm sitting here writing this afterword, I'm just so excited thinking about how I get to tell more of Lacey's story to you all.

As of this volume, Lacey gradually embarks on the path of an inventor. She interacts more with lots of characters who were only mentioned by name or didn't even have a name (such as the person with fox-like eyes) in the first volume. Lacey's world just keeps on getting bigger.

On a different subject, I bought rain boots recently. They're ivory-colored and go up to my ankles. I've been wanting them for a while now, but not desperately...so after a lot of shilly-shallying, I finally bought them.

Once I had them in my possession, I just couldn't wait for it to rain already. Then, when it rained at last and I excitedly sprang outside, something amazing happened: The boots got wet, but water didn't seep inside!

Hold on, that should be expected! *They're rain boots!* Well, I knew that as much myself, but I just couldn't help but be tickled pink while I was walking along the rainy sidewalk.

When I think of how life holds so many joys and pleasures I haven't experienced yet that randomly drop out of nowhere or are hiding in plain sight, I feel really happy. Lacey hesitates all the time, but I hope that she can gradually move along with Starseeking and find something important to her.

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. I kept barraging you with "What do you think about this, H? What about this? Or this?!" and you always responded with kindness and clear answers. I really owe you a lot.

To Kyouichi, who provided the illustrations. You're always creating gorgeous art at astounding speeds. I'm in awe of your professionalism.

Lastly, to the readers: Knowing that people are out there reading this is really encouraging. Your support is what fuels me!

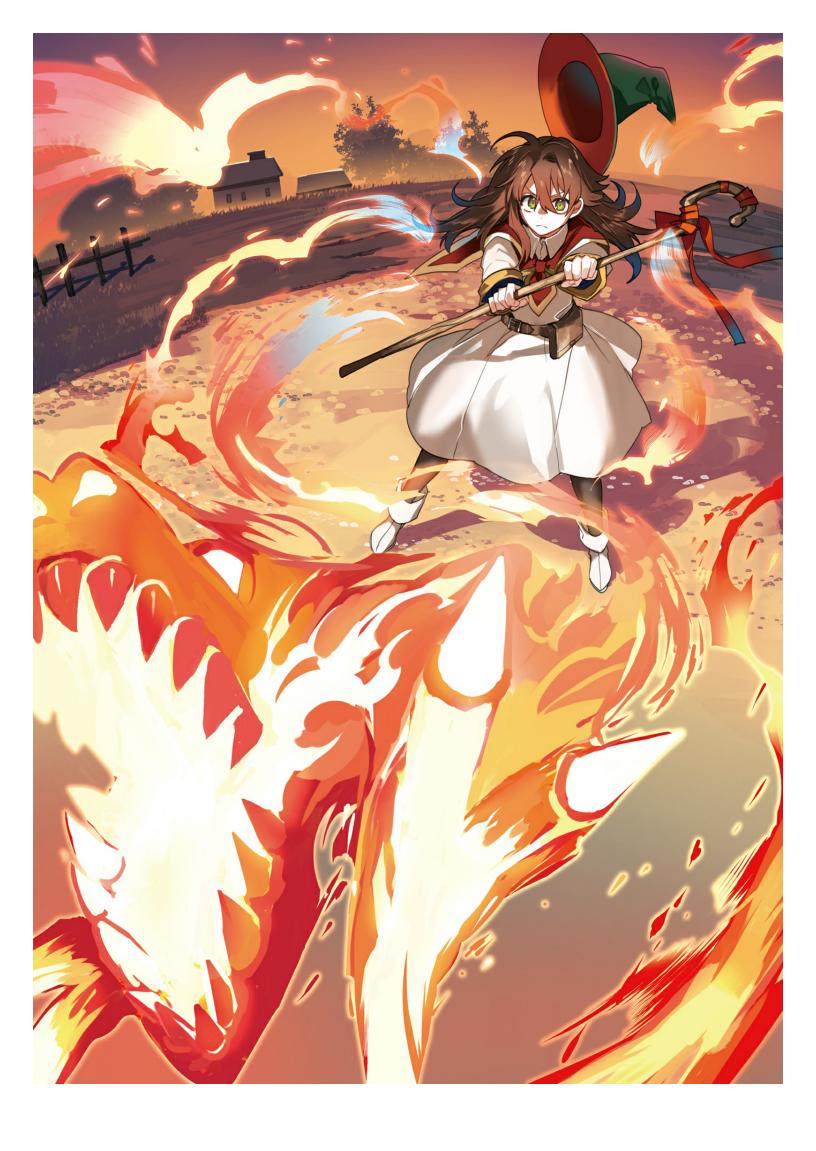
Thank you to everyone who was involved with this book. I look forward to when we can meet again.

—Hyogo Amagasa











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Lacey Longs for Freedom: The Dawn Witch's Low-Key Life after Defeating the Demon King Volume 2

by Hyogo Amagasa

Translated by Alex Honton Edited by Aldia Elwood

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