
Hyogo Amagasa
illust Kyouichi
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LACEY
LONGS FOR
FREEDOM
The Dawn Witch's Low-Key Life
after Defeating the Demon King


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"Could you help me come up with a fitting meal for my daughter's wedding?"
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The Dawn Witch's Low-Key Life after Defeating the Demon King


YORMA & REEVE
Allen's younger twin brothers
WAYNE CIELANIC
The former hero who enjoys taking care of Lacey
LACEY ASTER
The most powerful mage in the entire country. Also known as the Dawn Witch
NOI
A monster and Tee's friend
ELLIE
An energetic and stubborn girl
FOTIA (TEE)
A monster living with Lacey


“Your Highness, you will take the photographs. Capture the face of this country.”
Right then, a strong breeze blew.
The curtains billowed,
and Alicia’s dress swayed
from the sudden gust.

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Prologue: Sighs of a Certain Princess

A girl heaved a heavy sigh in her lavish room. She stared out her window, her arm resting on the windowsill as she gazed absentmindedly at the city proper in the distance. The city would soon be adorned all over with flowers to celebrate her very own wedding.

The girl's frown deepened as she looked away from the window. She had heard that couples had been holding celebratory weddings all over the city. Before she realized it, her grip on the windowsill had tightened. When she noticed, she shifted to fiddling with her hair.

I have no right to feel jealous toward them.

"Marriage, huh?" The girl twirled her pinkish-blonde hair and let out a subconscious mumble. She abruptly stopped fiddling with her hair, which was illuminated by the sunlight pouring in from the window.

"I don't even want to get married..." she muttered, but no one was around to hear her complaint, which promptly vanished into the void.

These were the sighs of a certain princess.

Chapter 1: Springtime Sasanqua Blooming in the Village

The spring breeze blew colorful petals all over, creating a trail in its wake. It was as if a carpet of flowers had been laid on the ground. Lacey looked troubled, wondering how things had gotten to this point.

It had scarcely been a year since Lacey had arrived at Plume Village. At first, this had been a small garden for growing herbs. She cultivated a barren patch of land and planted a handful of seeds. As she worked hard to till the garden, it soon escaped her control and grew on its own. Mana from the number one mage in all of Croix had seeped into the land she had cultivated, awakening seeds slumbering deep under the ground. These grew and grew until the plot of land was covered in exotic plants and gigantic trees that Lacey had never seen before. Now that spring had truly arrived, these plants, which had long lost track of the seasons, were now blooming profusely, expanding and bringing in more numbers.

Lacey loved this view, and seeing it made her expression loosen up.

"What a pleasant smell." She stooped down, her small hands gently scooping up a handful of flowers. Lacey Aster closed her hazel eyes, a big smile on her face. Before, she would hide her face with a huge hat. Now, her lush black hair was swaying freely in the wind. Her hair was decorated with a hair clip with a bird motif, adorned with a deep blue gem.

"Hey, Lacey!"

Suddenly, a voice called out to her. It was from a young man called Wayne Cielanic. His golden hair shone under the bright sunlight, and his green eyes bore a gentle expression. Yet his gorgeous appearance seemed to be a frequent source of grief for

him, as it ran counter to his actual temperament. He was the hero Lacey had traveled with for an entire year and who had taken great care of her during that time.

Wayne would occasionally come all the way from the capital to check on her. He was worried that he might find her dead if he left her alone for too long. Lacey now lived a proper lifestyle, but she used to be so frail that she might have faded away if no one had kept a close eye on her. She was never fussy about her living conditions—or rather, she just didn't care about them at all.

"Wayne!" Lacey turned around to make her way through the garden, but Wayne was already on his way to her. In some parts of the garden, the plants grew taller than Lacey, but Wayne made his way through without problems. Still, Lacey couldn't sit still and wait for him, and before she realized it, she ran toward him.

"Whoa! Why the rush? You might fall over!"

"H-Huh? Wh-Why... I-I'm not sure myself!"

I just felt like running when I saw you... was something she couldn't say out loud without making him feel awkward. Lacey took a deep breath to calm herself down, then carefully made her way to Wayne. In the meantime, Wayne put a hand on his chest to calm himself down, then smiled back at Lacey. Once they met up, each of them had their usual expressions on.

"Wayne, it's been a while. Two months, right?"

"Yeah, sounds about right. I've been kind of busy lately. You doing good?"

"Pretty great!"

"That's good to hear."

"How about you?"

"Not bad, not bad."

As the two of them made small talk, Lacey was bewildered at how fast her heart was beating. She tried to hide it by continuing the conversation, but she was no longer paying attention to what she was saying. She hoped that she wasn't blurting out anything strange. She was only vaguely aware of what was making her feel that way.

"I see you're using the hair clip," Wayne said.

Lacey bit her lip and averted her gaze. She suddenly wished that she still had her hat to hide her face. The hair clip was a gift from Wayne to celebrate her sixteenth birthday. A gorgeous, deep blue gemstone adorned the accessory. It was beautiful, as if the night sky itself were enclosed inside the jewel. Lacey could just hold it in her hand and stare at it all day. She felt that it was too precious to use, but at the same time, she had a great desire to have it adorn her hair. It was this tug-of-war between those feelings that made it difficult for her to get ready every morning.

What a twist of fate it was, then, that Wayne visited Lacey on the day she decided to go all out and wear the hair clip. She didn't want him to see her wearing it, but she also wanted him to see it on her. These contradictory feelings twisted and turned inside her head.

But other than those feelings, Lacey also felt an unusual emotion—irritation. She was here, tearing her hair out over her own appearance, but Wayne was here with a nonchalant expression on his face.

"It really does suit you," he said, laughing. This irritated her even more.

"Lacey, hold it right there," he said after a moment's hesitation.

"Okay."

"Why are you pointing your staff at me?"

"You're imagining it."

Normally, Lacey kept her staff inside her bag. It could change its size in response to her magic. The more Lacey focused her magic on it, the bigger it got. Moreover, increasing the size of her staff was another way to boost her concentration. This was one of the fruits of her training.

Wayne looked bewildered as he watched Lacey's staff grow bigger and bigger. "No, I'm definitely *not* imagining it! Why are you trying to blast me with your magic?!"



"I-I'm not sure wh-what's going on m-myself!" Lacey stammered. Her face was so hot that it felt like steam was popping out of her ears. She glared hard at her own hands gripping tightly onto her staff—hard enough that tears started to well from her eyes. Then, a pillar of fire erupted up into the sky, not from Lacey's staff, but from behind her.

"Kweeeeee!!!"

"Grr-oink! Grr-oink! Grr-oiiiink!!!"

"..."

"..."

Wayne and Lacey turned and found a boar and phoenix crying out with all their might. Tee was doing its best to light a single tree on fire while Noi was cheering from the sidelines. Lacey stared blankly, while Wayne, upon noticing the raging flames, immediately grabbed her shoulders and shielded her with his body. But while doing so, the strange sight of the two creatures caught his eye.

"What are those two doing, exactly?" Wayne asked.

"No idea." Lacey tilted her head in confusion. She noticed that her heartbeat had returned to normal and breathed a sigh of relief.

***

The Dawn Witch Lacey arrived at Plume Village a little over a year ago. She was an orphan who happened to possess a high aptitude for magic, leading to her dedicating her entire life so far to honing that skill. After defeating the Demon King alongside Wayne the hero and their comrades, she had no goals or dreams to follow, leading to her nearly getting married and becoming a trophy wife to a noble. It was Wayne who pushed her to acknowledge the thoughts and feelings she didn't even know that she had.

Now that she was free from her obligations to her nation, she was no longer the greatest mage in the country of Croix, but just "Lacey Aster." Her wish was to live and do as she pleased, and the first thing she did was start an "anything shop." She named her business "Starseeking" and managed to reconnect with her old friends along the way. She had grown stronger and more reliable

than ever. But still...

"G-Gyaah! No, no, no! That's too much fire! Everything's up in flames!" Lacey screamed as she watched the burning tree in shock and horror. She and Wayne had managed to reach Tee and Noi, and they ended up standing in a clearing with no vegetation in sight other than a single conifer tree. Tee had been focusing all its efforts into burning down that tree, opening its mouth as much as it could and breathing out as much fire as possible. It was a mystery how its tiny body could produce flames that were over ten times larger than itself. The fires danced and wrapped around the tree's leaves, completely covering them up to their tips.

Tee was a hatchling born from an egg left by a phoenix that Lacey rescued. It had accompanied her ever since her arrival at Plume Village, and it was now over a year old. However, this was not the time to be impressed by the gigantic flames it was breathing out.

Next to Tee was its best friend, Noi the wild boar. He was sitting calmly with a satisfied look on his face. Even the sharp fang jutting out of his mouth looked much less menacing—mild, even.

"This is not the time to be sitting around and enjoying a bonfire! What are you two doing?! H-Hey! Tee, come on!" Lacey yelled frantically.

"Lacey, calm down." Wayne stopped her from making her staff bigger. He gently grabbed her arms. Lacey thought that he would raise them up high, but he grabbed on to her waist and raised her whole body up instead. She felt like a baby in a parent's hands, but this was no time for such thoughts.

"Wh-What are you doing?"

"Sorry, reflex. Forget about that—look at that. The tree's on fire, but it's not burning. Do you know about fire-resistant trees?"

"Fire-resistant trees?"

It was the first time Lacey had ever seen one. They were trees that were completely immune to the effects of fire. Just as leaves gathered energy from sunlight, heat-resistant trees were able to use fire as a source of energy.

A variety of trees, plants, and herbs grew in Lacey's garden, and this tree that drew Tee's attention was just one of them. Thinking

about the irregularities growing in her own garden drew a frown to Lacey's face. However, this did not solve the mystery of why Tee was frantically blowing fire at the tree.

"Tee looks like it's in pain..."

Wayne had put Lacey down, but she still couldn't help but worry about Tee's condition. She kept looking back at the baby phoenix. It had its wings wide open, and its body was trembling. It was almost as if it didn't want to breathe fire, but it had to force itself to do so. Noi was doing his best to cheer Tee on. It was almost as if he were shouting words of encouragement at his friend. *They didn't need to push themselves so hard*, Lacey thought.

"I think Tee might be fire-breathing," Wayne suggested.

"Fire-breathing?" Lacey echoed.

"Yeah. You know how when babies are teething, they try to chew on anything they can get their hands on? Monsters that breathe fire have their fire-breathing organ around here." Wayne motioned toward his upper abdomen. "There's a period when it undergoes changes and starts to grow more powerful. It should happen once it grows into a mature phoenix, so maybe it's getting tummy aches from that. Or maybe it needs to breathe out all the fire that's stored inside."

"I see..."

"It looks like it chose the fire-resistant tree to breathe on. It would've been a problem if the flowers and herbs caught fire. It's even minding the direction of the wind."

Tee was blowing fire as hard as it could. The sight of its small, trembling body moved Lacey to tears. She realized that Tee had grown much bigger as of late. It had gotten pretty close in size to the phoenix that had entrusted Tee's egg to Lacey.

You've grown so big... Lacey nodded as tears welled in her eyes.

"Wait, this means that Tee is an adult phoenix now, right?" Lacey asked.

"Well, you could say that, yeah."

"Wh-Wh-What?! No way!" Even though Tee had grown bigger, Lacey couldn't help but feel that it was still a baby. Her eyes darted all over the place before looking at Wayne.

"Sh-Should I celebrate?! I haven't prepared anything!" Lacey's eyes shot wide open, and she gripped her staff tight.

"There's no rule that says you absolutely have to, but it might be nice to do that. Well, it might be hard to pull off a party immediately," Wayne said. Behind them, the tree was still ablaze. Each time the wind blew, it picked up the flames from Tee's powerful breath and also ruffled Lacey's long, black hair.

"I guess you're right," Lacey said.

"The fire-breathing phase shouldn't last for too long, maybe one or two days at most. It should calm down soon," Wayne assured her.

"Really? Tee looked like it was in pain, so I'm relieved to hear that."

"Oh yeah, Lacey, are you okay with me staying around here for a while?" Wayne asked.

"Sure. How long are you going to stay here?"

Wayne must have been waiting for the right time to say it. He paused for a bit before asking Lacey, who nodded in response. Usually, Wayne would stick around for a day or two. He always seemed to be quite busy and would often go back to the capital or leave for an expedition before long. According to Wayne, it wasn't that he had too much free time; it was that he spent all his free time visiting Plume Village.

Lacey was keenly aware of Wayne's busy schedule, so considering that he'd said that he would stick around for "a while," she wondered if he had managed to take a long break. A week, perhaps? In any case, this made her quite happy for him.

"About a month," Wayne answered.

"A-A month?!" Now *that* was quite long. Lacey floundered about before replying. "C-Could it be...?"

Wayne urged her to continue. Lacey gulped, then gave him a timid look. "D-Did you get fired?"

"Like hell I did."

It would seem that she had made a rude misunderstanding.

"I-I guess not. Your break's pretty long this time, huh?"

Wayne, as the former hero, was often tasked by the royal court to hunt down monsters that terrorized villages. It was a dangerous job,

so it should be a good thing that he managed to get a long break from it. But was it really?

"Wayne, are you really just on a break?" Lacey asked, worried about Wayne. He turned his head to her. "Did something happen? Did *you* do something?"

Lacey gestured to suggest that she was worried about his well-being, but Wayne kept his lips pursed and merely folded his arms in response. It seemed like he didn't want to discuss this matter any further. There was no point in prodding him, so Lacey gave up. Just then, Tee, who had been breathing fire nonstop behind them, suddenly lost consciousness and plopped down.

"Tee!" "Grr-oink!" Lacey and Noi cried out at the same time. Lacey hurried to pick up Tee, whose eyes were spinning.

"I-I think I should give it some medicine..."

Tee's usual meals consisted of the herbs that Lacey raised in her garden. She had no idea if that was appropriate food for a phoenix, but if Tee was hurting, this must be the right time to feed some to it.

"Let's see here..." Wayne snapped his fingers repeatedly right in front of Tee's face. Soon enough, Tee blinked. Then, rumbling sounds emanated from its stomach.

"The food's over there..." Lacey motioned with her hand.

"Kweee!" Tee jumped in excitement and dove straight into the field of herbs.

"Grr-oink!" Noi followed right after Tee. The two of them rolled into the field of plants over twice their size and happily gorged on the greens. They were quite energetic. Lacey and Wayne silently watched over the two beasts feasting.

The tree that Tee had set ablaze appeared to be unscathed. Its leaves looked healthy and seemed to reach up into the sky, as if they hadn't been enveloped in flames just moments earlier.

"These fire-resistant trees are incredible," Lacey marveled.

"They sure are. They can even grow in places infested with demonkin," Wayne mentioned.

"Wow..."

"Grr-oink! Grr-oink!"

"Mmmm... Kwelicious!"

"D-Did it just say 'delicious'?"

Tee's and Noi's appetites knew no end, so Lacey warned them not to overeat before she and Wayne left for the village.

Lacey's mansion was situated at the periphery of Plume Village. As they descended the small hill, the sky behind them appeared to be getting farther and farther away. On the other hand, whenever Lacey went back home, she always felt like she was approaching the sky. Her home might be far from the village, but she loved the scenery along the path.

"Wayne, if you're gonna be staying here for a whole month, we gotta greet the residents," Lacey said.

"Great idea. Let's do that." Wayne snapped his fingers, while Lacey mimed hiding behind a giant hat to hide her embarrassment. She became flustered upon realizing that she was still not used to not having her hat around and hid her face away.

The people of Plume Village already knew that Wayne was the hero. He had already visited the village multiple times, so everyone knew him, but this was the first time he'd be staying for a whole month. It would be a good idea to greet the residents like Allen or Kargo, along with the village elder. Lacey felt a little proud of herself for coming up with this idea. She felt like she had grown a little compared to when she was traveling with Wayne or when she had just arrived at the village.

"Heh... Greeting... Heh heh... Greetings..." Lacey mumbled.

"You're creeping me out," Wayne said. Lacey was getting more and more elated, and her smile was getting wider and wider. As they headed down into the village, Lacey somehow managed to suppress her huge grin. Lately, she had been getting a lot of opportunities to feel that she was becoming more mature.

"Wayne... I can't stop growing up... Heh heh..."

"I know. That's pretty great."

No one else was around to dispute this exchange. Wayne had complimented Lacey on her growth. However, whenever she received compliments, she started second-guessing herself.

"Wait a minute. Come to think of it, maybe I'm not that great after all..."

"Make up your mind."

"I can't be overconfident. That's the worst possible thing I could be right now. Don't be overconfident. Just don't..." Lacey's face scrunched up, and she started mumbling to herself. Wayne gave her a gentle, understanding glance.

"Lacey, you really *have* changed. And in a good way too. You've changed so much while I was gone that it honestly caught me off guard. You're also, um...a lot cuter than before. Hmm... Yeah. Well, um... I've found it hard to put it into words, and it's, uh, kind of embarrassing. I wonder why..."

"Oh hey, it's Cedric. I wonder if his shop is open."

"Don't ignore me."

Cedric was the owner of the village's one and only diner. He was in his forties. His well-groomed hair was adorned with streaks of white, and he wore glasses with thin frames. He appeared to be unfriendly or high-strung, but in reality, he was just an awkward man with a frank way of speaking, which Lacey figured out over time.

Cedric was at the restaurant Sasanqua, named after the imposing sasanqua tree growing on its premises. He had a grouchy expression on his face, which made the wrinkles on his face stand out even more. Lacey wondered if he was busy. His usual expression wasn't much different, so she found it difficult to tell. She started having second thoughts about calling out to him, but before she knew it, she had already given him the cheeriest greeting she could muster.

"Mr. Cedric, good morning!"

To interact with others, one must start with a greeting. Lacey was well aware of this, but in order for her mentality to keep up, she needed to take a deep breath, then push it all out. It was one thing to greet Wayne, but she was still on edge around Cedric. So when she started having second thoughts about greeting him, it was too late, and she had already blurted it out.

While Cedric heard Lacey and turned to them, he hardly took notice of her painstaking effort and instead gave them a wave.

"Why, if it isn't the great hero," Cedric greeted.

"Could you not call me that? Nice to see you again, Cedric,"

Wayne replied.

"Okay then, Wayne it is." A slight grin formed on Cedric's face as he corrected himself.

"Good morning to you too, Lacey." Cedric let out a gentle laugh. "Must be a good omen for my restaurant for the great Dawn Witch to come and visit this early."

This was the village where the Dawn Witch lived and where the great hero occasionally visited in secret. The residents already had an inkling that Lacey was the Dawn Witch, but they weren't aware that Wayne was the hero himself. Lacey could never forget the look of surprise from the villagers that he had fooled with his concealment magic. Once the villagers found out that Wayne was the hero, he had to put in some effort to put the nerves of some of the villagers at ease while around him. Now, the residents of Plume Village welcomed him as one of their own. On Lacey's part, she had to set aside the slight pang of envy she felt at the villagers' difference in treatment between the two of them.

"U-Um, I'm not really a fan of jokes like that!" Lacey blurted out.

"Really? I was being quite sincere, though."

"It's confusing when you tell jokes with such a straight face," Wayne pointed out. "Anyway, Cedric, what's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Hmm, I guess you could say that," Cedric replied with his usual deadpan yet friendly tone, but it was clear that something was different today. It was Wayne who asked, but even Lacey could tell.

Cedric continued. "It's a purely personal matter, though. I doubt it's anything that would interest you."

Cedric was holding a letter in his hand. He had taken it from his mailbox, and it seemed that he had just finished reading it. His house was only a few steps away from the mailbox, but he couldn't wait and ended up reading the whole thing while standing outside. It was definitely out of character for him, but that was just how much the sender mattered to him.

"Of course I'm interested. But we'll respect your wishes if you don't want to tell us about it," Lacey said.

"I'm quite rattled right now. I'd really like to talk to someone

about it. I'd be grateful if you two could listen to me. And if possible, I'd like some helpful advice as well."

Cedric remained expressionless, but his eyebrows were raised. It was hard to believe that he was actually rattled, but they'd just have to take his word for it. Cedric's emotions were difficult to read. He said that he wanted some advice, but Lacey had no idea what to say to him. Still, she couldn't just say no to anyone who needed help, especially not Cedric, to whom she felt indebted.

"You've helped Lacey out a lot while I'm not around. It's about time that we returned the favor. Leave it to us."

Those words had a different feel to them coming from Wayne. As usual, he played the part of Lacey's reliable guardian.

"Okay. Talking about it would be a huge load off my mind."

Lacey tightened her fist where Wayne and Cedric couldn't see. She tried to simulate what Cedric would ask for help with. Then, she imagined herself giving him a good answer. *I didn't think of that. Wonderful. Thanks, Lacey! Lacey, you're incredible.* She visualized getting praise from the two men and felt a smile form on her face. Indeed, Lacey had matured. Now was the perfect time to prove it to them.

Leave it to me! Lacey puffed out her flat chest. *No matter what the problem, I'll give you a clear and satisfying answer! After all, the everything shop Starseeking has experienced many trials and tribulations to get here!*

Of course, Lacey didn't say all those embarrassing things out loud. She waited expectantly for Cedric to talk about his worries with them. Lacey was unaware that Wayne had caught on to the strangely excited expression on her face. She took out her staff from her bag, which grew in size as she gripped it in her hands. Sometimes, her staff would respond to the changes in her emotional state as such.

Cedric showed the letter to the two of them. Lacey and Wayne couldn't quite make out the words, but they could see the clean and beautiful handwriting. It was probably from a woman. The two of them could glean the sender's kind and gentle personality from the strokes on the page.

"My daughter is getting married," he said.

Lacey blinked. Wayne peered at the piece of paper, then made the same face as Lacey. Then, the two of them stared at Cedric. *Daughter...*

"Daughter?!" the two of them shouted in unison.

Oh, right. Cedric made an expression that matched those words.

In any case, this was a problem that far exceeded anything Lacey had imagined. A huge, red cross mark had been drawn over the matured image of herself that she had in her mind. Her idealized self had been deflated and flattened. She had puffed out her chest in great confidence, then quickly fell back into her usual nervous and anxious thoughts. Her emotions were turbulent, but that was just Lacey's nature.

Neither Lacey nor Wayne were aware that Cedric had a daughter. When they pried for details, he told them that she lived in another village about three days away by carriage. Moreover, he hadn't seen her in years. Considering his age, it wouldn't have been strange for him to have a child or two in their teenage years or older. And if he had children, that meant that he must have had a partner—and Lacey wasn't sure if that was something appropriate to ask him about.

As Cedric ushered her and Wayne into the restaurant, he told them coolly, "I divorced with my wife a long time ago. There's nothing more to say. It's nothing unusual."

Lacey sat down at a table with Wayne sitting opposite her. Cedric had brought them two cups of orange juice, which he had set on the table. As part of his hospitality, the cups also had straws made of wheat in them. When Lacey drank the juice, she immediately felt refreshed by the cold beverage.

"So, what exactly is troubling you about your daughter?" Wayne went straight to the point, his elbow resting crudely on the table as his eyes followed Cedric performing his duties.

"Y-Yeah, about that..." Cedric, still carrying a tray, fumbled his words—unusual for him. Just as he said, it seemed that he really was rattled. "I was really shocked by the letter I got from my daughter just now... In it, she said that she was getting married in

two weeks."

"That... That really *is* quite sudden," Lacey said. She knew nothing about marriage. Despite having been engaged at one point, she had left all the preparations to her partner. Of course, Lacey was going to be married to a noble, so there were significant differences in circumstance, but she at least knew that two weeks was hardly enough time to prepare.

Maybe she just forgot to inform her father? Lacey wondered, but Wayne, who had been sipping on his straw, looking displeased, dispelled that notion with his next words.

"There's no doubt that this is because of Lady Alicia's wedding this spring. They'd announced that she was to be married off to a neighboring country a month from now. Having your wedding during the same season as Alicia's wouldn't be a problem if you were a noble, but commoners can't afford it. The city will be decorated with an abundance of flowers, which means that most people will be priced out of them for a while. And, of course, you can't have a wedding without flowers, so your daughter must have sped up their plans to account for that," he explained.

"Exactly," Cedric nodded. Lacey could only blink and listen to the explanation.

"Getting married has become a fad all over Croix because of Lady Alicia," Wayne said.

"Huh, really?"

"What do you mean, 'Huh, really?'" Wayne gave her the side-eye. "Lacey, sometimes you're so..."

Lacey took a sip of her drink. Come to think of it, she did notice that everyone in the village had been talking about the engagement and marriage of Croix's eldest princess for a while now. Alicia's marriage was a huge step in deepening ties with the kingdom's neighboring country. News this big shouldn't have come as a surprise.

While Lacey had an incident with the said princess right before leaving the capital, she bore no particular feelings toward her. In fact, she only just remembered the lovely princess with the lush, pinkish-blonde hair and hoped that she was doing well. After all, the

last time Lacey saw Alicia, the latter had been shedding tears of pain and sorrow.

"Anyway, forget about all that. The real problem is that my daughter wants me to be there," Cedric said.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Lacey wondered.

"Absolutely not. I haven't seen her in over ten years. How am I supposed to face her?"

"But she said that she wants to see you."

"Don't wanna."

What a childish response. What exactly does he want, then? If he didn't want to go, then he should just write back saying so. But then, Lacey got sad imagining the dejected look of his daughter, whose face she didn't know. Still, Lacey also couldn't push him too hard, considering that she knew nothing of his circumstances.

"But I still want to go."

Which is it? Cedric's mood shifted so quickly that Lacey had no idea how to respond to him. "I can't face my daughter, but I want to celebrate my daughter's happiness. When thinking about what I could do for her, though, I have nothing except cooking..."

Cedric must have been thinking hard while opening up to Lacey and Wayne. He sat down on a chair and kept going, his tone completely serious. "But Selene—oh, that's my daughter's name—she already knows everything about my cooking. She would instantly identify anything I cooked for her. It's been ten years, but that I'm completely, absolutely sure about," he declared, placing his elbows on the table and crossing his fingers, covering his mouth. "She's one of the biggest eaters I know, after all."

"She'll get mad at you," Lacey warned. *How could you say that about a lady?*

"I want to bring her my cooking. Then, I want to go to the wedding and blend in with the crowd to bless her. I don't want her to find out that it's my cooking, but anything I cook tastes like *I* cooked it..."

This problem was getting more and more complicated, but Lacey slowly managed to get the big picture. *What should I do?* Lacey felt a waterfall of sweat rushing down her back.

“Lacey, I need your help. I’m formally requesting Starseeking’s services. Could you help me come up with a fitting meal for my daughter’s wedding?” Cedric asked.

Lacey slurped down her orange juice with great force.

This is... Well...

Cedric’s gaze from behind his glasses was fixed on her. Next to him, Wayne was raising one of his eyebrows. After she had slurped down all that juice, the next thing Lacey swallowed was a heavy feeling that had welled up deep in her chest.

“I-I accept...”

Lacey felt the weight of the huge responsibility behind that request.

Of course, there was no such thing as a request without any responsibilities. They may differ in weight, but all of Lacey’s clients sought her for help with their problems. She couldn’t just decide to put in all her effort for one request and leave another hanging. However, this was a *wedding*. The number of weddings one has in a lifetime might vary between people, but for some, it was a once in a lifetime event. Lacey had never even met Cedric’s daughter, but she wanted it to be a wedding for everyone to remember.

“I have a friend at Melia Village where my daughter lives. I’m sure they’d let me borrow the kitchen for a while,” said Cedric.

Lacey and an apron-clad Cedric were mixing flour in the restaurant kitchen.

“Yikes!”

The kitchen was plastered all over with handwritten recipes, many of which were scribbled over.

“Uuugh...”

Lacey was well aware that she should avoid mixing the pound cake dough too much after putting in some flour.

“Aaaagh!”

“Why are you moaning so much?”

Lacey was so nervous that she could pass out any time. She wanted to slam her head into the mixing bowl she was holding in her hands.

You're so good at making things, so cooking shouldn't be too much of a problem. Cedric told her as much, but cooking and artifact-making were entirely different matters. While Lacey had been the one to envision the concept of "iced tea," all she did was come up with the idea. Thinking up a whole recipe from scratch was close to impossible.

Wayne would have been a more appropriate person to handle all this. After Lacey told Cedric that she wanted to take up the request, she had suggested in a very roundabout way that someone other than Starseeking would be better equipped to handle Cedric's problem. To that, Cedric said this:

"I don't need you to come up with a whole recipe. I just want a basic idea that can get me started. Rather than someone who's good at cooking, I need someone who can come up with something completely unique. In other words, that's you, Lacey."

Cedric was completely serious. His expectations were crushing.

They didn't have a whole lot of time on their hands. They needed to come up with a concept as soon as possible. Lacey thought that they would struggle to think of something, but it came pretty quickly and naturally. Their concept was "flowers." When it came to weddings in Croix, brides were heavily associated with flowers. Even small villages were adorned with them in all corners. In that case, why not make the food themed around flowers as well? Lacey suggested this to Cedric, who agreed with no reservations. Now they had to decide just how to execute that concept. Cedric's expression was the same as always, but Lacey was sure that he was as nervous as she was, if not even more. The number of recipes on top of the kitchen table that had been crossed out or scribbled over increased as time went on.

Lacey and Cedric weren't alone in this task.

"Mr. Cedric is in trouble! You two need to work harder!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes ma'am!"

Clang, clang. Sounds echoed outside the kitchen. There, an adorable girl with her hair tied in two neat pigtails was giving orders to twin boys. Lacey watched over the children as their guardian. A

sign was posted on the restaurant's door, informing customers that the shop was temporarily closed.

"Flowers! We have to think of all sorts of flowers! We have to come up with unique flowers for Mr. Cedric's dear daughter!" The girl, Ellie, was standing with her arms folded and legs spread wide.

Ellie was an energetic six-year-old girl living in Plume Village. Yorma and Reeve were twin brothers who lived in the neighborhood. Yorma was in love with Ellie, but Ellie only had eyes for Cedric. A complicated situation, for sure.

As for how the three children managed to find out about Cedric's request to Lacey, it was quite simple. When Lacey accepted Cedric's request, Wayne said, "I'm gonna go out and greet Granny and everyone in the village," and left Sasanqua. Then, he literally went out, visited every house, and greeted every single villager. The more he walked, the more curious children followed him around. Of course, Wayne was aware of the three kids trailing him; he just pretended not to notice.

After going around the village, Wayne went back to Sasanqua. A sign saying that the store was closed had been posted on the door. Ellie forgot that the three of them were supposed to be hiding, and she jumped out from the bushes.

"Wh-Wh-Why is Mr. Cedric's restaurant closed?! And why is Wayne going inside even though it's closed?! This is too suspicious!!!"

Hence, the current situation. The door hadn't been locked, so Ellie just barged into Sasanqua, with Yorma and Reeve following pensively behind her. The twins were gremlins who loved to play pranks, but Ellie was the most reckless out of the three.

However, Cedric wasn't the least bit surprised by the kids. He didn't even intend to hide in the first place, and he kept on mixing dough while explaining the situation to the children. Ellie was elated. Apparently, she already knew about Cedric's daughter. The children decided to help out. They brought materials such as paper and cloth from home and spread it over a restaurant table, and started to brainstorm the kind of flowers they wanted to be part of the design.

"Um, Mr. Cedric, is this okay with you?" Lacey asked. She was getting anxious, considering that they only had two weeks to be prepared, even less when considering the length of time they needed to travel.

"Of course. I welcome anyone who wants to celebrate my daughter's happiness, no matter how young they might be." It turned out that Cedric's generosity ran quite deep.

Right now, the restaurant Sasanqua's dining hall and kitchen were bustling with activity.

"They'll have the main course ready during the event, so we should focus on making something other than that. Also, it might be difficult for the bride to remember every single meal that would be served during the wedding, so we should make something eye-catching. So I think we should make dessert," Lacey said.

"Okay. What if we make it so that once the pound cake is cut, it would show a flower-shaped design?" Cedric suggested.

"It might be difficult for people to tell that it's a flower... Oh, what if I get flowers from my garden and use them as part of the recipe?"

"I'm grateful for the offer, but your flower garden is a bit...special. Also, I'm not trying to stand out here."

"Ah, you're right. We have to make something simple that we can recreate in the kitchen in Melia Village. On the off chance that it falls apart on the way, we won't be able to reconstruct it. It has to be something that we can make on the spot."

The discussion went on and on, but they couldn't find a satisfactory answer. It was the same for Ellie. Flowers were scattered all over the tables. The three children were slumped in their seats. Wayne had decided not to intervene and was merely watching over the kids all this time.

Wayne was someone who could *cook*. If he were to think up a recipe from scratch, Cedric wouldn't be able to make the food at all. Lacey had to be the one to come up with the idea, with Cedric the one to execute it. Though he didn't voice anything, Wayne seemed to have ideas on how to execute Lacey's concept.

"We've made so many of these paper flowers, but we can't eat any of them!" Ellie groaned. A large number of fancy-looking flowers

were scattered all over the table. It was difficult to tell, but they were all made of paper or cloth. The harsh reality of their situation made Ellie take out a stuffed bunny from her pouch, and she started to play with it aimlessly. The stuffed bunny smushed one of the paper flowers scattered on top of the table.

"Hey Yorma, what if we make a rainbow-colored flower? Doesn't that sound pretty?"

"Reeve, it's not enough for it to be pretty. It has to be something that can be eaten too."

The twins discussed listlessly between themselves.

"Why don't we all take a break?" Cedric sighed. Even the kind Cedric seemed to be exhausted. He put on his glasses with one hand and massaged his forehead with the other.

"We should have some sweets during times like these. Why don't I serve you guys the usual?" Cedric asked the kids and went out of the kitchen. In response, the three children shouted in delight. They waved their arms and flailed their legs about.

"Um, Cedric, what's 'the usual'?" Lacey asked.

"Something quick and simple. Just sit back and watch."

Cedric took out a small pot and threw a small magic stone into the stove. The children, who had seemed to be drained of energy up until a short moment ago, were shouting, "Can we enter?!" while stomping their feet in excitement.

"Okay, you kids can enter after washing your hands," Cedric said.

The children grabbed the towels from Cedric, and before long, they surrounded him. Even Wayne was standing in the kitchen, arms folded, as he watched the situation unfold from a corner of the room.

"I make this for the kids sometimes. It's a secret between all of us."

The three kids heard Cedric's words and giggled. Cedric poured water into the pot and added some sugar.

"We'll leave it alone for a while after putting in the sugar. But we have to keep the heat at a certain level. We have to be patient."

Soon, the water started bubbling. Then, the bubbling dispersed, and the water started turning golden. Cedric took the pot off the

heat, then poured the liquid onto a metal tray. The liquid shined like a precious stone.

"Now, we have to hurry before it hardens."



Finally, he placed small wooden sticks into the golden liquid. It only took a short moment for the golden liquid to solidify around the sticks.

Cedric skillfully peeled the sticks off the tray with a spatula. "Here you go. Have a bite," he said as he handed over the sticks to the children.

"Thank you, Mr. Cedric!" Ellie replied happily. Yorma and Reeve followed her lead and thanked Cedric after receiving their sticks. Lacey and Wayne followed and received sticks as well. The two observed the kids and copied them. They held the sticks in their hands and put the crystalline snacks into their mouths.

Lacey's eyes shot wide open and sparkled. "Th-This is delicious!" she exclaimed. The snacks were sweet, with a slight hint of bitterness.

"It's just candy. Nothing special," Cedric said as he broke a thin piece of candy in his mouth. A clean cracking sound could be heard as he bit into the snack.

It was mere candy, but it was a snack that could be made in large batches with little preparation time. There were still leftovers on the tray. They came in various shapes—some were round, some were oval, and some had their edges chipped off. The liquid sugar solidified while being poured, so they took the forms they had once cooled. This property reminded Lacey of some other material.

"It's kind of like clay."

"Reeve! Don't say things that would make everyone lose their appetite!" Yorma scolded him.

"But it's exactly like the things we were making on our table!"

Lacey didn't say it out loud, but she thought the exact same thing. Ellie had been making flowers out of paper while Reeve and Yorma were making them out of clay. They were building the flowers out of separate, smaller parts, then putting them together. Perhaps the children of Plume Village were just as crafty as the original makers of the plume accessories that gave the village its name.

"It's clay!" "No, it's not!" The twins went on with their argument. Lacey was watching them warmly when she suddenly got an idea. When she turned around, she saw that Cedric must have had the

same idea. His eyes were narrowed in deep thought behind his glasses.

"That might just work..." Cedric muttered. Suddenly, he started busying himself. Meanwhile, Lacey went to look for an hourglass. She figured that the recipe would need sensitive and detailed work, and it would be a race against time. They would need an accurate way of measuring time.

The children watched Lacey and Cedric frantically move around the kitchen, while Wayne was observing them with a difficult look on his face, his arms folded.

First, Cedric mixed red coloring into the candy liquid. He poured the mixture onto the tray and shaped it into petals. Next, he put the petals together to form a flower shape, started measuring the time, carefully set the temperature, and repeated the process several times.

Then... It failed.

"I thought the idea behind making the snacks out of sugar was pretty solid." Like the children earlier, an exhausted Cedric slumped down on a chair, staring at the ceiling. His glasses looked like they were about to fall off. Behind him, Ellie was repeating the motions of stretching out her hand to comfort Cedric, then pulling back out of hesitation.

"The mixture of water and sugar isn't malleable enough, so increasing the flexibility of the mixture is a must. And it should've been the right amount of time and heat as well. And the cooking utensils... There's no way that I should be making the candy in that pan. I have to use the tray to shape them. I even borrowed a sharp knife from Wayne to cut out the candies from the tray. But the problem comes after that."

Cedric's voice began to lower in tone and volume along with his body sinking into the chair. "My hands can't keep up with the precision needed for this. The candy crystallizes too quickly, so it has to be done while the mixture is still hot. I have to work fast, but my fingers can't handle the heat coming from the candy. Even if I manage to do it, they end up looking ugly. This isn't something I can

do overnight. At this rate, I won't be able to make anything worthy of being served at a wedding. Besides, my friend's kitchen at Melia Village probably—no, definitely won't look like mine. This work can't be done on anything except a flat object like a metal tray, and it has to be highly resistant to heat..."

Cedric took off his glasses and covered his eyes with his arms as he let out a big, long sigh.

Lacey could sense the frustration coming from Cedric's desire to celebrate his daughter's wedding. She could only grasp her chest and bite her lip.

Something's not right. But what...? Lacey couldn't shoo away the feeling of unease in her chest. Something felt different with this request, and it was something that she had never felt before. She had no idea how to proceed. She had experienced not being able to come up with an idea many times before. But it felt different this time around. Even when faced with a difficult request such as this, she should have been able to come up with several different ideas just by racking her brain. But this time, no matter how much she gave it thought, she felt like she was completely in the dark, grasping for a light that might not even exist. She couldn't come up with a recipe at all.

Wh-What should I do...?

Suddenly, Lacey started feeling like everything she had thought up until now was just a fluke and that she didn't have a single creative bone in her body. She started falling into a deep hole of thinking that she was actually useless and had no place in the world.

She was scared.

She was terrified of finding out that she was a completely worthless, powerless person.

"Mr. Cedric, I'm so sorry about failing to help..."

"Lacey, you don't need to apologize for anything. Besides, it's my job to think of recipes. I should be apologizing for taking up Ellie's, Reeve's, Yorma's, and Wayne's time." Cedric rushed to comfort the downcast Lacey. However, the air in the room remained gloomy.

Everyone went silent out of resignation. Everyone except Wayne. His green eyes were closed, but then he looked up and called out to

Lacey.

"Hey." Wayne was leaning against the wall with his arms folded—his usual pose. "Are you sure you should be thinking about recipes?"

"Wayne? What do you mean?" Lacey asked.

"We're no professional cooks. No matter how much we think, we won't be of any use to Cedric that way. Besides, he's on a completely different level from either of us. But Lacey, that's not what Cedric is asking from you, is it?"

Cedric's expression brightened upon hearing his name mentioned. Wayne looked straight at Lacey as he spoke. She slowly understood the meaning behind his words. He was right. That wasn't how Lacey wanted to help Cedric. *That wasn't what Lacey wanted to make.*

"I see now," Lacey muttered. Wayne's words pierced deep into her heart. Color started to return to her face. Wayne smiled upon seeing this. He was, at the core, a trickster who liked to see new things and enjoyed the expression of surprise on others.

"I got it. Thanks, Wayne!" Lacey exclaimed.

"Did you come up with something?"

"Of course!"

Lacey jumped out of her chair. Cedric and the children were taken by surprise. Wayne laughed at the sudden change of atmosphere inside the kitchen. Lacey was the kind of person who wanted to try out her ideas as soon as she could.

"Sorry, everyone! Mr. Cedric, please continue to practice making the candies!" she shouted. Lacey couldn't wait anymore and dashed out of Sasanqua.

"Lacey, what's going on with you?!"

"I was so shocked when you just ran out like that!"

"Yeah!"

Lacey looked apologetic as she tried to calm Ellie and the twins expressing their concern for her. The three of them, accompanied by Wayne, chased after her right as she ran out of Sasanqua. There were few places that Lacey could've gone. When asked about her destination, Wayne replied, "I'm not sure, but she might've gone back to her house." Right after that, the four of them went to look

for her. They ran straight up the hill on the way to the mansion, and now the kids were huffing and puffing, trying to catch their breath.

"What about Cedric?" Lacey asked.

"He said that he'd keep trying to make those flower candies," Ellie said. "'If Lacey managed to think of something, I have no time to waste moping. I should be polishing my skills even further so I can make it work,' he said. He's so cool!" Ellie did her best impression of Cedric, which was shockingly convincing. She had even slanted her eyes with her fingers to imitate his expression. Yorma, who had a crush on Ellie, clicked his tongue and looked upset, while Reeve clapped his hands and laughed at Ellie's performance. All seemed to be quite well.

"So, this is your garden?" Ellie asked.

"Yeah, that's right." Lacey nodded in response.

A marvelous field of herbs and flowers lay in front of the children. Lacey's home used to be feared as a cursed property by the villagers, so other than Yorma, Reeve, their older brother Allen, and the fox-eyed merchant Lanze, who occasionally visited Plume Village, people rarely visited the place. It must have been an unusual sight for the kids. They oohed and aahed and yelled in excitement at the sight of colorful flowers, as well as herbs and shoots that towered over their heads. Lacey couldn't help but giggle at the heartwarming sight. Wayne, ever the protective guardian, was making himself stand out less as he watched over the group from the sidelines.

Soon, two figures started running toward the frolicking children. It was Tee and Noi.

"Kwee!" Tee's stomach pains seemed to have settled down, and it was riding on Noi's back, acting like the protector of Lacey's garden. Despite knowing that these two creatures were monsters that followed Lacey around, the three children still couldn't help but be terrified at the sight of them.

"Kweee!"

"Grr-oiink!"

"Waah..."

The two creatures approached Yorma, who had stumbled and fallen on his butt. Tee and Noi looked down at the child menacingly.

Yorma couldn't help but shake in terror.

"Tee, is your tummy still hurting? Did the herbs work on you?" Lacey asked.

"Kwee, kwe-kwee kweee!"

You don't have to say that out loud! It seemed that Tee was trying to convey this to Lacey.

"T-Tummy? Do monsters get tummy aches too?"

"Ellie, you shouldn't ask things like that! Y-You'll make them angry!"

"Yorma, you're such a scaredy-cat! They're monsters, but the bird isn't even that big!"

Reeve was holding out his finger at Tee while clicking his tongue. *It's okay, I'm your friend!*

Tee reacted to Reeve's gesture, swaying its head left and right. Suddenly, it jumped off Noi's back and approached the children.

"Gyaaa!" The children all squealed and huddled together in fear.

"Oh Tee, that's enough, okay?" Lacey, troubled by Tee's behavior, scolded the bird.

"Lacey," Wayne called out to her. When she turned around, Lacey saw Wayne's gentle smiling face. She wondered why Wayne called her name. She turned to look at Tee and the kids once more and found the little phoenix waddling toward Ellie. Yorma attempted to shield the teary-eyed girl, but it seemed that Tee was looking at something else.

"Huh?" Yorma looked down and saw something peeking out of Ellie's pouch. It was an adorable stuffed bunny with its ears poking out of the bag. The toy had a fancy design made out of two different colors of cloth. Tee curiously poked at the bunny ears with its beak and let out a small cry.

Ellie blinked. "Wh-What is it? D-Do you want to play with this bunny? Oh my, you have an eye for toys!"

"Kweeh!" Tee squawked.

"My dad made this bunny for me! He's very skilled and just as cool as Mr. Cedric! That's why this bunny is the best toy ever! See, the colors look great, right?!"

"Kwee-kweeh!"

"You might be a monster, but we'll get along well! Okay, I'll let you play with it! Wah ha ha!"

"Kweoh!!!"

Seeing Ellie get along with Tee finally got the twins to relax. They seemed to have calmed down from the earlier commotion.

Kids sure make friends really quickly, Lacey mused. *Oh wait, Tee isn't a kid anymore, right?*

"Stuffed toy..." Lacey muttered.

Wayne looked at Lacey, then gently tapped her shoulder. "Hey, weren't you gonna try something?"

"Oh, right! We need to hurry!"

Lacey headed to her destination along with the two monsters. The group following her had grown and now included the children, Wayne, Tee, and Noi.

The group arrived at their destination—the fire-resistant tree. Earlier this morning, Tee had been frantically breathing fire at it. Despite having been assaulted with that much fire, its leaves remained a healthy green color. The tree looked imposing as it bathed under the sun's light.

"Why are we looking at this tree? I thought you were gonna come up with a dessert to serve at the wedding," Reeve wondered. He had been the one to mutter about the candy looking like clay. Yorma and Reeve might be identical twins, but it was Reeve who often spoke up first.

"Are we gonna eat this tree?" Yorma wondered.

"We're not. And we're not gonna use this tree as an ingredient. When I heard Wayne's words earlier, I realized that I don't have to do any cooking," Lacey said.

"Hmm?" The twins pouted in unison. Their clueless faces looked very similar to their older brother Allen. Lacey was sure that they would grow up to be fine boys like Allen someday.

"I shouldn't be thinking of making recipes. What I should be doing is making *things*. It's all I can do, after all. And it should be things that can help out with Mr. Cedric's work."

Lacey had misunderstood and thought her job was to come up with a recipe. She became terrified when she found herself stuck

and unable to think of anything. But now, things were different. She was excited to try out new things.

"I think I'm gonna need this fire-resistant tree... I need to know its properties. Tee, could you blow fire at this tree?"

Tee perked up at Lacey's request and jumped onto Noi's head. It flapped its wings, took a deep breath, and exhaled strong flames at the tree. A fire began to burn before the group.

"Aaaahh!!!" the children screamed in unison. Once Tee stopped blowing and the flames subsided, the tree remained standing there as if nothing had happened.

"See?"

"What do you mean, 'see'?!"

"Are you messing with us?!"

"Don't make fun of us just because we're kids! And that was dangerous!"

The children started yelling at Lacey angrily. She started backing away. Wayne remained silent, but from the look on his face, he was incredulous at Lacey's actions.

"W-Wait, let me explain!" It seemed that there was a misunderstanding. Lacey put up both of her hands to appease the kids. "I-I wasn't doing anything dangerous! This tree doesn't burn at all, so it won't cause a huge fire! O-Oh, right! Was there anything strange about the fire just now?"

When Wayne told Lacey about the fire-resistant tree, she intuitively understood that it was a tree that didn't burn even when subjected to fire. Still, there seemed something unusual about the whole thing. It wasn't a big deal at the time, so she didn't pay much attention to it, but now she was sure of it. That just *had* to be the case. Lacey nodded to herself.

The three children huddled close to each other, then turned to Lacey.

"Strange? Umm... Well, I didn't really see anything... What about you, Yorma?"

"Yeah... I was just shocked at all the fire burning."

"Actually, is there anything that's *not* strange about this?"

They were staring at Lacey as if *she* were a strange object. *Is she*

okay? was the thought painted all over their faces.

Lacey jumped in panic. "I-I'm making sense here, I swear! Come on, try to remember! There was a fire burning right in front of us, but—"

"It wasn't hot at all." Wayne, arms crossed, muttered from behind the children. The three children turned to look at him. "It was burning right in front of us, but I couldn't feel any heat coming from it."

"Yes, yes, that's it!" Lacey exclaimed.

The fire-resistant tree stood close to Lacey's garden. Despite that, the fire never spread to any flowers or herbs growing nearby. The only damage the plants took was from a hungry Tee and Noi gorging on them earlier that morning.

"Isn't that because the tree absorbed the heat from the fire?" Wayne asked.

"Maybe. But there was something else that was strange. Tee's flame was behaving oddly." Lacey turned her gaze toward Tee, who squawked in response. It was flapping its wings to remain in the air.

Tee's flames had enveloped the tree and its surroundings from the root to the tips of its leaves. At first, Lacey had thought that Tee was holding back to prevent the garden from burning down. Wayne even said that it might have been minding the direction of the wind, which seemed to have been the case. But Lacey also recalled turning around and getting shocked by the gigantic pillar of fire that reached up to the sky.

"I think the fire-resistant tree, rather than absorbing heat—"

Lacey approached the tree and laid her hand on one of its branches. It was, mysteriously, cool to the touch and felt silky smooth in her hand.

"—instead makes things more slippery."

Where had the heat and wind from Tee's flame been directed? It went through the tree's stem, branches, leaves, and then the sky. Indeed, the fire-resistant tree was, as its name suggested, resistant to fire, but rather than take on the heat directly, it channeled it away from itself. Lacey was sure that this property would be useful for Cedric's recipe for candy flowers.

"Sorry about this," Lacey muttered to the tree. She wanted one of its branches, but she couldn't reach it with her hands. She could use her magic, but Wayne was much more suited for cutting the branch from the base with absolute precision.

"Wayne?"

"Okay." Wayne seemed to have gotten Lacey's hint. They all heard the sound of his sword going back into its sheath. "I cut it off."

The branch fell in front of Lacey. The branch was cut off cleanly from the base.

"The sensation from cutting it definitely felt odd. I feel like I cut through air instead of a tree. Maybe it's a lot weaker to physical stress in exchange for being able to redirect nonsolid objects."

As Wayne muttered to himself, the children watching him trembled in fear. First they were terrified of Lacey; now, it was Wayne's turn. The kids had been moving around frantically since earlier.

"Waah! The hero's scary! The Dawn Witch is scary!"

"Reeve, don't run away without me!"

"You two are so lame! You call yourselves boys?!" Ellie stood firm and called out the twins, who had been pushing and shoving each other. Despite this, her mouth and legs were trembling.

"Y-Yeah! This is no big deal! We're gonna work hard for Mr. Cedric's sake!" Yorma pulled Reeve back forcefully, leading to the two of them falling over.

"Which side are you on?!" Reeve protested. He was being dragged by the legs by the other two. His entire body was now covered in dirt.

These kids are so lively. Lacey rarely interacted with kids. Before arriving at Plume Village, the only instances she could recall were kids staring at her sheepishly from the shadows whenever their group visited a town.

Actually, Lacey did manage to recall one time. A young girl went up to her, asking, "Do you know where Ms. Dawn Witch is?" While Lacey *was* the Dawn Witch, the public's image of the witch was not of Lacey, but of the mature, red-headed girl. She recalled the girl's rosy cheeks. The little girl was blinking cutely as she pulled on

Lacey's heavy robe.

The girl's mother pulled her child back before long, chiding the child for being rude to the hero's party. Lacey recalled regretting not having said anything to the child. She saw the child as small, soft, and fragile. She felt the child to be an existence far removed from herself, and couldn't manage to speak to her.

But now, things were different.

"It's gonna be okay!" Lacey's cry was much louder than she had anticipated. She might have shocked herself the most out of all of them. To hide this, she cried out even louder. "We're not gonna do anything scary anymore!"

Despite Lacey's pleas, the kids kept crying and yelling and running around. But Lacey kept going. "I'm so sorry for scaring you all! Sorry! We're gonna stop, okay?"

Lacey kept repeating this until the kids finally calmed down. While they were still wary of Lacey, they finally met her gaze. She let out a big sigh of relief, then spoke to them in a more gentle tone.

"We're sorry, okay? Tell us if something scary happens, okay? We'll be more careful from now on."

"Really?" Ellie asked.

Lacey nodded in reply. "Yeah, really."

"No more setting things on fire in front of us, okay?"

"That was from that cockatrice!"

"Kweh?!"

Reeve's expression lightened up as he whispered, while Yorma kept on arguing. They were still under the impression that Tee was a cockatrice, but it was actually a phoenix. There was no such thing as a red cockatrice, but the villagers who weren't adventurers had no way of knowing this.

"Also, no more bringing out that sword out of nowhere."

"Oh, um, sorry about that. I thought it would be less scary if I cut the tree without you guys seeing the sword. I'm so sorry. I promise that I won't do that again," Wayne said.

"Okay then!" It seemed that Ellie had also been upset at Wayne.

"We'll do our best not to scare you all next time. So... So—" Lacey struggled to voice out the next thing she wanted to say. She

took a deep breath, then blurted it out. “C-Could you three help us so Mr. Cedric can make some wonderful candiesh?!”

Lacey had crafted her words carefully, but she still stumbled over them toward the end.

The three children glanced at Lacey, then exchanged glances with each other. They all smiled, then one raised his fist, the other raised both hands up high, then the last puffed out her chest. Their replies varied, but they all said the same thing. Lacey couldn’t help but grin. Wayne followed suit. His expression was more difficult to puzzle out, but he let out a soft sigh and laughed quietly. He appeared to be quite relieved.

“Mr. Cedric’s biggest problems with making the candy flowers are that they’re too sticky to work with and too hot to handle. We have to solve these two issues,” Lacey explained. Wayne was holding on to the tree branch that he had just cut off. “But both the heat and the stickiness are needed so he can shape the candies into flowers. We can’t just change the recipe to remove those properties.”

“Yeah. Can’t make anything out of clay if it starts all hard and stuff,” Reeve said.

“Reeve is right,” Lacey affirmed. The softness enabled the candy to be shaped, and the quick crystallization meant that Cedric could make it in a short time. There was no need to change the recipe; therefore, Lacey would have to create a tool adaptable to those conditions.

“My goal will be to make tools to help Cedric make candy sculptures for his daughter—for Selene!” Lacey exclaimed.

“Huh... By the way, ‘candy sculpture’? That something you came up with?”

“They’re flowers sculpted out of candy, after all! I just wanted a catchy name for it. Is something strange about that, Reeve?”

“I’m not complaining or anything. It just stood out to me.”

“I think it sounds great!” Ellie exclaimed.

“I agree with Ellie!” Yorma shouted.

The kids were all excited. Now, it was time for Lacey to think of what kind of tool to make.

“First, I gotta figure out the place where Cedric would make the

candies. Right now, Cedric is using the equipment in his kitchen, but he can't bring all of that to the kitchen at Melia Village..."

Right now, Cedric was struggling with getting the correct flower shape for the candies, but he wouldn't even be able to start making them if he had no access to the right equipment. His request was to ensure his daughter didn't find out, so she had to make something lightweight.

In that case... Lacey had the group sit under the fire-resistant tree to brainstorm ideas.

"First, we need a cooking platform. Something that's lightweight and doesn't stick. And it needs to be strong enough to handle the heat of the candies."

"Th-That sounds tough..." Ellie groaned.

"But doable if I use the fire-resistant tree's parts."

It was almost time. Her patience was rewarded, as whitish fluid began bleeding out of the severed tree branch that Lacey was carrying. She needed this fluid. The children appeared to be grossed out, but Wayne raised an eyebrow, seemingly intrigued. He seemed to have figured out what she was trying to do.

"You're gonna use weapon enhancement?" he asked.

"That's right."

"What's weapon enhancement?" Reeve looked excited, while Yorma looked skeptical. However, Ellie had the strongest reaction. Come to think of it, she was the daughter of a blacksmith.

"I know, I know! That's when a weapon smith applies a desirable property to a weapon after it's been crafted! Adventurers often request those. Right?!" Ellie blurted out while raising her hand enthusiastically. She explained the concept to the twins while completely ignoring any potential qualms about seniority between the three of them.

Lacey giggled to affirm that Ellie was correct.

"Come to think of it, I've seen fire-resistant trees being turned into fire-resistant weapons before," Wayne recalled. "Right, right! An old blacksmith once told me that he extracted the fire-resistant tree's sap by snapping off a branch from the base. He would paint a weapon with the sap and let it dry."

"Oh yeah, I remember. That means this must be the same sap," Lacey concluded.

Monsters belonged to different attributes such as water, fire, wind, or earth. Outside of extraordinary circumstances like Lacey, a mage who could wield different attributes, or Wayne, a clever warrior who used magic to apply various attributes to his weapons, most adventurers switched to weapons with the appropriate attribute depending on the kind of monster they were trying to hunt. Weapon enhancement was a basic skill for adventurers, and there were many different ways to enhance a weapon depending on the attribute. Among those methods were secret techniques known only to a handful of smiths. However, enhancing a weapon with resistance to fire was one of the more common ones.

Lacey took out a small vial from her bag and filled it with the tree sap, taking care not to spill any.

Now, what's next?

"Fire-resistant tree sap being strong against flames is pretty well-known, but not many know about it making things slip. It might be because that property vanishes when applied to a sword's blade. We'll have to look for a material that's compatible with that property," Lacey said.

"And it has to be light and easy to carry, in addition to being nondescript..." Lacey nodded in agreement with Wayne's words. The children groaned at the difficult problem facing all of them. However, the three of them looked at Lacey with eyes filled with determination.

"That's why we'll have to try out a lot of different things starting today. We don't know what will work, so we'll have to test as many materials as we can. Everyone, please tell me if you find something that you think might work."

"Yeah!" They all let out a loud cry and raised their fists in support. It was a race against time.

If they could make the tool as soon as possible, Cedric would be able to practice more with it, and he would be able to focus on improving the candy recipe. Everyone in Lacey's group understood

that.

"Since we're using the fire-resistant tree's sap anyway, why not make the tool out of the tree's bark?" Wayne asked. The idea made sense, but as soon as they tried it out, Lacey scrapped the idea. The bark absorbed the sap, and there were no other changes to the material.

"What about cloth, then? We can find that anywhere, and it's easy to carry around!" Reeve suggested. When they tried it out, they discovered the tree sap didn't stick to the cloth. It merely filtered through the material and dripped straight to the ground.

Next were leaves, stone, water, and kwee kwee kwee. They tried all of these, and some came close, but none turned out to be the right fit. The kwee kwee kwee was an herb that Tee had brought to Lacey. However, its medicinal properties were too strong and it clashed with the tree sap's attributes. Upon finding out that it was a bust, Tee's tail drooped down gloomily.

"Aaagh, come on! Fine, how about we make flowers out of clay, paint the clay with the tree sap, then use it as a mold? Then we can brush it with the candy mixture!" Reeve yelled.

"Reeve, that's an interesting idea, but you're talking before you think again. You'll end up eating the clay too," Yorma chided him.

"I *know* that!"

But we're out of ideas! The twin brothers were thrashing about in frustration. The ground was littered with various materials that they'd tried out. The plan had been to try out the sap on as many things as possible, so the brothers went all the way to Sasanqua and brought back as many materials as they could. Now, the floor was covered in items such as clay, scraps of paper, and flowers.

"We need something more...unlikely. Something that we haven't tried, but is just close by..."

"Does something like that even exist?"

"It has to! Maybe... I think." Lacey tried to assuage Yorma's worries, but even her own confidence had dwindled to a tiny morsel.

Even Ellie must have been exhausted by now. She was rolling on the ground, raising the stem of a flower against the sun. Wayne had helped her make some of the paper flowers, which were so well

crafted that they hardly looked like they were made of paper.

"Brushing the candy mixture on clay, huh..." Ellie mumbled as she played around with the flower in her hand. Then, suddenly, she got up. Finding it strange, Lacey asked her if she was okay.

"I figured out something that we haven't tried!" Ellie exclaimed. When Lacey lent her ear to the idea, her eyes shot wide open. And when they tried her plan, it went exactly as they had theorized. The kids were jumping up and down in excitement.

That was definitely a blind spot for me... Lacey admitted to herself. She was frustrated at herself for not having thought of it sooner, but upon seeing Ellie and the twins crying out in excitement, all her frustration vanished into thin air.

"Thank you, everyone. The sun's already setting. Your parents must be worried, so you should all go home."

Back at Sasanqua, Cedric had been getting worried, wondering when they would all come back to the restaurant. Upon returning, he showed a bit of a smile upon seeing them. The rays of light from the sunset dyed the interior of the restaurant with orange light. It was no wonder that he was getting anxious.

"Mr. Cedric, don't worry about me! I already told daddy that I might be a bit late, and he said it was okay!" Ellie said.

"Us too! We weren't able to help with chores today, so we told big bro Allen that we'll work twice as hard tomorrow!"

"Yeah, twice as hard!"

Cedric couldn't help but feel puzzled about the way the kids were responding.

"I mean, we're so close to finishing! I don't like that we have to go home now!" Ellie pouted.

"So close to finishing what?" Cedric wondered.

"Cedric, we'll send the kids home, so you don't need to worry about them," Wayne assured him.

"Wayne, wait—"

Cedric, still confused about what was going on, was rubbing his hands together. On his palm were a number of burn marks. He must have been practicing candy making the whole time since Lacey and

the others left Sasanqua. And despite all that practice, the shape of the candies didn't come close to what he envisioned.

Lacey looked a bit dejected, but she pumped herself up. Like the kids said, they were very close to finishing. "Mr. Cedric, I'm done making the item you requested. Could you please take it?" she said.

"The item I requested?"

Cedric's request to Lacey was to help him come up with food that he could offer to his daughter's wedding. What Lacey made was not food, but a tool that Cedric could use in his cooking. Something to help him out.

"Paper?"

What Lacey handed over to Cedric was a smooth sheet of paper.

"A regular piece of paper? Wait. It feels different from usual."

"That's right. It's no ordinary piece of paper. But this time, Ellie came up with the idea, not me," Lacey said.

"Lacey! You should give me a cuter nickname! Like Little Miss Ellie!" She pouted, crossed her arms, and looked away, trying to hide her embarrassment. "Besides, I only suggested that we try out paper. Without Reeve's idea to make a flower out of clay, I wouldn't have remembered to try it out. And without Lacey, I wouldn't have known about the fire-resistant tree."

Ellie took in more air in her pouty cheeks, like her father's forge blower. Lacey thought everything she did was very cute.

Meanwhile, Cedric didn't completely understand what he was supposed to do with the paper given to him. Lacey turned to him to explain. "Mr. Cedric, why don't you use that paper to make the candy flowers?"

"Candy flowers?" he echoed.

"Umm... You know, the flowers made out of candy. Just thought to give it a catchy name..." Lacey suddenly started feeling embarrassed.

Cedric raised an eyebrow upon seeing her getting flustered. "Okay then. As the great Dawn Witch wishes."

"Please don't joke about that! I already said I don't like it!"

"Sorry, I didn't intend it to be one. I'm not gonna joke about it again." Lacey was just too straitlaced. Cedric smiled and went back

to the kitchen. Lacey's group was covered in filth, so they couldn't enter. They stayed at the restaurant's tables and watched Cedric go back to work. And then...

"What in the world did you make?" Cedric was far beyond surprised. He was completely dumbfounded, unable to comprehend what was happening before him. He had poured a hot candy mixture on the paper, but the mixture neither burned a hole through it nor did it stick. After seeing Cedric's confusion, everyone else clapped and made excited noises.

"Mr. Cedric, that paper is made so it doesn't stick or burn! We applied the sap of a fire-resistant tree to it!" Lacey exclaimed.

"And, and! Lacey was so cool! The paper had to be dried first, but it would've taken a while, so she used her wind magic to blow warm air over it! We managed to make so much!"

"Big bro Allen was right! Witches are amazing!"

"Witches? More like Lacey's amazing!"

Reeve and Yorma eagerly explained to Cedric what had happened, proud of Lacey's achievement, almost as if they had been the ones to perform it. Seeing them so excited made Lacey grab onto the rim of her hat out of habit, but then she remembered that her hat was no more. The only thing she could use to hide her face was her own two hands.

"A-All this praise..." Lacey muttered, her face completely red. "A-All this praise is m-making me so h-happy!"

"See? Getting praise *does* make you happy," Wayne muttered softly in response. He sent a warm gaze to Lacey, who got flustered. She cleared her throat and calmed herself down.

"A-Ahem. A-Anyway, Mr. Cedric, what do you think? Now you don't need a steel tray to make the candies. We made a whole lot of it, so you can use as much as you want."

"Mr. Cedric, isn't it amazing?! It's magic paper!"

"Reeve, that's such a lame name! It's used for cooking, so we should call it cooking paper!"

"You two are such kids! Don't you know that they call cooking 'culinary arts' in the capital? Clearly, we have to call it a culinary sheet!"

“Yeah! Ellie’s so right! You’re the best!!!”

“Yorma, the way you get so excited out of nowhere scares me sometimes...”

The children were all yelling out of excitement.

“H-How is it?” Lacey asked pensively. She thought that she had done a good job with the paper, but that didn’t mean that Cedric himself approved of it. He might think that she had overstepped or that she had done something that would get in his way. Despite having poured all her effort into making the sheet, she started getting anxious the moment she handed over the item. Lacey gulped as she awaited Cedric’s answer.

“Hmm, how should I say this...” Cedric said softly. Lacey started to visualize the worst outcomes in her head.

“Wait, that’s not it. Can you...wait for a moment?” Cedric gestured to Lacey with his palm, which was covered in burns. He used his other hand to take off his glasses. Then, he retreated his outstretched hand to rub the corners of his eyes.

“I’m not sure how to put this into words.” He took a deep breath and then exhaled. “No, that’s not it. First off, I have to say this.”

Cedric rubbed the back of his fist against his forehead. Then, Lacey heard the words escape his pursed lips. “Thank you,” he said.

Suddenly, Lacey felt as if a gentle breeze was blowing on her face. The gentle caress of the wind felt like it could go on forever. But there wasn’t any wind in the room, and there was no way it could have been blowing inside the restaurant. Cedric’s words surely weren’t aimed solely at her. But no matter how much she heard it, no matter how many times it had been said, she would always feel like crying upon hearing those words. Lacey quickly suppressed the feelings welling up within her and rubbed away the tears before anyone could notice.

“I’m very grateful for this. When faced with a problem that seemed impossible, you made a tool to help me out instead of completely changing the method I’ve been using. The solution seems so obvious now, but I wouldn’t have thought to do something like this. Now I just have to practice making the flowers like hell until the wedding day.”

"U-Um, about that!"

The culinary sheet wasn't the only thing that Lacey had to show Cedric. She took out a number of bottles from her bag, including a salve that could heal Cedric's burns. Wayne held the rest of the items that she couldn't fit.

"Th-There's *more*?" Cedric looked flabbergasted.

"Of course!" Lacey nodded eagerly.

Flower petals were scattered all over. It was as if a bright red flower had bloomed out of season. Lacey's breath was stolen away.

In Cedric's hand was a vivid red candy flower.

"It's beautiful..." Lacey muttered.

The red candy flower was so realistic that it could be mistaken for a real sasanqua. Lacey alternated her gaze between the flower and Cedric's face many times.

Cedric sighed and let out an awkward laugh after seeing Lacey's reaction. "Is it?"

"I-It's incredible... It's—It's almost like the real thing! But if you look closer, it looks like something made to look like a flower... But that's also fantastic in its own way! Wayne, what do you think?"

"Yeah. I'm vexed at how creative this is."

"And why exactly are you vexed...?"

"I'm vexed that he has me beat when it comes to creativity."

"At least you admit it..."

Lacey, Wayne, and Cedric were the only ones in Sasanqua's kitchen. A few days after their intense brainstorming session by the fire-resistant tree, Lacey had decided to visit Sasanqua in order to see how the "culinary paper"—as Ellie had so named it—was working out. And now, Cedric was showing them a candy flower—the fruit of his hours and hours of practice.

Wayne dismissed his remark to Lacey as a joke, but he had a competitive side when it came to cooking. He probably was at least half serious about what he said. Cedric seemed to have caught on to this. He laughed at their banter and placed the candy flower on the table. He gazed at his creation with kind, gentle eyes. Then, he reverted to his usual expression while waving one of his hands

around.

"I feel more confident in my work after hearing your praise, Wayne. But really, it's all thanks to these gloves," Cedric said.

"Really?!" Lacey asked. "I'm glad there weren't any issues with them. It's great to know that they're good enough for actual use."

Cedric was wearing the other "tool" that Lacey had given him on his hands.

"I'm very grateful to you, Lacey. You too Wayne. And the kids. I'm sure I wouldn't have been able to do anything on my own and would have ended up full of regret. Really, thank you." Cedric showered Lacey with words of gratitude and extended his hand for a handshake, but pulled back upon realizing that he still had the glove on. He took it off. It was thin and transparent, had a snug fit on Cedric's hand, and was quite elastic when stretched. The strange item was made out of the sap of the fire-resistant tree.

The extra item that Lacey had shown to a flabbergasted Cedric not long ago was a container filled with the sap of the fire-resistant tree. Lacey had him soak his hands in the sap. Once removed, his hands were covered with a strange film. As Lacey and the others kept brushing the tree sap onto various objects, they noticed that their hands became covered with the sticky substance. They realized that it might lead to something interesting if they let it dry, and when they did, they got the gloves as a result. The gloves were much more elastic compared to the culinary paper and produced completely different properties. It had lost its resistance to heat, but they figured that it made detailed work much easier compared to doing it with bare hands. It seemed that this was vindicated by Cedric's work.

"My fingerprints kept getting on the candy flowers while working on them with my bare hands. With these, I managed to make them into the shape I envisioned," Cedric said while smiling and gently balling his hand. Lacey nodded again and again in response while clasping her hands together.

Lacey had decided to name her new creation "cooking gloves."

"So, have you decided on what kind of flower to make?" Wayne cut in with an important question.

Cedric froze. While he had settled on making candy flowers, he still hadn't decided on the kind of flower he should make. He had made several samples, which were now lined up on the table. All looked wonderful to Lacey's eyes, but it seemed that Cedric felt that they were lacking. He decided to close up shop until he figured out the right flower for the wedding.

"Hmm... I think it has to be something elegant and eye-catching, something fit to be a present for the bride. I'm thinking of making it a rose. Roses look good, after all."

Indeed, the rose did stand out among the samples that Cedric had shown them. However, Lacey couldn't help but offer her opinion.

"Um, Mr. Cedric, I think a rose would be wonderful, but... Why not the sasanqua you showed us earlier?"

"Huh? No way." Cedric rejected the suggestion in an uncharacteristically loud voice. "I made that flower as a joke. If I gave my daughter a sasanqua, she would immediately figure out that it was from me. The whole point of giving her candy was so she wouldn't find out that I made it for her. If I made a flower with the same name as my restaurant, I might as well advertise that I made the thing."

Cedric was completely correct. But to Lacey, the sasanqua felt like the most fitting flower. When she looked at the candy flower again, she was attracted by its vivid red petals but also felt a fleeting beauty from them, as if they would vanish at any moment. The flower's stigma was intentionally left unpainted, which blurred the line between real and fake. This quality drew her eyes to it.

"Hmm, yeah. Roses it is," Cedric concluded. "I gotta get in as much practice as I can with the time I have left. I have so much work to do."

Despite Cedric's words, his face looked energetic and refreshed. He was enjoying himself despite the anxiety. Lacey could relate to the feeling of being so excited to the point of being unable to sleep. She would think endlessly of new methods, new techniques, and new ways to improve on her work.

Lacey exchanged glances with Wayne, and the two of them left Cedric alone so they wouldn't get in his way.

Cedric had somehow managed to create something that he was satisfied with right in time for the wedding. All's well that ends well, or so they say, but things hadn't ended just yet.

Lacey and Wayne were on the way to Sasanqua when they were taken aback by a loud noise coming from within the restaurant. The two of them rushed to open the door, and were greeted by the sight of cups and trays scattered all over the floor. Wondering what had happened, they soon realized the awkward situation that they had barged into.

Two strangers were inside the restaurant—a man and a woman—and they were face-to-face with Cedric, who stood there dumbfounded, staring straight at the woman's face. Lacey could surmise from his hands that he was the one who had dropped the cups and trays. The eyes behind his glasses were opened wide in shock.

The woman must have been in her twenties. Her body was slender, and her slanted eyes were quite similar to those of someone that Lacey knew quite well.

"Dad..."

D-Dad! Lacey and Wayne exchanged glances, wordlessly echoing to each other what they had just heard. In other words, this woman was Cedric's daughter, and the man with her was her husband.

Neither Lacey nor Wayne could say anything—or rather, they *shouldn't*. However, they couldn't just leave. They were stuck between a rock and a hard place. They decided to hold their breaths and do their best to act like they weren't there.

"Wh-Wh-Wh—" Cedric, who had just been addressed by Selene as "dad," was visibly agitated, his eyes darting all over. He was clearly not okay. "Y-Y-You must be mistaken!"

"There's no way I'm mistaken! I would never mistake my own father's restaurant!" Selene insisted.

"Y-You're in the wrong restaurant!" Cedric yelled. His excuses were pathetic. Lacey and Wayne stared at Cedric with eyes full of pity.

"Fine... What are you doing here, Selene?" Cedric seemed to

have given up the ruse. He pouted as he acknowledged his defeat.

"Dad, you're the one who left those flowers made of candy at my wedding, weren't you? So you *did* visit. Thank you."

"N-No way. What are you talking about?" Cedric's immediate denial might as well have given away the answer, but it seemed that he was adamant about denying his involvement.

Selene sighed out of exasperation rather than resignation. She put on an awkward smile. "At first glance, I didn't think it was from you. But when I tasted it, I instantly knew. You mixed in a bit of safflower to hide the taste, but it's the same old candy I've eaten so many times. There's no way I could mistake it."

Lacey was astonished. Cedric had been making candy for the kids in the village. Of *course* he would've also made candy for his daughter.

"I'm the biggest eater around here, after all. You can't hide your food from me, no matter how much you try!"

Cedric himself was the one who called his own daughter a big eater. He tried his best to hide his identity as the cook, but it seemed that his efforts were doomed from the moment he decided to send her food.

"Dad, thank you for coming to my wedding."

At first, Lacey thought that this request to Starseeking was a failure, but now, she considered it a great success. Until now, Cedric had his back turned away from his daughter to hide his face, but then, he started visibly trembling. He took a deep breath and exhaled. Then, he couldn't stop the tears from flowing anymore. He took off his glasses to wipe them away and started sobbing loudly. Selene joined him as well.

Words of gratitude connected one person to another. Lacey thought this was a beautiful thing.

Cedric had snuck into Selene's wedding so that his daughter wouldn't see him there, but his daughter's desire to have him see her in her wedding dress had spread to the entirety of Plume Village. The villagers had decided that Cedric's daughter deserved that much, and soon enough, a second wedding was held for Selene.

Lacey could hear the villagers' voices filled with warmth and hospitality. She could see the villagers enjoying themselves all the way from up the hill where her home stood, away from the village. The sasanquas had long since fallen and withered away, but she could clearly see the lively decorations of the wedding ceremony from where she stood.

"You're not going?"

"Wayne, you should go there."

"I don't see the point in me being there if *you're* not going," Wayne said, laughing right behind Lacey. She turned to face him with a pouty look on her face, then turned her back once more. She used her bangs to hide her face and spoke in a low tone.

"I mean, you're the hero and all... Meanwhile, I'm...like *this.* I keep wondering if an outsider like me should even be there. I just can't help it."

Weddings were a very important celebration. Lacey hated herself for thinking that she didn't belong in such an event. She recalled a time during their travels when their party stopped by a village where a wedding was being held. When they invited the hero Wayne's party to their event, Lacey ran away and hid. All this time, she had been running away from having to interact with others. She was scared—or rather, she thought that everything other than honing her own magic was unnecessary. She had never once thought about these things, so she knew nothing of them.

Upon seeing Cedric wanting to celebrate his own daughter's wedding and watching Ellie, Reeve, and Yorma do their best to help him out, she finally realized what she had been missing.

"It's wonderful to see a family grow," she said. The words she had just spoken rippled throughout her heart. A warm feeling spread through her body, like gentle waves passing through her. "I want to celebrate with them. I think..."

"Yeah, sounds good to me. What do you wanna do?"

"I want to prepare something beautiful for them."

Even to someone like Lacey with an underdeveloped sense of aesthetics, she thought that Selene looked beautiful in her pure white dress. The smiling man right beside her must have made her

that way as well.

What's something beautiful, exactly? Now that Lacey started to think about it, it wasn't quite straightforward. She closed her eyes, gripped her staff, and thought long and hard.

Sasanqua flowers. The wide blue sky. Morning dew on tree leaves. A golden field of wheat. Many things looked beautiful and sparked joy within her.

Hey, Yorma, what if we make a rainbow-colored flower? Doesn't that sound pretty?

Reeve, it's not enough for it to be pretty. It has to be something that can be eaten too.

Lacey recalled a wonderful scene in her mind's eye, then opened her eyes. She recalled that winter day when she had first picked chestnuts with the children. She recalled the rainbow, and Wayne's playful expression reflected on the droplets of rain that day.

When she turned around, Wayne blinked. Lacey found this to be amusing, and she started giggling.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing, really... Just..."

Lacey closed her eyes and slowly lifted her staff up to the sky.

"It's just that I always come up with new magic because of you."

First, she spoke the words like a gentle breeze. Softly, she weaved the incantations like spools of thread. With each word, a warm breeze gathered around Lacey, gently picking up her long black locks along with them. A drizzle started falling from the sky. And soon enough, bubbles started floating all around her.

"Whoa." Wayne let out a gasp of surprise.

"More." Lacey tapped the ground with the base of her staff. At that moment, a rainbow sprouted across the sky like a fountain of water bursting from the ground. It spread and trailed above the two of them. They watched it fly across like a dragon in the sky.

Then, when Wayne looked away from the rainbow, he saw its seven colors reflected on every single one of the bubbles. Each droplet housed within itself a reflection of the rainbow. The hundreds of bubbles acted as shining mirrors of the sky. The reflection of the maroon ribbon wrapped around her staff blended in

with the colors.

Wayne silently watched Lacey's back. Despite her small frame, she could alter the sky itself with her magic. She was a fearsome yet adorable girl.

"There's gotta be flowers for the bride, right?" Lacey muttered, then snapped her fingers. The sound of glass breaking echoed, and the bubbles popped, leaving behind a rainbow-colored rain, which fell silently over the village. It looked almost like a storm of petals, though out of season.

"U-Um, what do you think of that?"

"Hm?" Wayne remained silent with his arms folded. Lacey, still gripping her staff, was trying to gauge his reaction. He was partly in awe of the scale of her magic. "What do you mean?" he asked her back.

Lacey started fumbling about. "Y-You know! U-Um, I just remembered when you made a bunch of bubbles, and a rainbow was reflected on them. I just thought I could replicate that..."

And now I'm asking for the inventor's opinion... Lacey thought, and she started mumbling to herself.

"Well, you managed to replicate it, I guess. But it's on a whole different level. And there's no way I could do something like put a whole rainbow in the sky." Wayne let out a dry laugh.

Lacey looked relieved and blushed as she continued. "Back then, I thought those droplets were reflecting a rainbow in the sky, but I guess not! You made small rainbows inside each of the droplets. Rainbows depend on the weather, but there's actually a trick to it. It looks like it's based on the sun's direction! In other words, light! So when I tried it, I realized that there might be a lot of possibilities when it comes to light magic—"



“Wait, slow down. I don’t get everything you’re saying.” Wayne put a hand in front of Lacey. She stopped talking and stared at him. Wayne couldn’t help but let out a giggle.

“Slowly, okay? I’m not an expert on magic. You gotta take it slow, or I won’t understand anything.”

“Okay!” Lacey beamed as she held on to her staff, then let out a big laugh.

As he watched Lacey, Wayne realized that his hand was reaching out, but had stopped midway to being fully outstretched. Feeling Lacey’s gaze on him, he silently placed his hand on her head, then started rubbing it.

“Wha—! What’s going on?”

“Just felt like it.”

“What for?!”

Wayne couldn’t keep it in anymore and let out a big laugh as he messed with Lacey’s hair.

“Heeeey!” Suddenly, he heard someone call out to them, and he swiftly pulled his hand away.

“Heeeey, big sis Lacey!” It was Allen calling out to Lacey, out of breath as he ran uphill. Behind him were his twin brothers, as well as Ellie.

“Oh, big bro, you’re here too? What were you doing just now?”

“Nothing.”

Before he knew it, Wayne had folded his arms and was looking away. Allen looked at him suspiciously before saying, “Wait, forget about that! Big sis, what are you doing here?! There’s a big commotion down there!”

“Yeah! Suddenly, there was a big rainbow in the sky, and it was like, whoa!”

“There was something shiny all around the rainbow too! It was really, really pretty!”

“And then suddenly, it rained! I thought flowers were falling from the sky! But it was just raining! It was so sparkly and pretty!”

The children surrounded Lacey and bombarded her with questions. She could only blink and retreat backward in response.

“Big sis, that was all you, right?” Allen spoke for all four of them

and stared straight at Lacey, who paused for a long time before answering.

"Um... I just thought that it might be nice if something that looked like flowers fell out of the sky all of a sudden..."

"Who else would think like that?!" the children shouted in unison.

"It's so obvious! Everyone in the village was saying that it had to be the Dawn Witch's doing! Also, why are you all the way over here?! Mr. Cedric's so busy with all the cooking! Big bro, you should help him out!" Allen cried.

"O-Oh, sorry about that."

"I think only Allen could manage to order around a former hero like this," Lacey muttered. Allen dragged the two of them downhill all the way into the village and made them join the wedding ceremony. They were now the talk of the town, with the villagers praising them for the incredible sight and expressing their surprise. Lacey was now embarrassed for even thinking that she didn't belong to this village. She was welcomed by everyone with open arms.

Even Selene's husband expressed his gratitude. "Thank you for showing us something wonderful," he said. Instead of hiding behind her now nonexistent hat like she used to, Lacey let out a bashful laugh.

One by one, the villagers handed the bride and groom their presents. Plume Village was decorated all over with flowers, making it look like spring had come early.

Where's the Dawn Witch? Suddenly, Lacey thought that she had heard a voice. She recalled the little girl who tugged at her clothes during their travels, inviting her to the little girl's sister's wedding.

I should've congratulated her sister, Lacey thought. She was not the amazing witch that everyone thought she was. That was how she used to run away from everything.

You don't have to run away anymore, she said to her past self.

Outside, a huge cake sat on top of a large table. It was topped with cream and various seasonal fruits and adorned with sasanqua candy flowers.

"I really wanted to decorate a huge dessert with the candy flowers. But they didn't have the right equipment for it at Melia

Village. I'm so glad you helped out, Wayne." Cedric seemed to be his usual self now, in stark contrast to all the crying and sobbing he had been doing just moments ago. Still, everyone knew that he came close to breaking down and crying every time he saw his daughter in her wedding dress.

The children never expected that the paper and clay flowers they had been making would be of use as they handed them over to the bride. They all expressed their excitement and surprise.

"I've always loved sasanqua flowers. They start blooming as it gets colder, when few other flowers unfurl, then wither away right before the other flowers take their turn. It's like it's doing its best not to make me feel lonely. It makes me feel warm inside." Selene smiled gently as she revealed why she loved sasanquas. Suddenly, Lacey understood why the restaurant was named that way.

Selene looked happy and beautiful in her white wedding dress. The villagers oohed and aahed at her as the celebration went on. The jolly music reminded Lacey of the popcorn-eating contest from a while ago. Tee and Noi were dancing to the tunes along with the children.

Everyone had a smile on their faces. Before long, everyone was giving a huge round of applause. Even Wayne was silently clapping right beside Lacey.

Selene had in her hand a large bouquet of flowers. It was said that the one who received the bouquet would be the next to become a bride. Lacey knew about this tradition, but had always felt divorced from it, and never gave it much thought.

"Miss Lacey!"

She had been called. Without thinking, she raised her hand. Lacey caught the huge bouquet in her slender arms. She let out a small cry. She knew that this bouquet held Selene's feelings. Lacey was shocked and had no idea what to do. She could only keep quiet and swallow her words. She felt herself blush from all the applause.

"Good for you." Lacey heard Wayne's nonchalant voice. Strangely enough, it managed to reach her heart. She embraced the bouquet in her arms.

"Yeah. I'm really happy." Those were Lacey's honest feelings. She

hugged the bouquet close to her chest and looked at Wayne. Unusually for him, his face was all red as he met her gaze. Lacey was astonished at the rare expression on his face, then realized what she had just said.

"W-Wait, that's not it! I-I'm not happy that I'll be the next bride or anything! I-I'm just glad to accept Selene's feelings! Y-Yeah!"

"I-I know that! I get it already! I'm well aware of that! I-I just felt really embarrassed all of a sudden, okay? It's just been a weird time lately!"

Lacey couldn't just nod and brush it off. Once again, she no longer had her hat to grab onto and hide under, so she frantically buried her face into the bouquet. Wayne also turned away from Lacey and hid his face with his arm.

Suddenly, a colorful rain of confetti fell over them. The festivities were still going on even without the two of them.

"Pfft..."

"Ha ha ha!"

Lacey was suddenly aware that they were in their own world, and she couldn't help but laugh at themselves. Wayne, similarly, let out a huge belly laugh. But this was drowned out by the laughter of the villagers all around them.

Lacey separated the flowers in the bouquet and used them to fill vases throughout her house. As she was changing the vase water in her room, Tee entered in high spirits, crying "kwee kwee kwee!" It had a nightcap on its head, clearly ready for bed.

"Kwe-kwee kweh!" Tee flapped its wings left and right, dancing round and round. Seeing this, Lacey giggled as she placed the vase on a bedside table.

Lacey thought for a moment, then reached into her belt bag, which usually held her staff.

"Hey, Tee?"

"Kweoh?"

Lacey hesitated for a moment, but she took a deep breath and crouched to meet Tee's gaze. She took out the item from her bag and handed it to the phoenix.

Lacey was holding a stuffed toy identical to Tee in her hands.

"You seemed to like the stuffed animal that Ellie had, so I thought to make one for you. What do you think?"

Tee stared at the stuffed toy that resembled itself, only rounder. It tilted its head inquisitively.

Tee seemed to like the stuffed toy in Ellie's bag—no, that's not it. Lacey shook her head. *That's not why I gave it to Tee.*

"Wayne told me... He told me that when your fire-breathing stops and you become an adult—when you grow up and mature, I should celebrate it as your family."

Lacey never had any family. Even the simple idea of celebrating a birthday was something she had to learn from Wayne giving her the hair clip. "Family" was such a foreign word to her, something that she thought that she would never have a connection to.

"I-Is it weird to give a stuffed toy as a birthday present? I-I couldn't really think of anything else. T-Tell me if you want something else, okay? Uh, um..." Lacey's ears felt hotter and hotter the more she spoke. She covered her face and ears with her hair in an attempt to hide her embarrassment. "W-Wait, that's not what I wanted to say."

Lacey took a deep breath and spoke the words that she had been trying to communicate. "Hey, Tee? Can I think of you as my family?" Her ears, hidden behind her long black locks, were now a shade of deep red. Her fingertips felt very cold from all the anxiety she was feeling.

Suddenly, Lacey felt something poking at her finger. She looked up pensively and saw Tee pecking at her fingertips. Upon meeting the bird's gaze, it let out a small "Kwee!", stretched out its wings, and started flapping excitedly.

"You're okay with it?"

"Kyuu!"

Lacey didn't know if Tee was actually responding to her. But one thing was clear—Tee and its stuffed toy smelled like the fresh morning sun when she embraced them in her arms. The sensation was that of a blanket freshly dried under the sun.

Is this what family smells like? Lacey wondered. She had no idea, but at the very least, she was sure about the happiness she was

feeling right now.



Chapter 2: How to Capture a Memory

It was a few days after the wedding of Cedric's daughter Selene. Lacey stretched on her bed, squinted at the morning sun filtering through the curtains, then got up to draw them open.

"Great weather today," she muttered. She opened the windows and took a deep breath of the fresh morning air.

It had been three weeks since Wayne arrived at Plume Village. Time passed much faster than Lacey expected, but strangely enough, it also felt much longer.

"Kwee... Kwee..." Tee was curled up on the bed, making cute noises during its sleep. Right beside it was the stuffed bird that Lacey had given it last night. It would seem that Tee loved the present, as it slept right beside it. Lacey couldn't help but smile at this scene. She took care not to wake up Tee when opening the door and going out of the room.

Downstairs, Lacey ran into Wayne, who was already wide awake. *Good morning!* She was about to greet him when she suddenly became conscious of her appearance.

"Oh, hey, Lacey—" The moment Wayne raised his hand and greeted her, Lacey squealed, shouting "S-Sorry!" and ran back into her room. Tee woke up from the sound of Lacey slamming the door closed, and was now looking around the room.

"Kyuu?"

"I-I-I was in my pajamas..."

"Kwee-kwee?"

"And my hair's a mess!"

This wasn't any different from her usual appearance. She used to sleep and wake up in the same room as Wayne during their travels. It was nothing new to the two of them, and yet...

Why do I feel like this? Lacey's heart was beating like a drum. She could hardly believe that a sound this loud could come from inside her body. She was used to pain and was confident in her own endurance, but this was on a different level. The feeling was unbearable. She leaned against the door, took a deep breath, then exhaled. She was terrified by the strange sensation in her heart taking control of her body.

Lacey had been acting weird ever since she saw Wayne's beet-red face during Selene's wedding. She ran away immediately after seeing Wayne's face just moments ago, so she had no idea what expression he was making upon seeing her. She hoped that he didn't find her behavior strange, but in the first place, she wasn't sure what exactly was strange about her behavior.

Lacey could hear the chirping of birds from outside the window. Tee was flapping its wings by her feet, as if it were trying to ask if she was okay. She stooped down to meet its gaze.

"Sorry, Tee, I'm fine," she said to Tee as she ruffled its cheeks.

"Kwee!" Tee seemed pleased as it happily shook the feathers on its tail.

"Okay!" Lacey stood up, changed her clothes, and brushed her hair. Once again, she went downstairs.

"Oh, you changed clothes." Wayne was still downstairs, his expression completely nonchalant as he prepared breakfast. Lacey had been completely defeated. Her heart of glass was no match for his indomitable composure. Wayne was just his usual self. Lacey could only nod listlessly in reply.

Noi entered the house from his usual outdoor den. With his arrival, the four of them started eating their simple breakfast—a soup made with vegetables from Allen, and a freshly baked croissant. The tasty food was a blessing to empty stomachs. Having access to such culinary delights slowly changed Lacey's attitude toward food day by day.

Lacey and Wayne chewed, crunched, and swallowed, finished their meal, and washed their plates. Thinking of how to start the day made Lacey forget about the earlier commotion. She had forgotten it completely when Wayne offered to tie her hair, and she sat with her

back to him.

Then, when she felt the sensation of Wayne's fingers on her ear, she suddenly remembered. She felt the tips of her ears grow hot. This was something he would always do—was it really, though? Her thoughts were in shambles. Lacey looked down and endured her embarrassment. It was fine as long as he couldn't see her face.

And because Lacey couldn't see Wayne's face, she couldn't see him quickly pull back his hand the moment his fingers brushed against her ear. He held his breath upon seeing Lacey's nape, which got exposed when she looked down to hide her face. When he noticed that he wasn't breathing, he shut his eyes and pursed his lips. He shook his head, opened his eyes, then kept on tying Lacey's hair as usual. Despite this attempt at clearing his mind, he couldn't help but pause his hand here and there.

The two of them sat in silence as they tried to avoid looking at one another, each hoping that the other wouldn't notice them acting strangely. In the end, they succeeded, as neither was even looking at the other. However, Noi and Tee, who were eating the salad that Wayne had made for them, had seen the whole event unfold as they chewed on their greens.

What are those two doing, grr-oink?

Who knows, kweh?

Of course, neither of them actually spoke, but their grunts and squeaks perhaps expressed that sentiment.

"Okay, Lacey, we're done!"

"Th-Thanks, Wayne! Looks good as always!"

Lacey and Wayne's conversation sounded stilted.

"It's been a while, but big sis Lacey, sorry about what happened back there!"

"Allen, what are you talking about?" Lacey asked as she fiddled with her two pigtails. She wore the hair accessory she got from Wayne on her bangs. Tee and Noi were lurking right behind Lacey, while Wayne was right behind them.

Wayne's stay was scheduled for a month, and it had already been three weeks since he arrived. He was supposed to be on break, but

when asked what he wanted to do, all he said was, "Nothing in particular. I just want to relax while I'm here." Wayne did travel for pretty much the entire year, so it was unusual for him to stay in one place for long. Still, it wasn't like he stayed at Lacey's house the entire time; he would go down to the village often to restock on groceries, visit Cedric's restaurant, and play with the village children.

As for the crafting of Aster Insignia artifacts, she had informed Lanze that production would slow down for a month. She had villagers helping her out, so it wouldn't be zero. Lanze reacted to this news by giggling deviously and telling her, "It's not a bad idea to lower supply to increase demand every now and then." Of course, that wasn't her intention at all, so she would rather he keep that plan stashed away.

Lacey had taken Wayne down into the village, where they ran into Allen. Allen had been sticking close to Lanze recently, but there wasn't much work to be done at the moment. He had grown in height since Lacey had last seen him, and he was carrying a rake on his broad shoulders. He must have been helping Kargo out with an errand.

"What am I talking about? I'm talking about Reeve and Yorma! Big bro Wayne, sorry if they bothered you too. I'm sure they were pretty annoying."

It seemed that he was talking about their candy-making adventure at Cedric's. Allen, acting like the older brother, let out a long sigh and stared into the distance. Still, from Lacey's perspective, Ellie and the twins were an adorable bunch, and she enjoyed her time with them. And without the help of the twins, she might never have accomplished their goal.

"No, they weren't really—"

They weren't really any trouble at all. You don't need to apologize. Lacey was about to shake her head and tell Allen it was fine when two figures swiftly jumped out from behind him. It was Reeve and Yorma. The two of them were giggling and running around Allen, who looked like he was about to pop a vein.

"You two! You already got to play around the other day! I thought you guys were supposed to help out! Besides, you didn't even greet

big bro and big sis here!”

“Lacey! Been a while!”

“You too, Wayne!”

“Hey, don’t talk to them like that!” Allen demanded.

“Allen, it’s fine. I don’t mind at all...” Lacey said. Allen was starting to seem less like a big brother and more like their father. Wayne was also smiling awkwardly.

The three of them seemed to have been on the way to Kargo’s farm when they ran into Lacey and Wayne. Reeve started riding on Noi while Yorma was playing with Tee’s tail. The latter yanked on it quite abruptly, which prompted Lacey to squeak in shock upon seeing it.

“Um, Allen, I think if anything, I should be thanking the twins for their help. I could feel their earnest desire to help out with Cedric’s daughter’s wedding, and they really did save us a lot of trouble. Though they did get dragged around by Ellie too. Right, Wayne?”

“Yeah, she’s right.”

Yorma and Reeve pretended not to hear the conversation as they rubbed their noses out of embarrassment from all the praise.

“Really?” Allen looked at the twins, but the two of them looked away and went back to playing with Tee and Noi. It seemed that they were too embarrassed to acknowledge their own good work in front of their brother.

“Well, it’s all good as long as they didn’t cause any trouble. Oh, right, big sis! Why don’t you send over the culinary paper and the cooking gloves to Lanze? They’re really useful, and they’ll definitely sell a bunch!”

“Sure... But I’ll need to mass-produce them if they’re gonna be sold... I need to figure out how to go about that. The culinary paper shouldn’t be too hard since I can just dry the materials under the sun, but the cooking gloves need to be molded around the hands, and it takes a long time to dry them without my magic. Oh, maybe I could use a hand-shaped mold for that...”

“Okay, then the gloves can wait until later. *I’m* gonna negotiate the materials and pricing with Lanze, so leave it to me!” Allen made sure to emphasize his involvement with his declaration. Allen asked

to study under Lanze's mentorship in order to be more useful to Lacey, and he looked very excited to finally have something to do for her. Even though he had grown up a bit, his childishness hadn't quite left him yet. Lacey couldn't help but smile at this observation.

"Okay then, I'll leave the negotiations to you. We still have a lot of culinary paper left over, so I'll send it over to you soon."

"Heck ye—I mean, ehem, ehem." Just as Allen was about to jump for joy, he noticed the gaze of his younger siblings trained on him, and he hurriedly cleared his throat to regain his composure. Lacey thought this was adorable, though she felt for Allen's desire to maintain his stature in front of his siblings.

"Speaking of culinary paper, Mr. Cedric's wedding was amazing," Reeve said in a loud voice.

"Reeve, it's Selene who got married, not Mr. Cedric," Yorma corrected his twin, then laughed.

"Oh, right. The bride was really pretty!"

The twins seemed like they wanted to participate in the conversation. Reeve took a stick and started drawing on the ground. Selene, perhaps?

"It was an all-white dress like this."

"Wait, that's not right. The sleeves were a lot longer."

"No, it was definitely this long. And her hair was really straight like this."

"Are you trying to draw Mr. Cedric or something?! C'mon, gimme that!"

"No way, loser! You suck at drawing!"

"You suck even more, Reeve!"

"Wait, wait, you two! Calm down!" Lacey frantically tried to get between the two and stop their argument, but Allen didn't seem to be fazed.

"Big sis, it's fine. You don't need to do anything," Allen said. He seemed to be used to these sibling quarrels. "It *has* been a while since the last wedding in the village. I bet Reeve and Yorma were really surprised too."

"Really?"

"Yup. There aren't a whole lot of people of the age to get

married, and the last wedding wasn't that festive. Hmm, maybe 'festive' isn't really the right word to describe weddings..."

Plume Village used to be known for its special plume accessories made from the feathers of a golden cockatrice, which brought prosperity to everyone. But once the cockatrice vanished, the riches stopped flowing to the village, and the festive atmosphere disappeared. Now, with Lacey's magical artifacts, life was slowly returning to the small town.

Wayne nodded thoughtfully. "It's great to have memorable events like those. I still remember a bride I saw when I was a kid, and she looked really pretty. Oh, but if you asked me exactly what she looked like, I probably won't be able to remember everything."

Allen grimaced in thought as he shifted the rake on his shoulder. "Memories are nice and all, but they change all the time. They're not always as you remember, even when you make a drawing out of them."

Lacey suddenly recalled the portrait of the hero's party that she encountered in the capital. Unlike her comrades, the face and hair color of the Dawn Witch in the painting were completely different from her actual appearance. Even so, Lacey had the painting displayed in the most prominent part of her home. It wasn't that long ago that Wayne noticed and told her to take it down out of embarrassment.

"Maybe it would be nice to have something that can let you keep memories. That way, you'll have a way to remember them even if you forget. After a long time passes, you can come back to it and say, 'Oh, I remember now.' You could laugh along with everyone when it turns out you remembered something wrong, or get relieved when you remember it exactly as it is. Heh. Sounds nice, right?"

Well, don't think that'll ever happen, though. Allen snorted at the thought and flubbed his nose at the idea, then left with his twin brothers.

"Lacey, something wrong?" Wayne asked.

"O-Oh, it's nothing. W-Well..."

Allen's words left a mark on Lacey's heart.

A way to remember memories even if you forget. Could such a

thing exist?

"Maybe... I should make it."

If it didn't exist, all she had to do was make it. If it's something nobody had done before, then Lacey would be the first to do it.

When the idea came to her mind, Lacey looked at Wayne with excitement. "Wayne, I want to make one! I want to make an item that can capture memories and turn them into a keepsake!"

"Ooh, that sounds like an idea. Sounds fun. Lemme try and think of ideas too," Wayne replied.

"Grr-oink!"

"Kwee!"

Lacey raised her fist to the clear blue sky. She still had many things left to make. Things that would be useful to others, and things that would make others happy. Realizing this made her very pleased and excited about things to come.

Lacey stretched her small body. She had a lot of things to think about, and she'd be very busy soon enough. But this made her even more excited, and she couldn't help but smile at the future.

After finishing their shopping at the village, Lacey, Wayne, and her two pets started planning the "item that can capture memories." However, that was much easier said than done. She currently had no ideas in mind. While heading back to the mansion, she tried to think of magic that could do something similar, but then Wayne tapped her shoulder.

"Hey, Lacey, walk straight," he chided Lacey while holding a bag of food.

"Right, it's you, Wayne!"

"Yes, Lacey, it's me, Wayne. Maybe you should do your thinking once we arrive at the mansion."

"Wayne, I think you might know some kind of interesting magic that I don't know about. Actually, remember when you used wind magic to make the wind play a sound?"

"Come on, listen to me! I'll point and laugh if you trip and fall into a river, okay? Also, wow, why're you even bringing up something that long ago?"

Lacey was referring to something that had happened over a year ago. Wayne wanted to reveal to the king of Croix the insults Lacey's ex-fiancé had thrown at her. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Lacey was here because of Wayne's actions on that day. It was no wonder that she hadn't forgotten about it.

"Making the wind remember and play back a sound feels similar to what I had in mind. Oh, sounds are nice and all, but I want something different. I want to capture the image of, say, a beautiful bride... Right, yes, an image! Like a painting! I want something that can remember a scene!"

As Lacey babbled, she started visualizing her ideas. The vague thoughts slowly started to take form in her mind. She clutched her fist tightly.

"Is there...any magic like that?" she asked Wayne.

"Nope."

"Mmm..."

Wayne didn't even pause for thought.

Lacey, you're only at the starting line! Come on, let's go! Grr-oink! Kweeh! Noi and Tee started grunting and squeaking and using their limbs to comfort Lacey. A kind gesture from these small creatures.

"No, wait. I shouldn't say that too quickly. I might've thought of some similar ideas in the past," Wayne said.

"Huh?"

"I was a pretty naughty kid, after all."

Wayne was the second child of a noble and wasn't adept at using magic in the past. If he couldn't pull off impressive magic, he could at least use it to have fun and prank people. According to him, he had a phase when his mind thought like that.

"I know magic that can show a scene that others didn't want to see. I really thought I was a genius when I came up with it. Like this."

Wayne placed the bag of groceries on Noi and cast a short incantation. He pointed a finger at the nearby river and spun it around. The next moment, a circle of wind appeared underneath his feet. The flow of the river suddenly went quiet, and then, Tee's figure appeared in the still water.

"Nkwee?!"

But then, the flow of the river went back to normal, and the current swept away the image soon enough.

"You used wind magic to stop the river's current, then created an image on the water," Lacey muttered.

"Right. I think that was pretty impressive, if I do say so myself. I guess the hard part about using it is needing to have a good sense of aesthetics. And it's probably quite different from what you're imagining."

Wayne was right. It was magic that drew a scene from memory rather than capturing the memory into an image. Lacey folded her arms and scrunched up her face, groaning about the difficulty of her task, before Wayne dragged her by the collar and walked off, saying, "Come on, it's dangerous here. Let's go home."

Grr-oink-oink! Noi followed closely behind them, carrying the bag of groceries. Tee followed suit, squawking as it marched forward.

The path ahead of Lacey seemed long and arduous indeed.

When they got back to the mansion, Lacey plopped down on a chair. Wayne had chided her for doing her thinking before eating, so she stuffed her mouth with spaghetti and started groaning in thought.

"Do your groaning *after* you finish eating," Wayne scolded her again.

While tending to her garden, Lacey used her water magic to pour water on her own head.

"Focus on your work when you're working on something!"

Lacey tried to turn around and reply to Wayne in agreement, but she slipped and landed on the ground instead.

"Come on, at least pay attention to where you're stepping! I'm begging you!"

She kept getting an earful from Wayne. However, Lacey couldn't help herself. She didn't have much time left; in fact, she only had a week until Wayne's break ended and he had to return to the capital. Until then, she had to finish making the item. This was a self-imposed deadline, and Lacey didn't need to rush at all. There was no

reason to, and she could just relax and take time with the process.

However, Lacey felt uneasy. She wanted to make something, but she had no idea what needed to be done to make it a reality.

"Hey, why are you in such a rush?" Wayne asked. Tee and Noi seemed to be asking the same thing as they gazed up at Lacey.

Lacey couldn't muster the right words to say, so she looked up at Wayne and said, "Because I really want to make something right now."

It wasn't a well-thought-out answer. But Wayne seemed to be satisfied with it.

"Okay then. That means it's time for a planning session!"

Of course, that would come after they've had dinner. All of them scarfed down the meals prepared before them.

Once they had their fill, they cleared out the empty plates from the dinner table, then laid out a gigantic sheet of blank paper. Noi and Tee were peeking at the table as well. Lacey suddenly remembered a time like this with her fellow party members during their travels.

"There's a town over here, but there's not a single soul living there. I received info that demonkin had taken over this area as well. We could either slip by without incident, or take a bet that there are survivors and pass straight through the town."

Lacey recalled Wayne's voice as he pointed his finger at a map. *We'll go straight through the town!* She recalled her comrades balling their fists as they made their determined choice. She recalled Wayne, the hero, laughing back then.

Right now, he was making the exact same expression.

"You have an idea in mind, but you're not quite sure how to implement it. In that case, we'll have to reference our ideas with each other. We'll each explain the visions in our heads. There's no way they'll be the exact same, so we'll point out where we differ. Then, we'll write down all the ideas that come from that. Don't worry. I'm betting on my pride as the local prankster that I'll fill up this blank paper before you do."

"No way you're getting there first. I'm the artifact-making genius, after all," Lacey fired back.

"We'll see about that."

A fire was ablaze in their eyes.

Lacey felt that her heart was fully exposed before Wayne. He was the first person she cried to, and the first person she ranted about her feelings to.

"Are you hungry?"

This was a memory from when Lacey was a tiny mage wearing a black robe with a heavy black hood. When Wayne asked her, she slowly, carefully answered him. She was nervous about giving him a weird answer. Her only thought was to answer him out of obligation, since she was going to travel with him. But her mistake was thinking that the conversation ended when she answered him. Before she realized, the conversation went on and on. Whenever Lacey answered, the next question came right after. She remembered feeling surprise and confusion.

As they traveled, those feelings soon turned into feelings of warmth and familiarity. Back then, Lacey was terrible at speaking out and would always have her head cast down. But as she kept on talking with Wayne, she slowly learned to face forward.

To Lacey, Wayne was the first person she had ever had a conversation with.

To Lacey, who'd only ever known how to polish her own magic, Wayne was the first to look at her as a person, as Lacey.

"Pffft."

"Aha ha ha!"

Before long, she realized that a hot, burning emotion had started filling her heart. But she suppressed it with an evil laugh. Wayne seemed to be making the same expression as Lacey, but was he only trying to match her, or was it his honest feelings? Perhaps it was even both.

"Grr-oink! Grr-oink!"

"Kwe-kweeeh!"

"Oh, sorry about that! You two must be having trouble seeing everything."

Noi had his front limbs on the table while grunting in frustration. Meanwhile, Tee was flapping its wings frantically. Lacey could have

put Tee on top of her head to solve the problem, but that seemed to present problems of its own. Besides, the two creatures seemed confident that they could help this time, so Lacey wanted to give them an equal seat at the table.

Lacey spun her index finger. At that moment, the door opened, and chairs flew in. They lined up and floated about. Then, at a snap of Lacey's finger, they landed on the ground next to the table, as if they had suddenly remembered the existence of gravity. The large Noi sat on the four-legged chair, while Tee sat on the stool. It was a perfect seating arrangement.

Thus, with everyone seated, their planning session had begun. The goal was to come up with a way to capture memories. No magic had ever existed that could do such a thing, meaning that they would have to invent it from scratch.

"Using water might be the easiest. It's a liquid, and magic can manipulate it pretty well," Wayne suggested.

"That makes sense. But I want people who can't use magic to be able to use the artifact. That means we can't rely on magic to make it work," Lacey replied thoughtfully.

"I see. In that case, our methods will be pretty limited."

"Wayne, the magic you used involved physically drawing an image over the water using the ripples, right? I think we might not need anything that complicated."

"What do you mean?"

"You know how the sunlight reflects images on water? Like a mirror. We could use that to capture an image."

"Hmm, mirrors, huh?"

"Grr-oink!"

"Kweeh!"

Their discussion was starting to bear fruit. Lacey was voicing her opinions, while Wayne took notes, and vice versa. This kept on going until the paper laid out on the table was filled with notes, scribbles, and diagrams. The once-white paper was now covered in black ink. Both of them scrutinized every note and finding, leading to more discoveries, which they analyzed even further. They racked their brains for ideas until day turned into night, and night turned into

day. Their throats had been squeezed dry, but they were having so much fun with their debate. Soon, they were well into the second night of discussions.

"Lacey, you okay? You should get some rest."

"I'm fine..." Lacey let out a yawn. "Ah, on second thought, I think I'll lie down."

Lacey wanted to keep going, but her body could no longer keep up. Before, she would have kept going even if her body was begging her to stop. She used to think that she didn't need food or sleep, and it was normal for her to push her body to the limit. It wasn't unusual for her to collapse like a marionette with its strings cut.

I'm definitely not as sharp as I used to be...

There was no end to her training as a mage. She didn't go as hard on it as she used to, but she never stopped. But if she were to analyze why she didn't feel as adept as she used to be, it didn't feel right to say that it was because her journey had ended.

Actually, maybe it's the other way around.

Lacey was now much better at listening to her own body. Her body realized that it was at its limit, and she could hear its cries of pain. She used to deceive herself by saying that hunger was something to bear. But now she knew that it wasn't a sensation to be used to. She just never realized it because pain had been a constant in her life.

Did realizing this make her weaker? There was a kind of strength in following orders and aiming for a singular goal. It was simple, straightforward, and it made her powerful. Now, Lacey was always lost, anxious, and hesitant to move forward. Looking back gave her too many things to do. In exchange, her field of vision was wider, and she could see her surroundings much more clearly. She could see that she wasn't alone and that there were others willing to help her out.

"Wanna go to bed?"

"Huh?!" Lacey had drifted off on the couch for a moment. Wayne's face was so close to hers that her head collided with his. "Uh, ough!"

“Ow!” Wayne cried out.

Tee and Noi peeked into the couch, worried about her. Outside, the sun had already risen, and she could hear the chirping of birds.

Lacey writhed in pain for a moment and apologized to Wayne, who told her that he didn’t mind.

“I’m fine. Anyway, why don’t you go get some sleep? Can’t come up with ideas if you’re too groggy, you know?”

“You’re right... But, um... I have an uneasy feeling in my chest right now...”

Lacey put her fist on her chest and grimaced. She was so close. She could feel that she was almost there, but she didn’t know what to do next.

“You know how we can see our faces on the water? It’s a very natural phenomenon, but why does it happen? Why does it only happen on transparent liquids? Windows, mirrors, glass cups, shiny objects... They all have different shapes and forms, but we can see ourselves in them. I’ve never questioned it before, but I feel like it shouldn’t go unexamined. Like how everything in magic is based on formulas. Like how spells stop working if there’s even one rune out of order...”

Lacey knew that there had to be something out there—something that didn’t even register as obvious or natural to her. She groaned out loud. Wayne followed suit, and so did Tee and Noi.

“What else is there? Something that shows my appearance... Something that I don’t know about...” *There must be something I can figure out from there...*

Lacey folded her arms and thought. Nothing would come from just groaning about it. Just as she was about to suggest taking a break, Tee suddenly started flapping frantically and squawking out loud.

“Kweeeh! Kwekwe-kweeeeeeh!!!”

“Tee? Wh-What’s wrong? Are you hungry?”

“Kweh-kweh-kweeh!!!”

“No? Oh, oh, are you sleepy?”

“Kwekwekwekweh!!!”

“Grr-oink?! Grr-oink-oink! Grr-oink!!!”

Lacey had never heard Tee make these noises, but Noi seemed to understand what it was saying. Noi jumped up and down and turned to Lacey, as if he were trying to alert her to something.

"S-Sorry, I don't really understand..."

"Grr-oiiiiink!!!"

"Kwe-kwe-kwe-kweeeeh!!!"

It was utter chaos. On top of Lacey's hunger and drowsiness, her head was now spinning.

Meanwhile, Wayne remained calm and kept watch over everyone. "Did you figure something out?" he asked Tee. The phoenix gave a big nod in reply and wagged its tail at him.

Lacey, over here! Tee must have been beckoning to her. It wagged its backside at her, then started hopping forward. Noi followed closely behind. Curiosity over where Tee wanted to lead Lacey won over her drowsiness, and she was now wide awake.

Hop, hop, hop. Tee hopped, skipped, and occasionally hovered forward, while the other three followed behind. Lacey's mansion was so big that she couldn't even begin to guess where Tee was leading them. They climbed up the stairs and walked down the hallway. Realizing where they were heading, Lacey's expression started to cloud over.

They arrived at their destination—a place that Lacey would normally never visit, nor did Tee, Noi, and much less Wayne. It was an empty room at the end of a hallway on the second floor. Lacey knew about the room inside, hidden behind bookshelves.

"Kwee!"

"Are you sure it's here?" Lacey asked Tee in a low tone.

This was a place she didn't want to frequent. The room Tee wanted to visit was the same room where the former owners of the mansion—the Wellbuyers—confined, or rather, imprisoned Tee's parent phoenix. Lacey hoped it wasn't the correct room, but Tee nodded, and that hope vanished.

"Do you want me to open it?"

"Kweh!" Tee nodded and flapped its wings frantically.

A phoenix had been chained deep inside this room for years and years, until Lacey had set it free. It was such a painful sight to look

at that Lacey would rather not remember it. But Tee looked at Lacey with hope brimming in its eyes.

Phoenixes did not have a concept of parent and child. In fact, they were all supposedly just a single organism. In truth, Tee, which Lacey perceived as the phoenix's child, was something of an offshoot of the original that Lacey rescued. Tee still shared the original's memories, which was why it was able to lead Lacey to this room.

"Okay. I guess we have to do this," Lacey said. Even if Tee wasn't the same phoenix who had been imprisoned in this room, it was still not a good place for it to visit. If Tee had gone all the way to lead Lacey to this room, there was no use in dawdling any further.

Lacey pushed aside the bookshelf, revealing a large, imposing metal door. Behind the door, there was only darkness. She would regularly use magic to clean up the house, so the room inside was much tidier than one would expect. Dust and dirt had not piled up on the floor, and the air was no longer stagnant.

When Lacey first found this room, there had been a phoenix—one that she had mistakenly thought to be a cockatrice—locked away in this room, cowering, with its limbs bound using magic. There was one light source above them. It was barely bigger than Lacey's hand; in other words, it was too small to even be considered a proper window. Lacey had once destroyed the ceiling of this room, but a dumbfounded Wayne had repaired it since then.

"So, Tee, what did you want to show us?" Lacey asked, but she still hesitated to enter. She tried to peer into the room, but Tee started squawking and used its head to usher her inside.

"Nkweeh!"

"Huh? Uhh..."

"What's going on?" Wayne asked from behind.

"Grr-oiiink!"

Lacey was able to resist Tee's pushing, but not long after, the group entered the room.

"Umm, Tee?"

"Kweeeh!!!"

"What, now you're talking to *me*?" Once they entered the dark room, Tee suddenly turned its wings to Wayne and started flapping

them. He evaluated Tee's actions, nodded, and said, "Okay, okay." It seemed that it was telling him to close the door. Lacey also understood this.

Lacey picked up Tee. "But Tee, it'll turn pitch black if we shut the room," she told the phoenix. Tee nodded in reply.

Of course it will! In fact, that's exactly *what I want!* Tee's "words" came through in every gesture. Even if the room went pitch-black, Lacey and Wayne could just use magic to light up the room any time, and there was no lock on the door.

"I'm closing it." Wayne placed his hand on the steel door and quietly closed it. For a moment, the room was enveloped in darkness.

Then, the sky fell.

"Wha—"

Of course, the sky didn't really fall down. But it *was* clearly underneath their feet.

"What... What's going on?"

"Grrr-oink?!"

Wayne blinked and gasped in disbelief. Noi was frantically running about in excitement and confusion.

An unbelievable scene unfolded before them—it was as if the sky itself had been cut out and laid down on the floor. Heaven and earth had switched places. But of course, such a thing didn't happen. The floor remained the same as always. An image of the sky had merely been projected onto it. A closer inspection would show that the clouds appeared hazy, and the blue color could not be compared to the vivid hue of the real thing.

Still, the scene took Lacey's breath away. "It's like we're floating in the sky..."

Everyone in the room concurred. Even Wayne was speechless, his eyes wide open as he stared at the floor.

"What in the world is going on?" Lacey muttered. She had visited this room many times before, but this had never once happened. She was sure that there were no magical contraptions in the room

that could cause this.



The image of the sky appeared once they closed the single door in the room, which was currently fully shut. The four of them should have been completely isolated from the outside world. Isolated, except for one thing.

"The window..."

It was too small to be called a window. It was more of a small hole in the ceiling.

Ideas started to flow into Lacey's brain. Why could she see herself in the water? She had visited this room so many times before, but why did this phenomenon only happen now?

The sunlight let her see herself in the water, just like a mirror.

"Light..."

The sky did not appear until the room went dark. The image became diffused while the room was filled with light. From this, Lacey had a further realization about why windows, mirrors, glass cups, and shiny objects showed an image of herself. One could perceive colors from water, a transparent liquid. Why did she see water as "blue"? Could it be that it was because it was projecting an image of the sky?

The reflection of light caused an object to project an image.

"The possibilities of light magic..."

Lacey echoed the words she had said to Wayne back when she made a rainbow in the sky.

"I can make it work."

At some point, Lacey started gripping her staff. She was already starting to formulate a spell in her mind. For a moment, she forgot about the concept of gravity. A gust of wind was forming in the room with Lacey at the center.

"Kweeeh?!"

"Grr-oink?!"

Wayne caught Tee and Noi midair as they were being blown away by the wind.

Lacey's long, black hair was being tossed around by the sudden gale. Her hazel eyes were captivated by something that the others couldn't see. She was making calculations in her head at dizzying speeds. She could do it. She understood. *She could perform magic*

capable of capturing people's memories.

"Kwe-oh..."

Slowly, Lacey floated back down on tiptoes. She grasped her staff along with the wind that began to die down. Her eyes were closed.

"You good?" Wayne asked.

"Yeah," Lacey said and nodded in reply. She stared at the floor. "I managed to develop a new spell—one that can capture a memory and materialize it. But that's not what I want. I don't want to make a spell that only I can use. I want something that everyone can use. People who can't use magic, grown-ups, children, nobles, and peasants. No matter what kind of person they are, I want them to be able to keep their memories and treasure them."

But that's not what happened. Lacey groaned. She cursed her lack of ability.

"Isn't that enough?"

Wayne wasn't trying to console her. That was his honest opinion, and Lacey appreciated it. But she couldn't help but feel tiny and helpless at that moment.

I could've done better. Lacey bit her lip. Those words gave her a strange feeling. Had she ever felt sad about comparing herself to someone else? She must have. She experienced so many firsts when she arrived at Plume Village, and she was learning so many things every day. So she was sure she must have felt it at least once before. But back then, she wasn't conscious of the dizzying changes overtaking her. Now that she was aware of them, she felt that this feeling was to be treasured.

Lacey grasped her chest. *If you know you could do better, you can move forward.*

"You managed to create a spell for it. So your next step will be to materialize it. That's more than enough progress for today."

"Yeah."

"By the way, could you tell me why I'm seeing the sky on the floor right now? Even if you say 'light' or whatever, I still can't understand what's going on."

"Oh... O-Oh, right! Sorry, I got too excited back there. See that tiny window up there? It's just enough to let some light in. Because

of that, the light from the sky gets reflected onto the floor. Normally, there's too much light in the room to see, but the small window filters the light so that an image is clearly visible. The smaller the window and the darker it gets, the clearer the image—"

Lacey cut her explanation short as she realized something. She had thought that the light from the ceiling was coming from a hole, but if that were true, the room would have been exposed to the wind and rain from outside. But that was clearly not the case. Upon closer inspection, the hole was covered with glass. And it wasn't just a flat piece; it was clearly thicker in the middle and thinned out on the edges. The shape had a gentle curvature.

"Wayne, when you were fixing the roof, did you touch that window up there?" she asked studiously.

"Nope. The roof broke just slightly away from it, so I didn't fix that part."

"I see... Um, Wayne, don't get mad, okay?"

"Me? Get mad? Why?"

Lacey pointed a finger at the window and spun it around. The next moment, a strange popping noise rang out.

"Lacey?! What are you doing?!"

"I-I'm just taking off the glass! I didn't break it, I swear!"

Lacey had used magic to remove the glass from the window. She placed it gently in her hand and spun it around with her fingers. Just as she had confirmed with her eyes, the glass was thicker in the middle and thinner around the edges—completely different from a normal window. When she looked at the floor, she noticed that the image of the sky had blurred away after taking off the glass.

This piece of glass was the cause of the image of the sky.

"How does this work?" Lacey muttered to herself. This room was constructed by the Wellbuyer couple. Could this piece of glass have been part of their building plans?

Lacey sensed a small trace of mana coming from the glass. She felt a sense of familiarity from this sensation. Upon realizing that this mana was from Tee's parent, her eyes went wide, and she let the piece of glass slip from her grip. Wayne, fortunately, caught it in time.

"Whoa, Lacey?! What's going on?"

Lacey covered her mouth with her hand. She was trembling. She had realized something. Tee silently gazed at her.

At first, she had thought that it was a regular piece of glass. But Lacey realized that Tee's parent had used its flames to slowly melt the glass away. The Wellbuyers had sealed away its magic, but before it had been severely weakened, it might have been able to use just a bit of its mana. It produced a thin, needlelike flame over and over until the glass had been altered.

It was all so it could see a bit of sky. It was its sole solace amid its despair after years and years of being bound and immobilized. Even after Lacey had freed it from its shackles, it would return to this room every now and then. It would curl up in the area where the light shone and stay there, motionless. Surely it was because it wanted to see the sky, Lacey had thought, and left a blanket for it at that spot.

But the phoenix did not want to see the sky from the window. It wanted to see its image on the floor.

The phoenix with wings of gold curled up in the room filled with blue. It could have been underwater, or it could have been floating in the sky. The phoenix caught the beam of light with its entire body. Its feathers sparkled under the sunlight. Lacey thought that it would stay unmoving, but it lifted its head. *Kweh,* it cried softly. The bird looked at Lacey as if it were greeting an old friend. Its voice was just a bit meaner than Tee's.

Lacey blinked. The scene just now was just a figment of her imagination. Still, she felt something caught in her throat. She felt the hard work and suffering of that phoenix in her heart, and her eyes began to water. This room was that phoenix's prison, but it was also its treasure.

Lacey rubbed her eyes and faced forward. With this piece of glass, she could accomplish her goal. But...

"Tee, are you sure? Can I... Can I use this piece of glass?" she asked.

"Kwe-kweeeh!" *Of course you can!* Tee jumped excitedly. That

must have been why it led her here.

"Okay. Okay! Thank you so much!" *In that case, I'll make good use of it!*

"Well then, let's get going!" Lacey exclaimed.

"Go where?"

Lacey opened her mouth, then closed it again. Then, she said, "Let's all go to bed!"

They had not slept a wink since yesterday. She felt lightheaded, and her eyes were dry. Just as Wayne said, she couldn't come up with any ideas while groggy.

Wayne laughed at Lacey, whose head was wobbling side to side. "Okay then!" he said as he lightly tapped her shoulder. "Let's get some sleep, wake up, get some breakfast, think about the next step, and start making the thing!"

That day, Lacey couldn't remember what she had dreamed. She thought that she wouldn't be able to sleep from excitement, but she quickly drifted away into sleep, enveloped by a sea of blankets. She seemed to recall the figure of a bird flying high in a distant sky. It looked almost exactly like Tee, but a lot meaner. And she felt that it could fly far, far away, and could go wherever it wanted.

Chapter 3: What to Convey, and What Can Be Conveyed

Lacey and Wayne had decided to call the strangely shaped glass a "lens." The two of them had gotten enough sleep and woke up sometime in the afternoon. They got out of bed, had lunch, and were now examining the lens on a table.

"So, I get that you can get an image from that lens by shining a light into it in a dark place, but how are you going to turn the image into something concrete?" Wayne asked.

Lacey answered in between stuffing her mouth with the meat pie that Wayne had cooked. "You know how sunburns work, right? The parts of the skin covered with clothes don't get burned. We can only do it in black and white, but with the lens, we can use the degrees of light and shade to convey an image."

"Hmm, okay. But in that case, we'll need to make a tool that allows you to transfer that image, right?" Wayne surmised as he wiped food crumbs off his lips.

Lacey nodded in agreement. By her feet, Tee and Noi were squawking and grunting as they fiercely scarfed down the food on their hapless plates.

"So, what we need to do is make a tiny room. To be exact, it should be similar to that room, but small enough to be able to carry around. As much as possible, it should fit in the palm of your hand. It should be solid enough that light from outside won't get in. We'll make a smaller version of this lens, and slot it in!"

"If we had time, we would be able to make the lens ourselves, but I don't think we can. We'll have to ask someone else."

"About that..." Lacey took a deep breath and gulped.

The two of them stood before an imposing building.

"W-We g-gotta...ashk...ask? An expert! Yeah, we gotta ask an expert!"

"You're *really* stuttering right now."

Lacey was visibly nervous. She folded her arms, trying her best to stay composed, but her body wasn't keeping up.

The shop in front of them had a logo of a shield with a sword superimposed across it. At a glance, it was a weapon and armor shop, as well as a smithy.

"So is this a weapon shop, an armor shop, or a store that sells accessories?"

"It's all of the above, I think... Plume Village is pretty peaceful, so they don't need weapons or armor, but every village needs a smithy, so this place ended up doing everything. Actually, this is the first time I'm going here."

Lacey and Wayne left Tee and Noi at the mansion. Now, they were staring at the shop in front of them. Lacey gulped. She was here to ask to replicate the lens, but would they accept such a strange, out-of-the-blue request? Even though she was starting to get over her shyness, she was still very nervous when it came to asking something from strangers.

Lacey took deep breaths.

"You're hyperventilating. Are you gonna be okay? Wait, you haven't talked to the person running this place? This place isn't that big, so I'm sure you've seen them around."

"I've seen him before, of course... But I haven't talked to him that much. He would always slap my back without a word. It kinda hurt."

"Your back?"

"Yeah, like this." Lacey mimed slapping someone forcefully on the back. "He looks kinda...burly."

Lacey averted her gaze. She had a pensive expression on her face. Her introverted side was starting to show again. She was grasping at the nonexistent hat on her head.

"Burly? What's wrong with that? I mean, you can take down a squad of a hundred orcs."

"W-Well, yes, I can! But! I'm definitely gonna struggle against a hundred! Wait, that's not the point. Uh, um..." Lacey's hands were

fidgeting all over. She was still trying to find her hat out of habit. Today, her hair was tied into a cute ponytail high up on her head. "It's just...a primal fear... I guess..."

"What's with all the racket right in front of our shop?! Oh my, it's just you, Lacey."

"Ellie?"

The door suddenly swung open, and out came a girl in pigtails. When Lacey called out her name, the girl immediately pouted. "I *told* you to call me a cuter nickname! I thought it was getting noisy outside and wondered what was going on out there!" Ellie shrugged while holding on to the doorknob.

Lacey wondered why Ellie was in the shop, then she remembered. "Oh, right, your family runs a smithy."

"Yeah! Oh, right! Since you're here and all, I'll introduce you to my dad. He's kind of quiet, so you've never had a proper conversation with him, right? Daddy!"

"Gah?! Little Ellie, no need to do that! We'll come back another time! I'm so sorry!"

"Hey, don't run away!" Wayne grabbed Lacey's collar. She struggled, trying to escape, then they heard heavy footsteps echoing from inside the shop.

Then, a giant showed up before them. He slowly opened the door and stepped outside, then stood in front of Lacey and Wayne. He had deeply tanned skin and a shiny, bald head. In his hands, he had an axe with blood dripping from its blade.

"Hello."

The man's voice sounded like a deep rumble from beneath the earth. Wayne's height was taller than average, but compared to this giant of a man, he looked like a child. As for Lacey, she might as well be a dwarf compared to him.

There was a short moment of silence.

"Hello." The man repeated his polite greeting. Lacey and Wayne could only stare up at him.

"Wait, daddy, why are you holding that axe?! And why is it all bloody?!" Ellie cried.

"It's from the chicken. I was asked to cook." The burly man

whimpered.

"This is mom's fault?! Also, you don't need two axes for that! Actually, you don't even need an axe!"

"I got used to it... It's good to have a signature weapon."

"No, it's not!"

"If he fought Brooks, who do you think would win?" Wayne whispered to Lacey.

"Wayne, this man is a normal person! He's not an adventurer!"

Even though Lacey tried to distinguish between the two by profession, she still couldn't figure out the correct answer. Then, as the shop owner was trying to explain himself to his daughter, Ellie let out a loud cry and dropped a flying kick on him. The shop owner easily went flying, crashed, and rolled all over the floor.

Ellie heaved a heavy sigh, then quickly turned to Lacey. "Lacey, sorry about that! Daddy's really cool, but he misunderstands a lot! I'll have him do it over!"

"Huh? Oh, you don't need to apologize for anything... Also, do what over?"

"Wait there, okay?"

Ellie slammed the door behind her. Lacey could hear thumping and thudding behind the shut door. She couldn't help but wonder what in the world was going on inside.

Suddenly, the noises died down. Then, when the shop owner emerged, he was no longer holding an axe, and the blood spatter had been cleaned out. However, the biggest change was on the shop owner's once-bald head, which was now covered in hair. It was a head full of silver hair that went down to his hips. It was, of course, just a wig.

"Snrk..."

"Pfft..."

Lacey and Wayne both averted their gazes from the shop owner at the same time. They bit their lips and scrunched their faces, trying their best to suppress their laughter.

"Ellie... This wig is a bit much. I think we should drop it," the shop owner said.

"Why? It looks wonderful! I'll make a different one next time,

okay? What about a look like Mr. Cedric's?"

"I'll think about it..."

At this remark, Lacey and Wayne bit their lips even harder to stop themselves from guffawing.

Once the shop owner removed his wig, Lacey and Wayne could finally look him in the eye. His body was as burly as ever, and his fingers girthy.

"Um, nice to see you, Mr. Theobald. This is Wayne Cielanic. Umm... He's my friend."

"I know about the great hero. I'm Theobald. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Wayne."

"Ms. Lacey, I also heard that my daughter was under your care the other day. I thank you."

"O-Oh, please don't mention it! Your daughter helped me out so much!"

As she watched Wayne and Theobald exchange a handshake, the latter suddenly bowed to Lacey and thanked her. She became flustered and started shaking her head frantically. She was befuddled by this turn of events and made the same confused face as she did back with Allen and his twin brothers.

In any case, Ellie's father, Theobald, turned out to be a friendly and gentle figure. When Lacey looked ahead, she saw Ellie beside her father, arms folded with a proud expression on her face. She must have been quite proud of having introduced her father to Lacey and Wayne. Her father should have also been the one who made the stuffed rabbit sticking out of her pouch.

"Anyway... You're here because you need something from us, yes?" Theobald asked Lacey slowly.

Lacey and Wayne exchanged glances. Wayne gestured to her with his eyes, asking if he should be the one to make the request. Lacey shook her head, took a deep breath, and puffed up her cheeks. Wayne wondered what she was trying to do, but he figured that she was just trying to psych herself up. Lacey went all the way here, so she should be the one to ask.

"Um, Mr. Theobald. It might be rude to ask this on our first meeting, but we have a request for you. Um... We'd really

appreciate your assistance...”

Lacey started to trail off at the end of her sentence. It was a bit doubtful whether Theobald had heard what she was saying. Ellie’s gaze was shifting around, trying to assess the situation. She looked at Lacey and then Theobald. Lacey’s voice was stuck in her throat, and it felt like something was tightening around her windpipe.

“My assistance, huh?” Theobald replied in a low baritone. Lacey flinched a bit. “This isn’t the kind of talk we should be doing out here. Come in.”

Theobald turned his back to them and vanished into the shop. Lacey and Wayne exchanged glances again. The anxiety in her chest was growing. What Lacey held to be precious wasn’t necessarily the same for others. She was terrified of interacting with other people. She wanted to run away. But that was exactly why she could feel that these things were valuable.

And it was also exactly why this situation was troublesome for her.

“An artifact that lets you capture memories... What a fantastic idea! So you need something like this glass piece, this ‘lens’ thing, yes? You also need a box, but that shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“Nice, glad you’re easy to talk to, old man! As long as the box doesn’t let light in, anything will do.”

“And you’ll be using that sunburn phenomenon too, right? Then we’ll need a platform to keep the box in place. You’ll need to put the box under the sunlight for a long period of time, and holding it in your hands will make the box shake.”

“I see! But it’s also not great if the height is fixed... What about something like this? Three legs, and you can spread or contract them if you want to raise or lower the height.”

“Okay, I’ll take that idea!” Theobald snapped his fingers, which were so large and thick that the resulting sound could be mistaken for an attack. The way he carried himself was reminiscent of Brooks, who might as well be a living mass of muscles.

“Lacey, would you like a drink?” Ellie offered.

“Thanks, Ellie.” Lacey bowed and took the glass of water. She had been quietly watching Wayne and Theobald’s discussion from a

corner of the room. At first, she was awkwardly trying to talk to Theobald. Across the counter table, Theobald was nodding and listening to Lacey's explanations. He was a hundred times more receptive to her ideas than expected. But he was *too* receptive. As a craftsman, he must have been very excited to work on such a novel idea. At first, Lacey was putting out ideas here and there, but at some point, Wayne had taken over for her, and now the discussion had been taken over by these two passionate men.

Adjusting the height, huh? I didn't even consider that... Lacey pondered the idea, then she shook her head. This wasn't the time to be dawdling around in the corner. She gulped down her drink and took a deep breath. She had decided to join in on the discussion. She didn't want to just sit there quietly.

"Um, in that case, Mr. Theobald, can we leave the production of the lens to you?!" Lacey's voice came out a lot higher pitched than she anticipated. Wayne and Theobald paused and glanced at her. Then, Theobald gave her an emphatic nod.

"I've made something like this lens before. All I have to do is sand down a piece of glass until we get this shape," he said.

"You're sounding more like a handyman than a smith," Wayne quipped.

"That's right. I'll even take jobs like fixing a hole-ridden pot," Theobald declared. Here in Plume Village, pots held more value than swords. He must have had a lot of experience with those kinds of jobs.

"I can leave my usual business to Ellie, and I don't have any urgent jobs anyway. I'm interested in seeing this artifact that can capture memories in its entirety, so you can leave the work to me. By the way, where do you plan to copy the images you want to capture? You brought up sunburns earlier, but you're not gonna use human skin, are you?"

"Um, I'm still thinking about that. Maybe something that's reactive to sunlight, sandwiched between panels of glass," Lacey suggested to Wayne and Theobald as her hands fidgeted uncomfortably. The two men thought for a while, then looked up and opened their mouths almost simultaneously.

"Silver!" they exclaimed.

"Huh? Silver?" Lacey blinked in confusion.

"Yeah, silver. I should've thought about it earlier," Wayne said. "You know how it's basic knowledge not to use light magic when wearing silver accessories? It makes the silver darken, right?"

"But Wayne, if we use silver to create images, it'll get really expensive. And if left alone, the images will absorb natural light and darken eventually."

"How about we turn the silver into powder and soak it in slime fluid? Then, we place it between two panes of glass. Slimes have some transforming abilities depending on the variant. We could cut the costs this way."

"That's it!!!" Theobald bellowed and slammed his hands on the countertop.

Slowly but surely, their ideas were shaping into something concrete. What started as Lacey's fantasy was becoming a reality.

"Umm... Uh, erm..."

Lacey had hoped that she'd be able to take charge this time, but once again, she had been swept away by the tides.

"Well, umm..." Lacey looked timidly at Wayne and Theobald. Ellie, with a tray pressed between her arm and body, sighed and looked at the two men with exasperation in her eyes.

"Yes, that's right. In short..." Theobald continued her train of thought.

"G-Gaaaaaah!!!"

"Lacey, hold on tight!"

Lacey did as Wayne said and held on to his back for dear life. She felt a sense of déjà vu. It was back when they had to chase Brooks, who was running amok, on horseback. While he couldn't quite reach the same speed as Brooks, Wayne could still run quite fast despite carrying a whole person on his back. Next to them, Noi was charging full speed ahead, while Tee was hovering right above Lacey's head.

Lacey and Wayne were slime hunting. They had to find ones that could transform and extract their fluids. These creatures preferred dark and narrow places where humans could only enter on foot.

Wayne couldn't ride his beloved horse to these dank, damp forests where the slimes could be found.

To hunt down these slimes, adventurers would make use of oscillation magic. Slimes were weak creatures, but immune to most physical attacks. To neutralize them, one had to use oscillations to vaporize the slime's body fluids, then destroy its exposed core. But this time, they needed an enormous amount of slime fluid, so that method was off the table.

"I'll leave the collection of the fluids to you, Lacey. Good luck."

"O-Okay..." Lacey's confidence vanished once she felt the weight of responsibility from being relied on.

The two of them entered the forest known as the Slime Woods, where these creatures lurked. Slimes rarely entered human settlements. Here, herds of slimes would occasionally gather and disguise themselves as trees.

"Grr-oink?!"

Noi's stumpy ears picked up a sound. He ran toward the source. Noi slammed headfirst against what seemed to be a normal rock, and got repelled. Then, the rock suddenly crumbled and separated into a number of round slimes that got launched into the air.

"Tee!" Lacey yelled.

"Kweeeh!!!"

Slimes instinctively feared fire; thus, phoenixes were their natural enemy. The fleeing round creatures heard Tee's cry and froze in place. Then, in that critical split second that they froze, Wayne—still carrying Lacey on his back—closed the distance between himself and the slimes. In one slash, he had cut open five slimes cleanly in half and exposed their cores.

In that instant, Lacey cast a spell. Blades of ice pierced the slimes' cores, and they were reduced to nothing but fluid. She cast water magic to gather the slime fluid by wrapping it in water. This was what Wayne meant by "collection of fluids." She sealed the fluids in water bubbles and let out a sigh.

"That's five," Lacey muttered.

These slime hunts were normally performed by a group of at least three mages and a number of other party members. Defeating

the slimes was a simple task, but when gathering slime fluid, someone had to destroy the slimes' exposed cores, and another had to collect the fluids. Only Lacey could manage to cast several spells at once to perform this task solo.

Lacey gathered the slime fluid inside the bottles she had prepared.

Wayne looked satisfied with the results and nodded. "Looks like your skills haven't dulled one bit," he said.

"Somehow. And you're the only one who could expose slime cores by force, just by slashing away their body fluids. Normal people have to use magic to weaken the slimes and expose their cores," Lacey retorted.

"Pretty efficient, right?" Wayne grinned.

It was now dusk when they finished gathering the slime fluid. Lacey and Wayne went back to Theobald's smithy the next day. This time, they brought Tee and Noi with them. There were six days left until Wayne had to return to the capital.

Theobald had finished making the lens. To test it out, they tried it in a completely dark room and managed to produce an inverted image. Since they could only produce an image that was inverted, they had to invert it again to produce the correct result. For now, they had accomplished their first goal. Wayne and Theobald slapped their hands together in excitement, while Lacey trembled in excitement and anxiety in the corner.

Next, they had to make the box. This didn't take very long to finish making, and soon enough, Lacey also slapped her hand against Theobald's. It produced a loud noise, and her hand felt numb right after.

The next step was to mix silver powder into the slime fluid. It was difficult to get the right proportion of silver and slime. All the measurements—the thickness of the glass, the volume of slime fluid, and other considerations—had to be just right. They had to try out many different patterns. At this point, Lacey and Wayne had to stay at Theobald's place. His wife, Paula, gave them a big smile and prepared dinner. The two of them thanked her and had their fill of

bread filled with cheese.

Two days had passed, and only four days remained until Wayne had to leave. They had discovered a terrible flaw in the images: They were too blurry. The problem apparently lay with the lens. To fix this, Lacey suggested using not one lens, but multiple thin ones to improve the detail of the resulting image. They spent another day trying this suggestion, then...

"It's done."

Lacey held in her hand a single image. It was an image, but it was much too detailed to be a mere drawing or painting. It was an image made with a sharp contrast between black and white, so detailed and realistic that it could've been a cutout of the real thing. No, it was a perfect copy of the real thing.

Lacey named this image a "photograph." It was an image made with a small box—a replica of that small room—reflecting what could be seen in reality. It was a device that could capture memories in a glass frame so that they could never be forgotten.

"Unbelievable. You really did it," Wayne muttered. It wasn't that he didn't believe that Lacey could do it, but he couldn't conceal his amazement. Lacey must have felt the same way. All of them slowly took a deep breath and slammed their hands together.

They had completed the small room. And thus, the camera was born.

"This... This is a pho—photo...graph? And you used this...camera thing...to capture it?"

"Mrs. Tricia, I'll explain it again, okay?"

Tricia had greeted Lacey at the village, seemingly having noticed that she and Wayne had been up to something at Theobald's place. Wayne was busy preparing for his trip back to the capital, and Lacey had the camera and three-legged stand—her tripod—with her, testing out the photographs all over the village. The quality of the photographs changed with the weather and the time of day, and she had been carrying around the camera to test these things. It was during this time that she ran into Tricia.

Tricia was the mother of Allen and the twins. Moreover, she also

had a daughter named Lane, whose name was very similar to Lacey's. Despite being a mother of four, she had quite a youthful appearance and often looked out for Lacey.

Tricia had invited Lacey to tea, and Lacey ended up following Tricia back home. Before, her first reaction would have been to reject the invitation and run away before being dragged along, unable to say no. Now, she accepted the invitation of her own will. It was very likely that she would have ended up going regardless of what she did, but the process of getting to that result still mattered.

Lacey stuffed herself with Tricia's handmade jam cookies and had some tea that had the gentle taste of home. Lane, who had just turned a year old, was making baby noises. Having seen her right as she had been born, Lacey was shocked at how quickly she had grown. Lane was now standing and walking on her own. Her steps were still a bit wobbly, but she was using two legs to walk to Tricia. Lacey couldn't help but be amazed at this sight.

Tricia picked up Lane and sat her beside Lacey.

"So, what were you up to?" Tricia asked Lacey, who was still grinning and gawking in amazement at Lane. She explained the camera to Tricia, but the concept seemed to be too complicated. "Photographs" were still a completely novel thing, and it was difficult to explain something that previously hadn't even existed. Even if she demonstrated what it did, she wouldn't be able to show her the resulting photograph immediately. She needed the right phenomenon to occur.

Lacey, Wayne, and Theobald had thought that the silver powder mixed with slime fluid was enough, but they discovered that the powder blackened before the fluid could solidify. After racking their brains, the solution they ended up with was using the saliva from ragias as a "fixing fluid" mixed into the photograph, preventing the silver from blackening further before the slime fluid could fully solidify.

A ragia was a monster who lived in the same damp forests as slimes. They were one of the few monsters that fed on slimes, and their saliva had some property that reacted with slime fluid. Thus, Lacey and Wayne had to go out and capture a ragia. They were

running their bodies ragged from staying up all night working on the camera, and by the time they finished, they were completely exhausted. Even though Lacey was starting to listen to her body's complaints, these cries were—and perhaps would continue to be—drowned out by the voices of excitement and curiosity in her head. She was now fully honest with herself.

"Hmm, well, a photograph is..." Lacey twirled her fingers and thought hard before arriving at the answer: She only needed to show her the actual product. Even though she couldn't demonstrate the process, she could show the one successful result. She cursed her own forgetfulness, bringing out the glass case from her bag.

"Mrs. Tricia, this is a photograph."

"This?"

It was a normal scene from Plume Village. Lacey had tried to take photographs of people, but they ended up blurry whenever they moved, so she had opted to capture motionless objects. She had taken photographs of houses, logs, and sasanquas. The photograph, encased in glass, made a small noise as Lacey placed it on the table.

Tricia silently looked at the photo with her mouth agape. She blinked repeatedly.

"This... This isn't a painting, is it?" Tricia finally spoke after a long moment of silence.

"No, it's not. To capture it, I need to count to ten depending on the way the sun is shining. I can even take a photograph of a person, as long as they aren't moving," Lacey replied. She felt a bit proud of herself for this accomplishment. She was sure that Tricia would be amazed. She felt a bit of pride and enjoyment whenever her creations left people speechless. Whenever people asked her what she was making, in her mind, she would pump her fists in joy and anticipation.

Lane suddenly made cute babbling noises and started stroking her mother's back. Tricia was staring at the photograph. Then, a single tear went down her eye.

"Huh?" Before she knew it, tears suddenly started gushing from Tricia's eyes. She wiped her face with her sleeves, but the tears wouldn't stop coming.

“M-M-Mrs. Tricia?! Wh-What’s wrong?!” Lacey started panicking. It was the first time she had seen Tricia cry. Lacey had tried to surprise her, only to end up being the one to get surprised. She was confused. She stood up and stepped back for a bit, then hastily approached Tricia to check on her.

“Wh-What’s wrong? I’m so sorry! D-Did I make you uncomfortable?! I’m really, really sorry!”

“No, Lacey... You didn’t do anything wrong. This... This item... It’s wonderful. I was just so moved that...” Tricia tried to speak through her tears.

Wonderful. If Tricia found it wonderful, then that meant she didn’t think that it was a terrible thing. Despite that, she was sniffling and rubbing her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I must have given you a fright. I was just so amazed that a thing like this could exist... No, that you could create something like this. I was so amazed that I couldn’t help but cry.”

Tricia’s words felt so far away. Lacey knew in her head that she was being praised, but it didn’t feel real to her.

“You cried...from just that?” The words escaped Lacey’s mouth before she knew it. She realized what she had just said and covered her mouth, but it was too late. The meaning was up to the listener’s interpretation, but *just that* was a very rude thing to say to Tricia. However, she didn’t have the time to correct herself.

Tricia stared at Lacey. *She’s mad. What should I do?* Lacey thought, but she didn’t know what to say.

Tricia was upset, but the reason was not what Lacey had expected.

“Lacey, don’t you know just how *incredible* this is?”

“Huh?”

Tricia had spoken those words carefully and emphasized each word. Lacey had no idea what she meant. Tricia sighed and picked up Lane, who was wriggling and writhing.

“Lane will grow up really, really soon.”

Lane giggled as she was picked up by her mother. Seeing this, a thought passed through Lacey’s mind for a moment. *Toddlers really do have the scent of milk.* She saw small but fully formed teeth in

Lane's mouth as she giggled.

"Allen, Reeve, and Yorma all grew up really quickly. I tried my best to treasure each and every moment with them, but no matter how hard I tried, those memories just kept on fading away. I should be glad to see them grow up, but I can't help but feel lonely despite that. But with this camera and photograph, I'd be able to see my children as they were in my memories. The details I couldn't remember... The memories I knew were there... I can keep them with me forever."

As she spoke, tears once again streamed down Tricia's face. As she sniffled and rubbed her eyes, Lane escaped her embrace and sat on Lacey's lap.

"Lacey, I'll ask you again. Are you aware of just how incredible your creation is?"

Lacey recalled the time she bought the portrait depicting herself and her companions from a stall at the capital. The version of herself in the painting was a far cry from her actual self, but it didn't matter. Wayne chided her for hobbling around with a gigantic painting and forgetting to use spatial magic to store it. But she wanted to hold it with her own two hands. Upon arriving at Plume Village, she hung it in the most conspicuous spot in her mansion, and would feel a sense of pride whenever she stared at the depiction of her comrades.

Loneliness drove Lacey to buy that painting. She felt sadness digging deep into her heart once her mission as a mage ended and her loveless engagement to a noble began. At the very least, she would have that painting with her. She would be able to treasure her precious memories with her companions.

"I'm... I'm very aware..." Lacey muttered, her expression unchanging. She was not a stranger to the feelings that Tricia experienced. Right now, her emotions were a blur. When she answered, her head drooped down, her gaze drifted to the floor, and when she blinked, she suddenly felt a tight embrace from behind. Lacey was shorter than Tricia, so she was surprised to see her stoop down with her jaw resting on Lacey's shoulder.

"Thank you..." Tricia couldn't hold back her emotions. She was trembling even as she kept Lacey in her tight embrace. "Lacey...

Thank you so much."

A wave of emotions began to swell within Lacey's chest. The bubble of her feelings burst, sweeping her away with wave after wave. She couldn't stop it anymore. The body of water that contained her emotions was beautiful, breathtaking, but also terrifying, and made her want to look away.

Lacey exhaled and blew her nose. Her lips were trembling as she tried to speak, and before she knew it, she was sobbing like Tricia. The two of them were gasping as they embraced each other and let out all of their emotions.

Lacey's eyes were still a little swollen when she returned to the mansion. Wayne was concerned, but he pretended not to notice. Lacey felt embarrassed for sobbing so much, so this little gesture of kindness was much appreciated.

The following day, Lacey and Wayne went on a picnic. Their destination was a bit far from the mansion, so they decided to pack lunch for the trip. They also brought the camera and tripod with them.

Because taking a photograph of a moving object led to a blurry image, they had to take the wind into consideration. The two of them sighed as they performed the difficult task of observing and adjusting to the weather.

"This good?" Wayne asked.

"Yeah, looks great," Lacey replied.

The pair took photographs of mundane objects: leaves, flowers, mountains, and trees.

Tomorrow, Wayne would be heading back to the capital, so Lacey had invited him to this trip to take photographs with the camera. She didn't have a particular subject in mind; she just wanted to take pictures with him.

"I started rushing to make the camera because I thought you might want to do something like this." Lacey and Wayne walked together, taking photographs of the scenery along their path.

"I'm grateful that you managed to think of me like that," Wayne said, averting his gaze. He must have been embarrassed. "Anyway,

how's the camera feel?"

"Feels really great. Oh, but there are lots of things I want to improve. Like how it can only take black-and-white photographs, or that it takes a lot of time to capture one photograph. Wayne, thanks for helping out."

"Lacey, I think you're a genius."

Lacey couldn't help but laugh awkwardly at Wayne's compliment. There was only so much that she could do on her own. She wouldn't have been able to make the camera without the help of so many people along the way. Theobald's handiwork, Reeve's and Yorma's suggestions, and, of course, Wayne's skills.

"Hey, Wayne, yesterday I had a talk with Mrs. Tricia."

"Really? What did you talk about?"

"She thanked me for making these photographs," Lacey said.

"Huh, good for you, then," Wayne said nonchalantly. Despite that, Lacey knew that he had been worried about her. He would always be gentle to Lacey whenever she learned something new. Lacey smiled awkwardly and continued.

"That made me realize that other people won't always value the same things that I do. Like when my ex-fiancé called my staff a filthy thing. That's why I was so scared of asking Mr. Theobald to make the lens for the camera."

Lacey had nearly thrown away her entire life and magic by asking Wayne to burn her staff. But now, she was eternally thankful she didn't go through with it.

"On the other hand, I learned that, sometimes, the things that I value are even more valuable to others. Wayne... Thank you for not burning my staff when I asked."

"Wow, now that's a trip down memory lane. Just so you know, I only rejected your request the first time you asked."

The second time Lacey asked, they were interrupted, and she never brought up the matter again. Even so, Wayne's initial rejection had surely saved her from a lifetime of regret.

"So now, I want to treasure the things that others think are valuable. I hope that this camera will be able to capture many more memories in the future. Of course, it can still be used in the wrong

way. It might capture awful moments or things that shouldn't be seen. I think it could end up preserving those too," Lacey opined.

"That's no different from magic, then. Convenience always comes with dangers. It's always going to be up to the user in the end," Wayne replied.

"Really? I can't say that with confidence. But I hope that this camera will make the world a happier place."

Everything started with the wedding of Cedric's daughter. Reeve and Yorma argued about the dress she wore. They couldn't quite remember, and Lacey thought of finding a way to leave such memories behind for everyone. During the wedding, she recalled that Cedric was also having trouble finding a present to give his daughter in secret.

"I wish happiness to everyone who will get married in the future. Of course, Starseeking will be helping out not just brides-to-be, but everyone who needs help. I think that's the kind of freedom that I want to pursue."

Lacey despised the hollowness that she felt in herself. That was why she wanted to fill in that void. She wanted to make a choice and live freely. That was why she was standing here, facing forward and into the future.

Wayne stared wistfully at Lacey, who was silently gazing at a grassy expanse. Then, his expression turned serious. "So that's the answer you've arrived at?" he asked her. Lacey, taken aback by the sudden grave tone of Wayne's question, turned her eyes to him.

Then, his tone went back to his usual self. "Hey, Lacey. I wasn't here for a whole month without a reason, you know?" Wayne said, seemingly at a loss for how to explain himself.

"Wayne?"

"I was given a request. I had a month to fulfill it. During that time, I had to get the Dawn Witch—or rather, the maker of the Aster Insignia artifacts—to accept that request. I didn't want to have anything to do with it, so I was just gonna go back to the capital and tell them I couldn't get you to say yes."

In short, Wayne wanted to shut off the request before it even reached Lacey.

"You mean..."

"Listen. Can you guess who might've given me the request?"

Lacey was about to get upset at Wayne, but she suddenly realized something strange. The request wasn't addressed to Starseeking. In fact, the name "Starseeking" was practically unknown outside of Plume Village, which is why the requester referred to the Dawn Witch. And other than her friends, only one other person knew the name Lacey *Aster*, her new name. And of course, that person was also one of the few people with the authority to give Wayne orders.

After seeing Lacey's expression change with her realization, Wayne knew that she had figured it out. "That's right. The requester is King Croix, the ruler of this land. And the request involves his daughter, Lady Alicia, who's about to get married off to a prince from a neighboring country. So, do you want to hear the request? You don't have to, of course."

Alicia Castile, the lovely princess of Croix with pinkish-blonde hair. She had two elder brothers and was the only daughter in their family. As the sole princess, she was showered with affection by the king. And now, she was slated to be married to a prince from the neighboring country of Eharaja.

Alicia's upcoming wedding was to be celebrated in the capital with an abundance of spring flowers. This resulted in the price of flowers spiking all over the capital, which was another reason Selene had wanted to hold her wedding earlier.

A request involving Princess Alicia from King Croix himself? This was far beyond Lacey's wildest imagination, so she had no idea how to react. As if reflecting the state of her mind, the quiet grassland was suddenly disturbed by a strong gust of wind.

"Lacey, just to be clear, this isn't an order from the king. And even if it was, you have the right to say no. You're no longer tied to the country." Wayne let out a long sigh after saying his piece and sat cross-legged on the ground. He seemed to be very reluctant to tell Lacey about all of this, and the creases on his brow made it crystal clear.

Lacey was ready to be critical of Wayne, but she quickly figured

out why he held back from telling Lacey about the request. As always, it was out of respect for her decisions.

"Thanks for your concern. But I should hear it out." Lacey had decided. She would listen to the request, whether it was for Starseeking, for the Dawn Witch, or for Lacey Aster. She sat down next to Wayne, who took a deep breath, then exhaled. Whenever Lacey looked at him, she would often forget that he was the son of a noble. Sometimes, he would have moments that reminded her of that fact. This time, it was the former.

After a long sigh, Wayne slowly turned to face Lacey. "So, um... You know how Princess Alicia is getting married soon?"

"Yeah. Once it's spring, right? It should be in less than a month from now."

Wayne had already mentioned that Princess Alicia's wedding had caused weddings to be a fad all over the country. He kept glancing at Lacey, seemingly trying to figure out her reactions. Lacey looked confused and wondered what this was all about.

"Princess Alicia is...well... Uh, a lot happened, right? Well, uhh... You know..."

"Know what?"

Lacey stared at Wayne, who was groaning and struggling with how to explain everything to her. Lacey figured that he must have been referring to the incident between Raymond Dejafaim and Princess Alicia. Wayne must have found it difficult to discuss the details of that time.

Raymond was Lacey's ex-fiancé, who had also cheated on her with Alicia. Unfortunately, his womanizing went far beyond everyone's expectations, and he had been cheating on several women. His tryst with Alicia was exposed before the king, and he received the appropriate punishment for it.

"Okay, so..." Wayne slowly started explaining the situation to Lacey.

To cut it short, Alicia had been heartbroken ever since the incident with Raymond. Contrary to expectations, instead of being sick of men, she dove straight into finding a marriage partner. To forget about Raymond, she opted to find a new man and get

married off to a different country to bury all her memories of him. The neighboring country of Eharaja had friendly relations with Croix, and marriage was the perfect opportunity to deepen the ties between the two nations. The preparations for the marriage were going smoothly, or they should have been.

"Now that the wedding date is getting closer, Princess Alicia has started sinking deep into depression. She refuses to leave her room and just stares out her window at the city. I just think it's pretty spoiled of her when she asked for all this herself."

"Wayne, it's not strange for someone to start feeling anxious about something they decided for themselves," Lacey scolded.

"Okay, okay. I won't say anything more about that. I just wanted to say what I feel about all this." Wayne appeared to be quite furious. However, he swallowed his anger and continued his explanation.

"Ever since locking herself in her room, the only things that the princess has expressed interest in are your artifacts. She especially likes the sachets, and whenever a new one gets released, she orders her maid to go out and buy her one."

"That's..." Lacey felt a mix of ticklish pride and vexation.

"The king has asked several people to help out already, from high-ranking priests, famous merchants, chefs known for preparing delectable meals, and designers known for their luxurious dresses. He asked every famous and high-ranking person he could think of to figure out what Princess Alicia wants, but none of them were permitted in her room, and she never smiled once at them. The only exception was whenever she would receive an Aster artifact."

The sound of the wind echoed around them, almost as if all other sounds had been muffled.

"The preparations for her wedding are still ongoing, even though she refuses to leave her room. The king is at the end of his rope. In other words, Lacey, you're his last resort."

They couldn't just cancel the wedding this close to the actual date, and it would also damage relations between the two countries. Even if she were his precious only daughter, Alicia's actions as the princess were a massive source of headaches for the king.

"I'll go to the capital and accept the request," Lacey declared. Of course, she had no idea whether she'd be of any assistance, but she had to start somewhere.

Lacey's instant reply caught Wayne off guard. He blinked, then asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah. But I'm not doing this for the sake of the country. Well, I'd still like it if we remain friends with our neighbors. But this is the same thing as Mr. Cedric and Selene, right? This is a problem between father and daughter."

Lacey couldn't just favor one request over the other. She was still just human, of course, and it was inevitable that she would have some biases. But this request was no different from one she would receive as Starseeking. This request was between the king and the princess, and she was a mere mage. But beyond all those titles, they were all just regular people. The choice to reject the request on account of the requester being a nation's ruler did not exist within her.

"A problem between father and daughter, huh? Well, you're not wrong. But... Don't you have any negative feelings about all this? I mean, it's *that* Alicia, right?"

"Negative feelings? Why?"

"I mean, a lot of things happened... You know, between you and Raymond."

"Me and Raymond? Oh... Oh!" Lacey clapped her hands together. Wayne was referring to the fact that Raymond, her fiancé, had cheated on her with Alicia. She understood that Wayne was trying to respect Lacey's desire to live freely and without being bound to the country by not telling her about the request, but it would seem that he was also trying to be careful about one other thing.

Lacey giggled. Come to think of it, Wayne had also been confused about how she didn't react at all when they were talking about Alicia's wedding at the Sasanqua.

"Wayne, thanks for worrying about me. But sorry... To be honest, I really don't mind at all. And it was because of that incident that I'm living life the way I am right now, so I'm kind of thankful to Alicia for that." In truth, she was more worried about Alicia finding her

untrustworthy after she had practically destroyed her relationship with Raymond in front of the king.

Lacey knew nothing about Raymond. Even when she asked Wayne about what kind of man he was, all he could answer was about his looks. That was why she felt no regret or sadness when talking about him.

"Umm... Sorry, okay?"

"Right. You've always been like that. I guess I've been too worried again." Lacey felt bad for Wayne, seeing him deflate. "Back then, I thought you were sobbing because of him."

"Back then? Oh... Oh! Uhh, umm... That's—" Lacey stammered.

Wayne was talking about the time Raymond canceled their engagement. It was over a year ago, right before she arrived at Plume Village. She cried like a baby out of relief. It was the first time she cried in front of everyone, or perhaps the first time she sobbed like that at all. Lacey's face went beet red from Wayne bringing up a past event that she would rather forget. Knowing that Wayne had misunderstood her tears all this time made her want to crawl into a hole.

"Th-That's not why I cried! I wasn't crying because my engagement got canceled... I was relieved..."

"Relieved?"

She must have cried because Wayne was with her back then. She never had to unleash all her sadness and loneliness until then, and for the first time in her life, she sobbed. But she wouldn't be caught saying all that out loud. She could only groan and writhe in embarrassment.

"Anyway, you got it all wrong, okay? My sobbing had nothing to do with the engagement!" Lacey insisted. She would've cleared up Wayne's misunderstanding if she had just explained herself, but the embarrassment prevented her from doing so. But she still wanted him to know about her feelings. Contradictory emotions stirred inside her heart. "This conversation is over! Got it?"

"O-Okay then."

She couldn't deal with the matter, so she forcefully dropped the topic. Lacey's face was all red like a ripe tomato as she stood up and

took a deep breath. Then, the funny girl with the amusing expressions that had been there just now vanished.

"I'll take the request. I'm not taking the request as the Dawn Witch or as the Aster artifact maker. I'm accepting it as Lacey of Starseeking, out of my own free will. This is my *freedom*, and my choice," Lacey declared. Even if the requester was the king of Croix himself, that didn't matter to her. She was offering her services because someone needed help, and that's all that she needed.

Lacey's hair swayed in the wind. Wayne silently gazed at her, then stood up after her.

"So that's the answer you've arrived at," he echoed his words from earlier, but now in a more gentle tone. Wayne's expression had softened. "In that case, I'll take you to King Croix. And if he makes you do something you don't want, I swear that I'll protect you from him."

"Wayne, I'm really glad that you're doing all this for me. But I'm fine. I don't want you to push yourself too much."

"I'm not pushing myself. This is what I want. My *wish*."

After Lacey's party had slain the Demon King, they all expressed their greatest wish before King Croix. One wished for his martial arts to be acknowledged. Another wished for a large sum of money so that orphaned children may no longer wander the streets. Lacey wished to be free from her ties to the nation. And Wayne wished to be able to grant whatever Lacey wished for.

Right now, Lacey had no way of repaying Wayne for all he'd done for her. She felt her chest burn. It was like she was about to cry, but not quite. She wore a determined expression on her face and swallowed the incoming tide of emotions, then looked straight into Wayne's eyes. Neither of them needed any more words. They drew their fists together in a show of determination.

Chapter 4: A New Request

Lacey should have been used to packing her things for a trip to the capital, but she took longer than usual this time. She looked around her room and noticed that she had more belongings than she used to. There were prototypes of items that she and Wayne created, chestnuts and fruits given to her by the village children, the flowers from Selene, and Tee's and Noi's food bowls.

Her room felt warm and gentle. Before Lacey knew it, her life as her own person was getting filled up like water being poured into an empty vessel.

Lacey embraced her bag, smiled, then filled it up with her belongings one by one. There was a slight sense of urgency, but she made sure to take care of each and every item.

Lacey left the mansion to Tee and Noi, then rode with Wayne to the capital on his beloved horse.

Since moving to Plume Village, Lacey had headed to the capital only once to check on Allen as he worked. It had been a while since she entered its grand gates. Inside, the city was abuzz with excitement, which soon infected Lacey. Before, she found the capital to be a lonely place. The roads were full of people whose lives felt so distant to her. But now, the colors that she saw all over were brighter and more vivid than ever before. The capital was more joyful, more lively than she had remembered. Everyone she encountered was laughing and smiling.

As she walked down the capital's streets, Lacey would sometimes spot women wearing bags with the Aster insignia stitched on them. Each time it happened, she felt like her heart would leap out of her chest. She felt an incredible sense of happiness, and she would feel her expression soften into a smile every time. Seeing Lacey try to suppress her excitement, Wayne couldn't help but smile.

Then, Lacey and Wayne arrived at the castle. It was not her first

time being here, but she still felt nervous. Her request for an audience with the king surprisingly went without a hitch, and they were guided straight to the audience chamber. Normally, even the Dawn Witch and the hero Wayne would have had to wait for a while. Perhaps that was just how urgently the king wanted this request granted. When she gazed up at the king sitting on his throne, she felt that he was a bit smaller than she remembered.

The king's brow twitched slightly as he began speaking. "Lacey Aster, the Dawn Witch. I welcome you to my palace. And Wayne, I commend you for finding the Aster artifact maker and bringing her to an audience with me."

Wayne was silent and bowed his head before the king, and there was no way of knowing that he had ignored the king's request and withheld from informing Lacey of it until very recently.

King Croix had his arms on his throne's armrests and moved slightly forward as he spoke. "I had heard rumors of the artifacts with the Aster insignia, but I had my doubts. To think that it truly was you, the Dawn Witch. You must have heard from the hero already, but my daughter has been very...distressed by her upcoming wedding. I would like you to ease her emotions. Am I clear?"

"Your Highness, I must apologize," Lacey answered in a calm but clear tone. "I am not presenting myself before you as the Dawn Witch."

"Does this mean that you refuse to accept my request?"

"On the contrary, Your Highness. I would like to declare that I am here, of my own will, to relieve Princess Alicia of her distress. I, Lacey, wish to be of assistance to her highness, the princess of Croix."

Lacey stared straight into the king's eyes.

Was this girl capable of such a fierce expression before? King Croix flinched for a split second. Lacey's living arrangements in Plume Village, including the mansion, were granted to her by King Croix himself. He was very aware of her whereabouts. Though he had given her the Aster name and permitted her freedom, the Dawn Witch was a grave threat to Croix. He couldn't just ignore her.

However, the king had also granted Wayne's desire to grant Lacey's wish. He could not just turn back on his word to the Witch and the Hero. Though he knew it was Lacey who had been creating the artifacts that were getting popular around the city, he had to feign ignorance and ordered the hero to find the artifact maker. He gave Wayne a deadline of one month. He had also expected Wayne to cover for her and had low hopes that he would actually bring her before the throne. And yet...

King Croix was at the end of his rope trying to figure out how to send his daughter to their neighbor without incident. He loved Princess Alicia and showered her with so much affection, but this time, the entire country's well-being was on the line. This time, she was being too selfish, and it was giving him a migraine. And when Lacey announced that she was not here as the Dawn Witch, he felt cold sweat pour down his back. He gulped, expecting her to reject his request. But once she'd said outright that she was willing to lend her assistance, he only had one thing to say to her.

"I expect much of you. I leave the task to you."

Lacey smiled at the king's reply. Her hazel eyes were gazing straight at him.

The king frowned. *Is this really the same Lacey Aster that I knew?* he thought. She'd grown a bit taller than the Lacey of his memories. She was no longer wearing a gloomy and heavy robe; rather, she wore clothes appropriate for a girl her age. Normally, anyone being granted an audience by the king should be wearing more formal clothing, but he granted them an exception. He wanted to see her as soon as possible.

Lacey's appearance had definitely changed. But the chill down his back was not solely because of this. Before he knew it, the king's hands gripped the armrests with exceptional force.

Where did the girl who struggled to stand on her own go?

When Lacey had stood before him to ask to cancel her contract, her legs had been trembling, and she'd had to rely on her staff to keep herself upright. She had been the most powerful mage throughout the entire country, but she was horribly introverted. That was the impression the king had of her. But now?

“Head straight to Alicia’s quarters. I have already informed her of your arrival.”

“Understood. I shall be taking my leave, Your Highness.”

Lacey bowed, and she and Wayne left the throne room. Just as they had left, the king let out a long sigh.

“Lacey Aster... You’re fifteen...no, sixteen years old?” the king muttered.

Lacey had been an orphan, but her talents as a mage were truly exceptional. This was somewhat of a mismatch with her personality, but this served to strengthen her magic even further. Other than her young age, she was the only one fit to defeat the Demon King. But she had been too immature.

The king recalled his daughter’s age. She was three years older than Lacey, but she was too carefree to be a princess of this country. The fact that she was about to be married off to the neighboring country did not help assuage his worries.

“I can’t tell which of them is truly the elder...”

Lacey looked too young to be sixteen. On the other hand, Alicia looked too mature for her age, but that was only surface level. He wondered what it would have been like if it had been the other way around. He sighed once more, longer and weightier than the first time, as he imagined an impossible scenario.

***

“Nnnngggh...”

Lacey was walking stiffly down the hallway, with Wayne next to her. She walked quickly, wanting to get away from the door that shut behind her. Wayne already knew his way around the palace, so he declined offers to guide the two of them to Alicia’s room after checking with Lacey.

Lacey kept walking. She walked, and walked, and walked, and sometimes sprinted. Finally...

“Gwaah! I thought I was gonna get yelled at... I was sure I was gonna get yelled at! Waaah!” Lacey cried.

“Nah. You didn’t say anything wrong. The king has already given

up on his right to order you around," Wayne assured her.

"Still! Ahh, I thought I was gonna die! Look, Wayne, my legs are still shaking!"

Wayne cackled. "Incredible. You're trembling more than a newborn deer!"

The tremors had spread throughout Lacey's whole body. Oddly enough, this managed to calm her down. She leaned against the wall, took a deep breath, then exhaled. Her fingers were still shaking.

Lacey stared at her trembling body.

I'm still standing.

Lacey was scared, and she was still about to buckle to the floor. In the end, she managed to hold fast. She was shaky, but that was all. She balled her hand into a fist and looked at Wayne.

"Wayne, I'm moving forward."

"Yeah."

"I'm growing up."

"That's right."

"I've grown up!"

"Just a bit."

Wayne didn't affirm the last one, but he was still grinning at her.

"Okay, let's do this!" Lacey yelled and took a big step forward. Wayne couldn't help but let out an awkward laugh.

Lacey turned around. The pair had declined to be shown around the castle, but she didn't know where Alicia's room was. Lacey tried to communicate this to Wayne, but they ended up staring at each other. Wayne's eyes said nothing. She realized that Wayne didn't know where the room was either. Even though Wayne knew his way around, he had never gone to Alicia's room. The best he could do was approximate where it was.

Lacey stared blankly at Wayne.

"Sorry. You, um, didn't seem to be okay earlier, so..."

Wayne's decision not to have prying eyes on them was correct. Lacey would have exposed her incessant trembling to the eyes of strangers. However, this was not the time to praise Wayne the hero for his decision-making skills. Lacey and Wayne nodded at each

other and promptly turned around.

After overcoming the initial awkwardness of having to ask for a guide after they had already declined one, Lacey and Wayne managed to get directions from a soldier. "Princess Alicia's room is that way," the soldier said, and they bowed and gave thanks before leaving.

The king said he had already informed Alicia of their arrival, but Lacey wondered if she still had to inform the guard posted in front of her room. They had arrived right in front of their destination, but there was still a big gulf separating Lacey from the door.

"Lacey, sorry, but I'll stay here. I don't think you'll get anything out of her while I'm around," Wayne said.

"Huh? I don't think that's—"

"I'm the guy who exposed her lover, remember? In her eyes, I might as well be the biggest criminal in the entire country."

Wayne was the one who exposed Raymond's philandering to the king, and Alicia was there to witness it. As Lacey struggled to find words to affirm or deny Wayne's statement, he continued. "You don't have to mind me. I'll wait outside the castle, okay? Sorry for making you worry." Wayne ruffled Lacey's hair, then took his leave.

The soldier guide had also left, so now, Lacey was all alone in the hallway. But she couldn't just stand there forever. A soldier was standing guard in front of Alicia's room, unmoving, with his hands behind his back. She timidly approached the soldier.

"Um... Excuse me. I have been ordered by the king to enter Princess Alicia's room."

"Ah, you must be the Aster artifact maker. I have been informed by his highness as well. Princess Alicia awaits inside," the soldier responded politely to Lacey and bowed.

"Inside..."

Should I go in already? Lacey wondered and looked up at the door. Right then, she heard thumping sounds coming from inside the room. Someone seemed to be rampaging inside. Lacey and the soldier stared at each other.

Maybe I should go some other time. Lacey frowned. The

thumping and thudding continued. She stared blankly at the door, wondering what to do next.

"Her Highness has informed me to let the Aster artifact maker in when she arrives," the soldier told Lacey.

"But—"

The soldier cleared his throat and knocked on the door thrice.

"They're here?! Tell them not to come in yet!" called a voice from inside the room.

See? I knew it! Lacey, filled with strange levels of confidence, looked at the guard.

"Actually, never mind! Let them in!"

Okay, which is it?

Whenever she was presented with two choices, Lacey tended to answer in the negative. She picked the path of least resistance and decided not to enter. The noises coming from the room had vanished, but she decided to wait until she got definitive permission. It wasn't like she was resistant to the idea of waiting.

Time passed; Lacey had no idea how long. Alicia, having grown impatient, opened the door with great force. "Arrgh, jeez! How long do you intend to keep me waiting?!" she cried.

Alicia's gaze met Lacey's, whose eyes went wide from surprise. She blinked repeatedly, and her mouth was wide open.

"Oh my, I apologize. I had no idea you were this close to the door. I am very sorry for surprising you. So you are the famed Aster artifact maker—"

Alicia had a gracious smile on her face, then did a double take at Lacey's face. "Oh?" she said, then her mouth opened and closed like a fish.

"Y-Y-You're the Dawn Witch!"

Alicia did not recognize Lacey the first time they met, but it seemed that the princess remembered her this time around. Now that she had been recognized, she had no choice but to acknowledge it.

"A pleasure to see you again, Princess Ali—"

"Gaaaaah?!" Alicia let out a loud scream, cutting off Lacey's words as her arms fumbled about. It was the first time Lacey had been

directly in the path of such a scream.

Looks like this request won't be so straightforward either. Lacey's brow furrowed, not out of discomfort, but out of anxiety. She couldn't help but frown and feel like giving up right off the bat.

"Gyaaaah! Gaaaah! Gwaaaaah?!"

Alicia's screams got more colorful and richer in variety the longer Lacey kept quiet. Lacey had accepted the request not to help out the king, but to help out father and daughter. But now, she was starting to think that she might have made the wrong choice. Perhaps she wasn't the right person for the job after all.

What do I do now? Lacey thought. *She seems very...different from the last time I saw her.*

Alicia appeared to be completely perplexed by the situation. Finally, she calmed down, but was still heaving labored breaths. She pointed a trembling finger at Lacey.

"I-I could have sworn that I asked for the Aster artifact maker! Why are *you* here?!"

"Umm... I'm sorry..." Lacey mumbled.

"Sorry?! What the hell does that mean?! Don't just look at me with those dead eyes! Speak up! I've always *hated* that about you—"



Alicia's meticulously groomed hair was now in shambles as she exploded at Lacey. Then, a realization seemed to have dawned on her as her expression turned to one of shock, as if lightning had just struck her.

"Don't tell me... *You're* the Aster artifact maker?"

Lacey's face contorted once more, as if she had just sucked on a sour lemon.

"Whaaat?! What have I done?!" Alicia went back into her room and slammed the door. "Really?! You're not lying to me?!"

Then, Alicia opened the door once more. Her head peeked out of the opening. The guard no longer seemed to care and had his back turned away. Lacey couldn't say anything and kept quiet.

Alicia was seemingly bothered by the silence. She bit her trembling lips, then said, "Enter!" She grabbed Lacey by the chest and dragged her into the room.

Lacey stumbled into the room and turned to see the door shut behind her. She took a look around and was surprised at the gloominess. All the curtains were drawn shut save for one window. The room seemingly reflected Alicia's current state of mind. Lacey's nose twitched at the scents inside. Then, her hazel eyes widened, and her expression loosened.

Lacey started getting concerned that she was looking around too much, and shifted her gaze to Alicia. However, her back had been turned away from Lacey this whole time.

"Umm..." Lacey started.

"I've been waiting this whole time! And yet—"

"I got lost in the palace hallways. I apologize for making you wait."

"I don't care about that right now!"

Alicia turned to face Lacey, her fist balled tightly. Her face was beet red, and she looked like she was about to burst into tears at any time. Despite that, her pinkish-blonde hair was as beautiful as ever, and her bountiful figure reminded Lacey of Dana, her friend and former traveling companion. If Lacey was not mistaken, Alicia was nineteen years old but looked older. She felt a slight pang of

envy.

"I heard from my father that the Aster artifact maker would be coming to see me. If I had heard that it was you, I would not have allowed you to enter my room."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not asking for your apology! I didn't think I would ever see you again. I mean, I...and your fiancé..."

"Uh... Um..."

Alicia must have been referring to the incident with Raymond. She looked incredibly uncomfortable, but Lacey seemed completely unfazed.

"What is *wrong* with you?!"

Seeing Lacey make no attempt at a rebuttal, Alicia yelled at her and turned away. Then, the princess sat down and continued to pout and sulk.

Lacey could count the number of times she'd seen Alicia on one hand. Other than the time she caught her in a tryst with Raymond, Alicia had been present when the royals had sent their party off to fight the Demon King, and again during the parade after the Demon King's defeat. To Lacey, Alicia gave off the impression of a mature lady, but perhaps the Alicia she was seeing right now was her true self. The way she pouted reminded Lacey of the smith's daughter Ellie, and also of Yorma. It might have been rude to compare her to actual children, but doing this made Lacey feel unexpectedly relieved.

Wayne had mentioned that Alicia was not opposed to marrying a prince from neighboring Eharaja. Of course, he had heard this secondhand from the king, so there was no way to verify this. Alicia might have felt the complete opposite, or she might not have known what she truly wanted. Therefore, the first thing that Lacey had to know was Alicia's honest thoughts.

"Why don't you have some snacks first?" Alicia said.

"Huh?"

"I already have some prepared. I can't eat all of this on my own." Alicia's displeasure was clear in the tone of her voice. Her gaze was fixed on the lovely slice of cake decorated with bright red

strawberries sitting on top of the table, with a big plate of cookies right next to it. Steam was rising from the teacups on the table as well.

Lacey's eyes couldn't help but brighten at the sight. "Then, if you'll excuse me." She bowed and took a seat in front of Alicia. She reached out to one of the cups and took a sip of tea, warming herself.

Meanwhile, Alicia was mumbling to herself.

"I was so enamored hearing about this anonymous artifact maker too. The most powerful mage in the entire country? One of the heroes who defeated the Demon King? And now you tell me she also made those fashionable artifacts that made their way all over the country? This is such a scam!"

Lacey strained her ears to listen to Alicia's mumbling. She started feeling like cake was stuck down her throat. She was about to spit out the tea that she had been drinking.

"Um... Your Highness?"

"What is it? I have nothing to say to you. I bet this was all father's doing as well. I already know everything."

Alicia's tone was cold. Lacey had no footing to step on, but she had to break the ice somehow. She struggled to figure out how. If Wayne were to do this, he would have picked out the words that best suited Alicia's feelings. But Wayne wasn't with Lacey right now, so all Lacey could do was express her honest thoughts.

"As you say, Your Highness, I came here because I accepted King Croix's request. The king is very worried about you. Would you let me be of assistance?"

Alicia stared straight into Lacey's eyes. "I have nothing more to say to you," she said coldly.

"And so you left just like that?"

"Well, yes..."

"What an irritating princess. That's exactly how I imagined she would answer."

"Wayne, don't be so rude..."

Wayne shrugged. He and Lacey were strolling along the streets of

the capital. Wayne had used his concealment magic to disguise his appearance. While everyone in Plume Village already knew of his identity as the hero, showing up in the middle of the capital would surely cause a massive panic. It had already been a year since his party had defeated the Demon King, but his popularity was as strong as ever. On the other hand, the Dawn Witch's appearance as known to the public was completely different from her actual appearance, so Lacey had no such problems when walking through crowds.

"Well, sounds like your work is done, then. If she doesn't want any help, then you shouldn't force it on her. Though I'm concerned about how the country next door will take it."

"Wayne, I'm not really concerned about what will happen with Eharaja," Lacey said. It would be a big problem if this ended up sparking a war, but the other nations owed a debt to the country of Croix for the feat of defeating the Demon King. Lacey expected that it wouldn't be such a huge deal in the end. And if it turned into an international incident, that was no longer Lacey's problem, but the royal family's. It would be King Croix's issue to worry about. All Lacey wanted to know was what Alicia was thinking and what she was worrying about.

When Lacey explained her thoughts to Wayne, he nodded and said, "I see." As they walked, Wayne offered to buy a snack from a stall, but Lacey put a hand to her mouth and let out a small burp, then shook her head. Wayne wondered just how much she had eaten in Alicia's room. After all, there was a mountain of cookies on offer.

Wayne and Lacey sat on a bench as they waited for her stomach to settle. Lacey normally had a small appetite, so they had to look out for food coming back up and out of her mouth.

"So, do you plan on going back to the palace?" Wayne asked Lacey, whose face was still pale.

"Yeah. We don't have much time until the wedding... Urp."

"Are you really gonna be okay?" Wayne worried.

While neither of them was really that concerned, it was still best if Alicia could head to Eharaja without a worry. Lacey wanted to resolve her concerns as soon as possible.

Wayne rubbed Lacey's back to relieve her as he spoke. "I heard that the prince of Eharaja will be attending a party here in two weeks. That's probably your deadline. They can't have said party without the main character, after all."

"You're right... What should I do?" Lacey asked.

"First of all, as long as Princess Alicia refuses to talk to you, I'm out of ideas."

"Yeah, but...she didn't drive me out of her room."

"But she did say that she has nothing to say to you, right?"

Lacey had already informed Wayne about everything that had happened between her and Alicia. She nodded to Wayne.

"That's basically the same thing, then," Wayne said.

"No, it's not. If she drove me out, then we're stuck. But she only said that she doesn't want to talk to me, so I can still visit her. They're different things... I think," Lacey frowned, still lacking confidence in her words. Her stomach seemed to have settled as she talked with Wayne. She exhaled and rubbed it gingerly.

"Sounds like you're taking her words too literally."

"Yeah, but, you know, she served me hot tea."

Wayne raised an eyebrow. *So what?* His expression seemed to say as much.

Lacey explained. "Princess Alicia had no idea when I'd arrive, right? We were lost in the palace hallways for a while, so I arrived much later than she expected. But the tea in the room was still hot, so she must have prepared it right before we talked. There was no one else in the room other than her."

"You're telling me that the princess served you tea herself?"

"The royal family should be able to use magic. It wouldn't be strange for her to know magic that would let her make hot water."

"Since when did she know how to serve tea?"

"Even I had to copy someone to learn. And I heard her preparing things right before I entered the room."

There wouldn't have been such loud noises if Alicia had a maid preparing things for her inside the room. And a maid wouldn't have served such a large mountain of snacks to guests either. Even if Alicia didn't know that it was Lacey who was arriving, she was ready

to welcome them into her room. In that case, Lacey wanted to express her gratitude and reciprocate. Though, she did end up eating too many cookies during her short visit.

"Also, while I was in her room, I noticed that she had a few of the sachets I made. She carefully picked out scents that went well with each other. She also had the insulated thermal bag displayed. It really stood out and looked kind of funny, but I was still happy to see it," Lacey said.

"She must have been a huge fan of yours, then. Well, not like she knew that it was you, though."

Lacey let out an embarrassed giggle. That was exactly why she wanted Alicia to talk to her. If something was tormenting her, Lacey wanted to know. That was all that Lacey wanted.

Wayne let out another sigh. He seemed exasperated, but in the end, he encouraged Lacey. "Well, you should go at it until you're satisfied."

"This might take a while, though. I don't think I can return to Plume Village anytime soon," Lacey said.

"Why don't you stay at my place, then? It looks like I'll be able to take another leave at least until the princess's wedding party is over," Wayne offered.

"Your place?" Lacey stared at Wayne.

"Yeah." Wayne nodded. He stared at Lacey, then, as if suddenly realizing what he had just said, let out a small cry as his face went red. "Wait, I didn't mean anything weird by that! My family has a separate house, and there are other people, like servants, who go there. A-And, I've already been staying at your place in Plume Village! And there are some empty rooms over at our place!"

"Oh, I'm not saying that I don't like the idea. But I already informed one of the king's messengers about where I'm staying. The house I used to live in is still vacant, so I'm gonna be staying there for a while."

"I-I see. Yeah, a place you're already used to sounds best."

Lacey felt a slight sense of nostalgia at the thought of staying at her old place. For now, she still needed to unload her belongings, though she didn't bring much, so it shouldn't take very long.

"After that, I have something I need to check," Lacey muttered.

"Check? Like what?" Wayne asked.

"Hmm, yeah, I forgot to do *that* earlier. I-I gotta make sure!"

"Make sure of what, exactly?"

Lacey made an enthusiastic expression. She faced Wayne and gave him a thumbs-up.

Wayne looked confused. Then, after hearing what Lacey had in mind, he looked incredulous. But it seemed that it piqued his interest, as he also had a big smile.

"Gaaaaah!" Alicia let out a shrill scream that could shatter glass. She froze, hands on her cheeks, as she stared at Lacey's face. "Noooooooo!"

"Aaaaaah!" Lacey screamed back.

"Hey, don't scream at me! It's *my* turn to scream! And why are you here again? I thought you had already left! Was I imagining things?!" Alicia, still frazzled, pointed at Lacey.

"I-I-I came back! I-I just wanted to sort out my belongings!"

"R-Right, so I *wasn't* imagining things."

"I went back to the castle and asked the king if I could see you one more time. So now, I'm here!"

"You didn't have to go through all that!" Alicia kept on chiding her. "Also, your teeth are chattering nonstop!"

Lacey told Wayne that Alicia never told her to leave, but she was well aware that it was just her own interpretation of the princess's words. Lacey's chest was about to explode, knowing that she was going back to visit someone who had told her that they had "nothing more to say." Her legs wouldn't stop trembling, and she couldn't breathe properly.

"I-I'm terrified!" Lacey admitted. She couldn't take it and started gripping her staff, which grew in size in response to her emotional state. The more focused she was, the more anxious she was, the bigger it became.

A chill ran down Alicia's back upon hearing Lacey's words. She opened and closed her mouth, furrowed her brow, and put a hand on her chest. "You're...terrified of me?"

"No, I'm really scared of not knowing what's troubling you, Your Highness!" Lacey declared.

Of course, there was no guarantee that Lacey would be able to help out even if she knew what was troubling Alicia. But the opposite was also true. She might be able to do something for her. However, if Alicia really didn't want Lacey to help, she would only be meddling needlessly in the princess's affairs. That was why Lacey had to know for sure. She wanted to be of help to the princess who served her hot tea and freshly baked cookies. She had to face Princess Alicia head-on.

Alicia had misunderstood, thinking that Lacey was terrified of her, so the witch's next words caught her by surprise. Then, her whole body, from her face to her fingertips, went red. She screamed incomprehensibly. Despite the soldier standing guard right outside the door, there was no interference. He had no idea what the princess was screaming about, so he just pretended that he hadn't heard anything.

Alicia had turned Lacey away by saying that she had nothing to say to her, but Lacey insisted on visiting her again and again. And each time, the princess served Lacey hot tea and a mountain of cookies. The cookies were always there with each visit.

The room was quiet, and Alicia said nothing. Lacey had to break the ice, but she had no idea what to talk about to a girl her age. After struggling to find a topic, Lacey finally decided.

"Um, see, I know this very energetic girl named Ellie. She has a crush on Mr. Cedric, but shockingly, Mr. Cedric had already been married, and he has a daughter—"

Lacey had decided to talk to Alicia about her life in Plume Village.

It was now three days since Lacey arrived at the capital. She continued to visit Alicia's room, and each time, she regaled the princess with stories about Plume Village.

"See, there's a big garden right behind my mansion, and right now, Tee and Noi are protecting it!" Lacey's enthusiasm grew as she kept talking. At first, she was stammering and stumbling on her words, but now, the words flowed effortlessly from her mouth. The

stories just kept on flowing.

Meanwhile, Alicia was seated in front of Lacey, quietly sipping her tea. The breeze from the window felt pleasant.

Lacey was starting to feel confident about her storytelling. She started to feel that she might have a knack for this, when all of a sudden—

"I've had enough!!!" Alicia yelled.

"Huh? Oh, um... Oh, was my explanation of the fire-resistant tree not good enough? O-Or maybe I should tell you more about the people in the village?"

"I don't need any more of that! I get it already! Kargo and Tricia and their twin sons! And Yorma is the one in love with Ellie! Why do I, the princess of this country, have to listen to this Ellie girl's love story?! Also, you're *awful* at telling stories!"

"A-Awful..." Lacey couldn't hide her shock at this revelation. She truly thought she had been doing a good job engaging Alicia in (a rather one-sided) conversation.

"All you've been talking about are your artifacts or the lives of the folks at Plume Village, and these kids' love story for some reason! Don't you have something more important to tell me?!"

"E-Ellie told me that girls love stories of romance—"

"At least talk to me about *your* love stories!"

"M-M-M-My love—"

Seeing Lacey stammer and get flustered, Alicia seemed to have realized something about her, which made the princess raise an eyebrow. "Don't tell me... You don't have *anything* like that? Nothing at all? N-No way..."

Is that really something to get so shocked about? Really? Lacey wondered.

"You mean... You're less experienced than a bunch of kids?"

Alicia's words dealt critical damage to Lacey, who slumped over the table. She quickly picked herself up and perked up. "I-It's not like I'm *completely* inexperienced—"

Lacey almost bragged about her engagement, but awful storyteller or not, even she was aware that it wasn't anything to write home about. Besides, she didn't feel anything so grand as love

toward her ex-fiancé Raymond.

Lacey tried her best to rebut Alicia, but the words just wouldn't come to her. Then, a figure suddenly crossed her mind. The thought shocked Lacey so much that her whole body turned red in an instant, and she felt like she was about to boil over. She was completely befuddled, and she saw question marks pop up all around her.

Despite Lacey's strange behavior, Alicia only frowned and didn't say anything in particular. She let out a long sigh. "Anyway, that wasn't what I wanted to talk about."

Lacey forgot everything that she was thinking about and looked up at Alicia. Her reactions were clearly different today compared to the past few days that Lacey had been coming here. She looked at Alicia with eyes full of expectation.

"I was just starting to get sick of all this talk. Fine, I'll tell you what you want to know, and we can stop talking here. That's fine with you?"

"Y-You'll tell me?!"

"I will. But it's really not that big a deal. I think you'll be quite disappointed with me." Alicia averted her gaze, but she looked quite calm. Lacey nodded and motioned for Alicia to keep going. Alicia had finally started to open up to Lacey. That was all that mattered, and it made Lacey happy.

Alicia's expression darkened, and she looked down at the floor. Once both Lacey and Alicia went silent, the air in the room had suddenly turned gloomy. Lacey did her best to keep calm as she waited for Alicia to speak up.

"There's no reason at all," Alicia said slowly.

"Huh? Wh-What do you mean?" Lacey couldn't help but ask what Alicia meant. Alicia looked irritated after seeing Lacey's confusion.

"I meant exactly what I said! There's no reason at all! I told you that I have nothing more to say to you, right? Raymond... I wanted to forget that I was ever in love with such a shallow man. I wanted to sweep it all under the rug, so I asked father to look for someone I could marry. And he did find one! That was how I met Prince Kipharo. He's quite a wonderful man."

The man, Kipharo, must have been the prince of Eharaja, the person who was to become Alicia's husband. Despite saying that he was a wonderful man, Alicia couldn't seem to hide her irritation. She crossed her arms, almost as if she were trying to embrace herself.

"He's dreamy, kind, and wealthy! I have no complaints whatsoever. I can only count the days until I get married to him!" At that last sentence, Alicia glared at Lacey and slammed her hand onto her own chest.

Lacey sat quietly, hands on her lap, listening to Alicia's story. She was swept up by the enthusiasm in her voice. But she felt that something off was with her story. If everything she said were true, it would conflict with what the king had told Lacey. On top of that, it didn't explain why Alicia had been locking herself up in her room all this time. Alicia must have been aware of the contradictions in her story. She was frowning, like something was stuck at the back of her teeth, then she averted her gaze.

"But then, after my engagement with Lord Kipharo was set... I told father that I wasn't really feeling it. I mean, just think about it! I've been living here in Croix my entire life, then suddenly, I'm going to get married off to a different country! Of course I'd feel lonely! I might never see this country ever again! But I'm part of the royal family. I should be prepared for this, and I always knew that this might happen. But father... He keeps on making a big deal about everything!"

At some point, Alicia stood up with her fists balled as she let out her grievances. She was breathing heavily, and her face was downcast. Even her beautiful pinkish-blonde hair looked disheveled.

To sum it up, Alicia had expressed her anxieties to King Croix. The king was shocked and asked about his daughter's worries, but Alicia's pride wouldn't let her admit that she was merely "lonely." Each time the king asked, she refused to open up and could only run away. Things had gotten to the point where even she didn't know what to do.

"See? I told you it wasn't such a big deal. Feel free to be disappointed in me," Alicia said.

"No, I'm not disappointed at all," Lacey said, shaking her head.

Her silence was not out of disappointment or surprise. Alicia couldn't see it, but Lacey had balled her fist to suppress the emotions welling up within herself. She hadn't been able to move on because Alicia wouldn't say anything. But now, she opened up to Lacey.

"Princess Alicia, I'm so glad that you opened up to me," Lacey said.

"Open up to you? I mean, there was nothing to open up about. There's really nothing more to say."

"No, that was more than enough. Because you opened up to me, I finally understand you. I was so troubled because I didn't know how to get you to be honest with me."

Alicia knew very well that she couldn't let this go on forever. But she was past the point where she could back down. She was terrified, and she couldn't bear to come out of her room. But there was scarcely any time left until the wedding party.

Lacey now knew what she had to do.

"In that case, I will create an opportunity for you to come out of your room. Please let Starseeking take care of your worries!" she assured Alicia.

"Well... I said all that, but I'm still not sure where to start," Lacey confessed.

"So this time, you have to give her an opportunity... You're looking for something so abstract again."

After meeting up with Wayne outside the palace grounds, the two of them walked down the capital's streets while Lacey grumbled to Wayne. The city streets were filled with enthusiastic merchants and customers looking to do business with them.

"Not being able to back down from her word... What is she, a brat?" Wayne grumbled about Alicia. Despite Wayne saying nothing but complaints about Alicia, Lacey listened to him intently and seriously considered every word. "She already knows that she can't keep this up, right? Why don't you just drag her out of her room, then?"

"I can't do that. She has to come out on her own," Lacey replied.

Alicia did want to come out of her room, but being forced out and

doing it on her own terms were two completely different matters. If she managed to garner the courage to take the first step out, she would be able to take the next. After all, that was what happened to Lacey.

Alicia was about to be sent off to a different country on her own. Even if she were surrounded by darkness and couldn't see the way, as long as she had a guiding star to illuminate her path, then no matter what dark and terrifying future lay ahead, she would be able to take proud and confident steps forward. And yet—

"Uuuuugh..."

"Come on, Lacey, don't break down in the middle of the road," Wayne scolded.

Lacey slumped against the wall of a nearby store and covered her face with both hands. A pathetic noise escaped her throat. She cursed herself for getting so enthusiastic and regretting it afterward.

"My heart starts making awful noises whenever I think about how the wedding party's only a few days away... I was too busy to be worried about anything while making the camera, and I didn't feel anxious because everyone was with me while we were making the culinary paper. But now, there's foreign royalty involved! Gaaah!" Lacey squealed.

"You worry too much about things you shouldn't be worrying about," Wayne sighed. He comforted Lacey and soothed her back as she rolled into a ball and made strange noises. Passersby occasionally gave them questioning looks, wondering what they were doing, but Wayne paid them no heed and kept Lacey out of their prying eyes.

Right now, Lacey wasn't seeing her surroundings.

"Wh-What should I do, Wayne? Wh-Wh-What should I do?!" Lacey cried.

"You don't have any artifact ideas in that head of yours? That's your specialty, right?"

"Umm... I have some, but they're all still vague... And I don't know if I can make them take shape... What should I do?!" Lacey wailed. At that moment—

"Oh? That voice just now... Lacey, is that you?"

When they turned around, Lacey and Wayne spotted familiar figures.

"It *is* Lacey! What a coincidence!"

"Big sis! What are you doing here?"

"Lanze... Allen..."

Lanze was the fox-eyed merchant who visited Plume Village regularly. Allen worked as his assistant. When Lacey, still teary-eyed, looked up at the two of them, Allen was shocked. "What happened here?!" he yelled. Meanwhile, Lanze's fox eyes slanted even further as he got in between Wayne and Lacey.

"Were you the one who made Lacey cry? I don't know who you are, but Lacey has a wonderful boyfriend named Wa— Actually, I can't tell you who he is, so you better get the hell outta here!"

"Mr. Lanze, that *has* to be big bro Wayne, right? He's using concealment magic right now so he looks *really* plain," Allen said.

"Oh my, you're right! Hoh ho hoh!"

It was quite an unusual exchange. Wayne had no idea what to say to them, and his face remained fixed in an awkward expression.

"Sorry, it must have been weird for you two. I haven't been using my concealment magic in the village lately," he said.

"Oh my, I don't blame you for that at all. It's not good for you to show your actual face here. My, having such a handsome face should be a crime!" Lanze tried to elbow Wayne, but was repelled effortlessly. The two of them mixed together like oil and water. Wayne might enjoy messing with others, but he was not comfortable with being messed with. However, Lanze wanted to get his attention. He kept trying to elbow Wayne but kept getting repelled in return. Allen sighed as he watched the two adults keep up this pointless act.

"Mr. Lanze, are we good? We're gonna be late!"

"We're very much *not* good here!" Lanze leaped to his feet. He was seemingly in a hurry as he fixed the disheveled shawl around his neck.

"Oh, I'm sorry for holding you up... Please don't mind us," Lacey apologized.

"Nah, we're the ones who stopped to check on you two," Allen said.

"Right, right. We should be the ones apologizing for taking up your time," Lanze added. Soon, Allen was pushing Lanze and urging him to move on. They looked like a good student-teacher duo.

Lacey wondered why the two of them were in such a hurry. As she stared at the pair, Lanze seemed to have caught on to her gaze. "Would you like to come with us, Lacey dear?" he said, grabbing her arm. Lacey nearly fell out of balance.

"What do you think you're doing?" Wayne warned Lanze in a low tone.

"That goes for you too, Wayne dear!" Lanze grabbed Wayne's arm with his other hand. Wayne was confused and caught off guard. "This is a good opportunity for you two. Hurry, hurry!"

"Wh-Where are we going?!"

"Lanze, dammit! Don't pull on me!"

"Sorry about this, big bro, big sis!"

Wayne and Lacey tried unsuccessfully to free themselves of Lanze's grip. They resisted, but Lanze managed to drag them off. As they were pulled away to who knows where, Lacey pondered how many times this had happened to her lately, with the children of Plume Village in her thoughts.

Lanze had taken Lacey and Wayne to a large, brown-skinned man.

"U-Um... Mr. Lanze? Who is this person?" she asked nervously.

"Lanze, who are these? Don't bring visitors without telling me," the large man said.

"Oh, Mateo, did you shave?" Lanze addressed the man.

"Brings in more customers, apparently. Lots of women come in to buy that Aster insignia merchandise after all."

"Huh. Looks good on you. Anyway, Mateo, don't be shocked, but this young lady is the inventor of that Aster merchandise! Bow to her greatness!"

"Ah, so *you're* the great artifact maker, eh? And this one?" Mateo motioned to Wayne.

"Just a handsome guy!" Lanze answered.

"That's not an explanation. And how can you call this guy handsome?"

Wayne was using his concealment magic, so he would look as unremarkable as possible to the beholder.

Mateo, the man looking incredulously at the group, had the same stature as Brooks, one of the men who defeated the Demon King, and Theobald, the smith at Plume Village.

He doesn't look like he's had a hard time lifting anything, Lacey thought, the silly remark coming unbidden.

"She looks a lot smaller than I imagined," Mateo commented.

"Forget about that! My big sis has a heart bigger than her entire body!" Allen defended Lacey.

"She's a bit too timid, though," Wayne added.

Lacey didn't mind getting called small since it was the truth. For some reason, Allen got angry on her behalf, and Wayne butted in with a remark of his own. Lacey couldn't help but let out an awkward laugh.

"Sorry, sorry." Mateo shrugged. "Name's Mateo. I help Lanze sell those artifacts with your insignia on them." The large man extended a hand to Lacey, which she shook.

"I see. Thank you so much for providing your services. My name is Lacey."

"Mateo works as my bodyguard sometimes. I'm pretty flimsy, you see?" Lanze said.

"Maybe you should put on some muscle, then. Anyway, it's almost time. You're late, so we don't have any time to dawdle here."

"He's right!" Allen yelled at Lanze as he unpacked some wares. Soon enough, there was a stall set up by the roadside. "We might have a huge crowd today since we were on break for a while!"

Lacey soon realized what Allen was yelling about. They were opening up shop for the Aster artifacts. Until recently, Lacey had been making new artifacts nonstop, so, with the consent of the Plume Village residents, she asked Lanze to tone down the sales of her artifacts while Wayne was still in town. Then, once the camera was finished, she did as much of the work that only she could do—primarily infusing magic stones with mana—and handed over the items to Granny. The villagers did the rest of the work, transforming them into artifacts like the sachets and thermal insulating bags to be

sold by Lanze and Allen in the capital.

Considering the time it took for Lacey to travel from Plume Village to the capital, Lacey was surprised at how quickly the items were finished. But in exchange, there were fewer items, and the moment Lanze shouted, "Brand-new Aster Insignia items for sale!", the sachets and insulated bags vanished in an instant. Lacey was left dumbfounded by the swift turn of events.

"Sorry, we're sold out!" Allen shouted, his face hidden behind the hood of his robe. Lacey heard murmurs from the crowd:

"I didn't get any again!"

"Oh, how vexing!"

Then they slowly dispersed. Lacey was fidgeting about, trying to figure out if there was anything she could help out with, but Allen, Lanze, and Mateo cooperated so efficiently that everything happened in a flash. There was no room for her to speak.

"Wh-Whoa..." Lacey could only let out a cry of amazement, but she couldn't figure out exactly what she was amazed at.

Once, when an ill-intentioned noble tried to get his hands on Lacey's artifacts, she had Lanze and Allen accompany her to the capital. Back then, she was there to visit a shop that she patronized and discreetly obtain an item she wanted. She didn't have time to stay and immediately returned to the village, so today was the first time she saw people buying her artifacts.

"They really *are* buying my items," Lacey marveled. It was an obvious fact, but she couldn't help but state it anyway. Lanze smiled after seeing her express her amazement.

After putting away the crates and mats and closing up shop, the group parted ways with Mateo. Having lightened their burden, they entered a nearby café. Lanze invited Lacey and Wayne for a quick break, and they entered, still reeling from excitement.

The group entered an open-air café. They sat at a round table with a parasol. It was the first time Lacey would dine at an open-air establishment, much less one this fancy at the capital. Lacey's head spun just from reading the menu, and she couldn't even focus on its contents.



Lanze already had his order ready the moment he entered the establishment, and soon enough, a waiter brought a tray with a glass of iced tea.

"Thank you for waiting."

"Whoa..."

The glass made a small *clink* upon being set on the table. It was filled with an amber-colored liquid, decorated on top with a sprig of mint. The liquid reflected sunlight, making the drink sparkle. Inside the glass, the cubes of ice made a different *clink* as they melted and hit one another.

Lacey had been the one to suggest a method to drink cold tea. Back then, she had Lanze sell the recipe to a merchants' guild, and in exchange, they would pay him a fee to be able to use it for the next few years.

"It's still a bit cold out, so it might be out of season to order this drink," Lanze said. "I get pretty warm easily, though, so it feels pretty refreshing. I might as well have some since you're here."

"U-Um, Lanze, I'd like to order the same thing!" Lacey said.

"Oh? Well then, shall we order some?"

Soon enough, everyone on the table had the same drink. The staff looked at the four of them with curious gazes. Lacey paid them no mind and gently thumbed through the menu as if poring over a precious item, and kept being amazed.

"Iced tea is still a pretty novel way to drink tea, so there aren't a lot of shops that serve it yet. But there are more and more of them by the day. I wanted you to see this." Lanze swirled his glass and sounded the ice inside. "The city is changing bit by bit. It's very slow, but the whole country is changing thanks to your ideas."

Across the road, Lacey spotted two young women walking. Thinking that they looked familiar, she realized that they were at the stall earlier buying Aster insignia merchandise. They held their bags close to their chests and beamed as they talked to one another.

"I finally got to buy a bag! I'm so happy right now! Next, I gotta find clothes that look good with it! What should I get?"

Lacey blinked in surprise at Lanze. He had mimicked the voice of a young lady. "I'm just imagining what they might be talking about.

Don’t you think that might be what they’re saying?”

Lanze pointed at the girls, and Lacey followed with her gaze.

After the bag, I’ll get some clothes. Then, some shoes. And finally, a hat! Lacey imagined the two girls happily spinning around, holding the hems of their skirts. She didn’t know the names of these two girls, and she likely would never see them again. But Lacey felt like she could hear their happy steps as they walked down the road. She could see them trailing stardust as they walked, creating a long path behind them.

All this time, I’ve been making these artifacts with somebody in mind. The sachet had been for Brooks, and the insulated thermal bags for Allen and his family. But mysteriously enough, these artifacts had far exceeded Lacey’s imagined use for them, and strangers were now enjoying her creations.

Surely, these girls were no different from Lacey. They thought about what to buy, what to obtain, and what to match with them. It might be a bit of a stretch to call it *creation,* but these girls imagined themselves and created an image of their ideal selves, piece by piece.

Until today, Lacey’s image of the people buying her creations was vague and uncertain, but now, a clear image was forming in her head. Among those figures, one was a sad and forlorn young lady—Alicia Castile, the princess with the lovely pink-blonde hair.

“Whoa, big sis! Don’t just stand up all of a sudden!” Allen cried.

“Sorry about that, Allen,” Lacey said. “Lanze, thank you for today. I’m very grateful for your thoughtfulness. Here’s my part of the bill.”

“Lacey dear, you don’t have to pay for all of us! I’m the one who brought you two here, so let me treat you for once!”

“Oh no, I can’t— No, never mind. Thank you for treating us!” Lacey paused to think and sat down, then stood up. “I have some matters to take care of, so I’ll be going now! Sorry!” she said and started getting ready to leave.

Wayne insisted on paying for his bill. “Aww, I said I’ll pay for it, though!” Lanze said, but still accepted Wayne’s payment.

“Hey, you’ll trip if you rush like that!” Wayne called out to Lacey, who nodded back to him in acknowledgment.

"See you again!" Lacey shouted out to Lanze and Allen.

"Okay! See you guys around!" Allen shouted back. He and Lanze looked confused at Lacey being in such a rush, but they still waved at her as she hurried out of the café.

Wayne was right beside Lacey. She was walking as fast as she could, but Wayne was grinning without a care. "Looks like you've come up with something, huh? Can't sit still?" he asked.

"Yeah. Um, see, I always thought that the people buying my artifacts were completely different from me. But...maybe not as much as I thought. The people buying my creations might be the same as me."

"Huh?"

"Um... Well, in other words..." Lacey struggled to come up with the right words. Right now, she only had vague feelings and no idea how to communicate them to Wayne.

"Princess Alicia said that she was feeling lonely. I have to make an opportunity for her to come out of her room, but I think it's also important to make her feel less lonely. So in that case, what should I make for her? When I make things, I usually think of someone, the person who would be using it. But... What if what she wants is the same as what *I* want?" Lacey suddenly raised her voice while running. "Hey, Wayne, when you buy a bag, the next is shoes, right?"

Wayne looked confused at her question. "That something you want to buy?" he asked.

"No, that's not it." Lacey stopped and looked at Wayne. "A camera!"

"Camera?"

"I want to give Princess Alicia good memories. And I want to make 'shoes' for Princess Alicia's camera!"

Chapter 5: To Take a Step Forward

"Shoes...for the camera?" Wayne's eyes widened in surprise and confusion as he echoed Lacey's words. Lacey nodded enthusiastically. Wayne pondered what she meant. "You mean... You want to make a camera with legs that can move around?"

"That sounds fun! But..."

A camera that can capture photographs by itself, or perhaps one that reacts to moving objects. Those ideas sounded fun—and also realistic—to Lacey, and she wanted to see them come to life. But right now, she wanted to make something else.

Lacey noticed that she had stopped running. She moved to the edge of the road and started walking again. As they kept going down the street, the crowd thinned out. While the capital was lively, they encountered fewer and fewer people as they approached the walls surrounding the city. While less frequent after the defeat of the Demon King, monsters would occasionally jump the walls and enter the city, so people naturally avoided the vicinity.

"Lacey, where are you going?" Wayne asked.

"My house. I have to check on my things," Lacey answered. Lacey's residence was her mansion in Plume Village, so referring to her former residence in the capital as *her house* was somewhat of a misnomer. But Lacey paid it no heed and kept walking. It seemed that she had finally realized that she had been pressing forward without informing Wayne where they were headed. "Sorry for running off on my own," she apologized to Wayne, then continued her explanation.

"I haven't really thought about it before, but when you buy a bag, you get shoes next. When you buy something new, you want to get things in a set, right?"

"Yeah. It looks better when you get the full collection. And it looks weird when the colors of your bag and shoes don't match.

Lacey, wanna go to a shoe store?”

“Huh? Yeah... Is it weird?”

“No, not at all. I think it’s cute of you. It might be good for you to buy something different. Since I already got you a hair accessory, maybe I should get you new shoes next.”

“Y-You don’t need to! I’ll go buy shoes some other time!”

He called me cute out of nowhere again! Lacey felt irritated at Wayne’s casual compliments. She bit her lip and kept talking. “Anyway... The point is, people tend to buy things in a set. So, I want to make something that goes in a set with the camera. When you take a photograph, it doesn’t end there, right? You’d definitely want somewhere to store it. I think I’d like to keep it somewhere nice... Oh, but it’s just my personal preference, of course! I’d like to make some kind of book where you can store those photographs and hand it to Princess Alicia. It’ll be full of images of the Kingdom of Croix!”

As Lacey talked about her ideas, the abstract thoughts soon began to take shape, becoming more concrete. Lacey had created the camera out of a desire to preserve the image of a beautiful bride. It was not something that she had made for someone else—it was something that she had invented out of her own desire to see such an item come into existence.

When Lacey thought about the idea even more, she felt that turning the bride solely into an object to be photographed was too arrogant of her. In that case, perhaps this time, the bride—Alicia—should also be a recipient of these photographs. After all, Lacey wanted to hand the princess something that would ease her feelings of loneliness.

Another idea entered Lacey’s head, but for now, she wanted to focus on the camera. She made the correct decision to take her time thinking about what things to bring to the capital. Initially, she had thought that it was unnecessary, but now, she felt justified in bringing her newly created camera with her. She hopped and skipped, pleased with her own preparedness, and tripped.

“Whoa?! Mmgh!”

Lacey had completely ignored her footing. She was shocked at

the way she behaved just now. She heard Wayne's flabbergasted voice calling out to her. "Hey, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Wayne stooped down to check on Lacey. She reached out to grab Wayne's hand like she usually did, but stopped right before making contact and instead closed her fist.

"Lacey?"

"Oh, uh, umm—"

What's wrong with me today? This isn't any different from what usually happens between me and Wayne. But my ears feel really hot right now!

Alicia's words echoed in Lacey's head. *At least talk to me about* your *love stories!*

Lacey remained seated on the ground while Wayne stared down at her with a perplexed look. She hurriedly righted herself and dusted off her clothes.

Am I...? A revelation started to dawn in Lacey's heart, but it just wasn't the right time.

"S-Sorry about that, Wayne. I was a bit embarrassed."

"O-Oh, okay. Right. I guess it *is* a bit embarrassing. Sorry." Wayne scratched the back of his head and averted his gaze. "It's just that, whenever I see you, I can't help but offer a hand and try to help you out. It's a bad habit of mine, I guess."

"Wayne, no, I don't dislike it or anything."

"Okay, okay. I get it."

Lacey felt that she and Wayne weren't seeing eye to eye and tried to express herself better, but it appeared that Wayne didn't quite understand. She felt frustrated at her inability to correct his misunderstanding. She started to regret being too conscious about it and not taking his hand, but this was not the time to be thinking about such things.

First, I need to take care of Princess Alicia's concerns!

Lacey's concerns could be taken care of later. Right now, there was a lonely and miserable person whom she wanted to help. There was only one way forward and no time to waste. Without thinking, she started walking, picked up speed, and before long, she was running. Lacey had her head down, trying to hide her beet-red face,

and ran at a frenzied pace.

"Hey?!" Wayne exclaimed. He ran after Lacey and soon caught up to her, but by then, Lacey was back to normal.

"I've come back to this place a few times now, but it's still a bit...um..." Lacey muttered to herself. It had been a few days since she started staying in her old, crummy bungalow in the capital, but she couldn't help but comment on it each time she entered. The roof shingles were peeling off, and the walls were thin and could come crumbling down any moment.

Lacey couldn't tell if this house had been like this all along or if she was only thinking that because time had passed since she had last been here. That was just how little she thought of her old residence. She knew of her own capacity as the country's number one mage, and she could have transferred to a better house at any time. Now, she was painfully aware of just how little she thought of herself back then. The passage of time hit Lacey like a blade of wind cutting through her own heart.

Lacey felt embarrassed letting Wayne into her old house as he passed through the rickety door. The floor creaked under their weight. She turned to look at Wayne, standing still with his arms crossed. She knew exactly what his expression meant. That was the look of someone who wanted to clean up, but was trying his best to suppress the urge and keep his right arm from doing anything. She could see his fingers drumming restlessly.

Of course, it had been a while since Lacey had stayed at her old house, so she had done a little cleaning as she set up magical barriers for her own security. Emphasis on *a little*.

"Er, um..." Lacey started.

"Yeah?" Wayne's voice betrayed his impatience. The drumming spread from his fingers to the rest of his body.

"First off!"

"First off?"

Lacey took out her staff and spun it around.

"Let's do some cleaning!"

"I've been waiting for this!!!"

Wayne was quite enthusiastic about cleaning up, while Lacey felt embarrassed as she opened the doors and windows and cast a spell to ventilate the entire house. Lacey couldn't afford to hand Alicia something made in a house covered in dust and lint. She conjured up bubbly, soapy water and soaked cloth rags in it. Then, she wiped the walls and ceiling with them.

Before long, Wayne had donned a bandanna, face mask, and an apron, then he proceeded to clean small and narrow corners that Lacey couldn't reach. No hero in history could look this good in an apron other than Wayne.

The pair cast magic where they could. Once they finished getting the house sparkly clean, it was time to do their usual planning. The furniture in the house hadn't changed since Lacey last lived in it. There was one large table sitting in the center of the living room, perfect for making magical diagrams. Its large size was ideal. Lacey took out the camera from her bag. She wanted to establish her goal, and to accomplish it, confirming the details with her friends periodically was a habit that she had developed during her travels.

"Princess Alicia wants to come out of her room. She wants an opportunity to do so, but first, I'll need to solve why she's locked herself in there in the first place. Princess Alicia will be part of Eharaja's royal family after getting married. She might never see Croix ever again. She's deeply anxious about that."

There's no reason at all. That was what Alicia had cried out to Lacey. She figured that her real reasons were hidden behind the princess's rant as she opened up to Lacey.

"So you want to give her photographs of Croix, then. Would that really work out?" Wayne asked.

"I think it's better than doing nothing and going around in circles trying to think of an idea. It might be boring to just hand her photographs, though. I want to put them in some kind of album and hand her a whole collection!"

"An album, huh?"

"For that to happen, we need..."

Lacey rifled through her belongings. After finding the object she

wanted, she placed it on the table so Wayne could see it.

"For that to happen, we need an album that can fit this glass board! The size has to match this glass board perfectly!"

"Well, yeah, I see what you mean. But Lacey, is that all you have?"

"What do you mean?"

Lacey wasn't sure what Wayne was asking about. She had two glass boards with her. By placing one into the camera, she could produce a photograph. She had the camera, the glass boards, and her tripod. All the materials were ready.

"You only have two glass boards. In other words, you can only take two photographs, right?"

"Oh... Oh, y-you're right..."

Lacey turned her belongings upside down, but the two glass boards were all she had. It was the obvious outcome, as the two boards were all she brought to the city. She had also only brought the camera "just in case," and didn't think that she would actually need to take photographs.

"Uh, um..."

Lacey grasped her head and paced around the table. She couldn't believe that such a basic problem was in her way. Make more of the glass boards? That wasn't happening. They didn't have enough materials. Should they go back to Plume Village? They couldn't afford to waste any more time traveling. Give the album to Alicia after the wedding? The entire point was to give her the album *before* the wedding!

"Uuuugh!" Lacey groaned. None of her ideas solved the problem at hand. She curled into a ball that got smaller and smaller. Worried, Wayne cast his gaze down on her.

"Okay, we'll give up on the glass boards! Guh!" Lacey abruptly stood up and hit her head on Wayne's jaw. She got hit with a sense of déjà vu. "S-Sorry!"

"It's fine..." Wayne muttered.

The pair soothed the parts where they had collided. "Give up on the glass boards? You mean you'll just give her the camera?" Wayne asked, still soothing his jaw.

"No, no, I meant that we should give up on using the glass boards and just come up with a way to copy the photographs into the album," Lacey suggested. As she sounded out her idea, she realized that she was talking about something quite radical. "We'll make it so that the photograph appears in the album after taking the photograph with the camera. So we won't need the glass board."

"Can that really be done?"

"I think it can. With magic, of course."

Lacey could already produce photographs without using her camera thanks to her magic. She called it "projection magic," a type of magic she developed by watching the sky reflected on the floor of the dark room where a phoenix had been imprisoned. The camera was an artifact she created so that regular people could use it, so she had rejected the use of magic during its development. This time, she wanted to give the photographs to Alicia, and she wanted her to be the only one to use them. In that case, there was no issue with using magic. With a magic stone, she could incorporate her magic into her work and give her a lot of freedom with it.

Now that she had a direction, Lacey placed a hand on the camera on top of the table and grasped a magic stone that she had taken out from her belongings in her other hand. Quietly, she closed her eyes and felt something bubble up in her head. Rays of light created paths in her mind and intertwined with each other.

Projection magic used light. The theory behind it was no different from that of the camera. She used light to create a path to capture a scene, then used a lens made out of mana to focus its direction. The scenes that she had photographed with the camera—mountains, grasslands, flowers, the sky—flashed in her mind's eye. The vivid images felt like a gentle wind blowing through her mind.

I'll gently, carefully put the images into the box...

It was as if she were wrapping a present. She was tying a ribbon around a gift box, eagerly anticipating the recipient's joyful face upon receiving it. Her excitement was encapsulated in her gift. She recalled the time when she made the stuffed toy for Tee. She imagined Tee's delighted cries when it received the stuffed toy, and she couldn't help but smile while she worked on the gift.

Lacey visualized a small box in her mind. She closed the box and opened her eyes.

"Okay, it's done."

"Incredible." Wayne seemed nonchalant even as he praised Lacey. When he was traveling with her, Lacey would always be focused on her magic and kept on developing new spells.

Still, Lacey had been nervous while performing the spell, and she felt sweat dripping down her back. She only had one camera and was worried about what she would do if she failed.

"The camera could only capture images in black and white before, but now that I imbued it with projection magic, the photographs should be able to capture the colors."

"Wow. You sure worked pretty quickly this time around."

A lot had happened in the past month that she had been with Wayne. They made the candied flowers and hunted down monsters for the camera. Things kept happening even at the moment when they thought they were done.

Wayne folded his arms. "It's looking good if we're done here," he said mirthfully.

"We're not done yet," Lacey said.

"Huh?"

"We still haven't made the album. Even if we have the tool for capturing images right here, we still don't have a place to store them. There's no point if we don't have that."

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

"Using projection magic, the camera can now capture an image and envelop it within itself. But once it's captured, we need somewhere to place it. This magic only materializes once the two conditions are fulfilled. It needs a device to capture the image and a place to send it to."

"Can you choose what to send it to, then?"

"I can, but the magic power is reliant on the stone producing it. We need something that's compatible with the magic stone, or the stone's power will run out, and it'll fade away. In short..." Lacey took a deep breath. "Remember how we found out that paper works well with the fire-resistant tree sap? We'll do that again. We'll sift through

materials and look for one that's compatible with the magic stone! We gotta start working!"

"S-Seriously?!"

After working for a while, Wayne and Lacey soon realized that this work was too much for the two of them, and that they didn't even have enough materials to sift through. With that in mind, Lacey decided to call in reinforcements.

"Looks like you two are doing something *fascinating* again!"

"Big sis, I'm glad you called on me to help!"

Lanze gave them his usual wily smile, while Allen had a proud look on his face as he laid out a large cloth over the floor. He lined up the materials that they were going to test on top of the cloth.

"Thanks for taking some time out of your busy schedules, you two. I'm sorry for pulling you in like this," Lacey said.

"Ha ha! Lacey dear, your items sold out so quickly that we have too much free time on our hands now! Besides, I *did* want to be part of your *creative* group of friends at one point." Lanze's eyes were wide open instead of his usual, fox-like expression. Lacey could never tell how much of his words were his honest thoughts, so she could only grin awkwardly in reply.

"By the way, Lacey, I heard from Allen that you made another wonderful item recently. This camera, and that so-called 'culinary paper'... I think we could definitely make use of them." Lanze whispered the following words into Lacey's ear. "Can I sell them for a high price at the royal court?"

"Um... The camera's still not ready for mass production, so that'll have to wait. And I don't have a huge stock of the culinary paper yet."

The camera had some items sourced from monsters, and its creation needed some technical expertise. Lacey wouldn't be able to make more on her own, and she would need Theobald's assistance for it. On the other hand, the culinary paper and the cooking gloves didn't require any high-level skills. As long as there was a fire-resistant tree around, even the residents of Plume Village could easily make them. Of course, it would be difficult to start production

immediately.

"Lacey dear, how naive of you! That's the best part! We can say that there's little stock at the moment to justify the high prices!" Lanze let out a devilish cackle. His eyes went back to his usual fox-like expression.

Allen sensed that Lacey didn't know how to react, so he gave her a hand. "Lanze worded it like a villain, but I don't think it's a bad idea. If the royals start buying your items, it'll make them look trustworthy and give them value. And if you finish your current request, you'll have a pipeline to sell your items."

"In that case... Allen, I'll take your word. Mr. Lanze, please don't go overboard," Lacey said. Lanze gave her a big smile in response. Allen flexed his upper arm to signify that he'd take care of things. Then, Wayne got in between Lanze and Lacey. The two men stared at each other. Lanze quietly stretched out an arm toward Wayne, which the latter repelled. The two of them repeated this scene a couple of times.

"P-Please take this seriously..." Lacey mumbled. Everyone here was trying to help her out. She knew this, but her lips were trembling. They didn't have any time left. "P-Please take this seriously!!!" Lacey clenched both her fists and yelled. The two men who were arguing froze on the spot.

They hadn't even started working, but Lacey's house was already in a state of chaos.

Lacey had a camera, and it now had a function to project the images onto an object. But Lacey still had no idea what that *object* should be. She was groping around in the dark with no hints. To start with, she gathered as many objects from all throughout the capital and laid them out on the table and floor. Several miscellaneous items could be found lying all over Lacey's house. There were natural objects like tree branches, leaves, flowers, and rocks; items for daily use like silverware and clothes, as well as pots, books, and children's toys. She laid out anything and everything under the sun.

Unlike her attempts with the fire-resistant tree's sap, this time,

Lacey was looking for the object's affinity with her magic. It wasn't enough to evaluate the object's physical properties. It was certainly possible that just the object's shape and form could affect its affinity in small but significant ways.

Allen silently organized the items all throughout the house. Soon, they heard a knock coming from the door.

"Excuse me."

Mateo entered Lacey's house. He was carrying a heavy-looking wooden chest on his shoulder. He crab-walked through the miscellaneous items scattered throughout the floor and placed the chest down on Allen's directions. The space on the floor had been taken up by more items.

Mateo had used Lanze's connections to gather even more items throughout the city. "Sorry about that, Mateo! Glad we have those nice muscles of yours around," Lanze cooed.

"I'll be chargin' you for this, got it? I'm waitin' for your payment at the usual place," Mateo grunted.

"Oh noooo!" Lanze cried.

"I-I'll pay! Lanze, I'll pay for it!" Lacey urgently reassured him. She thanked Mateo as he left the house.

Lacey surveyed the room again. There was almost no more space to walk around. She let out a short sigh.

"Well, we have all this stuff now. What are you gonna do?" Wayne asked.

"We'll try them all out, one by one," Lacey answered.

"Yeah, figured that was the case." Wayne scratched his head after asking a question he already knew the answer to.

"But first, I have to figure out what to project onto them." Lacey browsed through a book lying atop the table. She opened it to a page and laid her eyes on a section of text. "For now, I'm going to try with the text in this book. I'm going to use projection magic and copy the text onto the objects in here. The item has good affinity with my magic, if I can clearly read the text even when using the minimum amount of mana. Of course, if it doesn't show anything, it's disqualified."

Lacey snapped her fingers, and a ray of light shone on a stuffed

bear lying on the floor. The same text that was on the book started appearing on the stuffed toy's belly. Lanze and Allen let out gasps of amazement as they peeked from behind Lacey and watched the scene unfold.

"Okay. I might forget which items I've tried already, so Allen, could you take notes? Wayne and Lanze, sorry, but I need you two to do some organizing. Each material takes up space in the room, but they're all over the place. The materials might have different reactions to the magic, too, so I'll need you two to confirm what's going on."

"Sounds good to me. But, um... Well, I gathered all these items with Mateo, but are you really going to check each and every one of these? You're going to cast magic on all of them, right? Are you gonna be okay?"

Lanze seemed unusually concerned and bewildered. But Lacey only said curtly, "I'll be okay." There was no other answer she could give.

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Lanze, you're worried about Lacey running out of mana, right? In that case, there's really no need to worry at all," Wayne said.

"Wayne... But look at all these items! I'm not very well-versed in magic, but I'm pretty sure this is enough to knock someone unconscious!"

"That's if you're talking about a *normal* mage."

Lacey took out her staff from her bag. She adjusted the size to fit in her hands, stood in the center of the room, and slammed the tip of the staff onto the floor. Even though the windows were closed, the wind started blowing inside the room. The breeze began to pick up speed, making Lacey's hair billow. Allen and Lanze cried out and shielded their faces with their arms. Meanwhile, Wayne was standing there without budging. His expression, in contrast to Allen's and Lanze's, was a proud one.

"She's a member of the hero's party that defeated the Demon King, after all. She's the number one mage in the country, the Dawn Witch!"

Lacey was muttering an incantation incomprehensible to anyone

but herself at high speed. She raised her staff, and several rays of light shone on the objects in the room.

"Wh-Whoaaaa?!"

Lanze covered his head and ducked under the table. Allen followed Lanze's lead.

"Big bro Wayne, you should take cover too!"

The rays of light kept shining. One of the objects it shone on burned into cinders and got blown onto Allen's face. "Gah!" he let out a panicked cry.

"It'll be fine. Lacey is aware of every single object in this room. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to know what objects to hit with her magic. She's also aware of where we are relative to her position, so it's fine," Wayne assured him.

"E-E-Easy for you to say!" Allen retorted.

"Anyway, we have to hurry and check the objects. Some of them are starting to become unrecognizable. I'll cover you guys just in case. Lanze, are you gonna stay down there or what?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming! I'm gonna put this on Lacey's tab and squeeze more sales out of her!" Lanze yelled.

"Mr. Lanze, your inner thoughts are leaking out! And I'm not gonna let you do that!" Allen shouted as he carried a stack of papers with him across the room.

The results were a catastrophe. Lacey had been calm while the rays of light pierced the items throughout the room, but once things had settled, she was disturbed—from the state of the room, not the use of powerful magic. She couldn't help but clench her fist in frustration.

"I can't believe my eyes," Wayne muttered. His words weren't directed at Lacey's magic. Allen splayed on the ground, still carrying a stack of papers. He couldn't keep up with checking every single item, so Lanze had been helping him out. Lanze, his hands blackened with soot, had checked every single item with Allen. The results?

"Steel, glass, wood, cloth... We tried all the materials we could think of, but none of them worked. How could this happen?"

Upon hearing Wayne's words, Lacey bit her lips. The items

throughout the room were either burnt beyond recognition or completely untouched. Some had the text burned on them, but they were too blurry or too faded to read.

Projection magic was a type of light magic, and having too strong an affinity with it resulted in the item being burned down to cinders.

Should I adjust the amount of mana I pour into the magic stones? Lacey asked herself, trying to figure out a way to fix things. *That wouldn't work*, she reasoned. It was too difficult to adjust the amount of mana in a highly fragile artifact. Such an adjustment was out of the question.

Lacey put a fist to her head and slumped down on a chair. She thought it was going to work. She thought she had found a breakthrough, but instead, there was only a dead end. She sat down with a downcast expression on her face. Nobody could say a word to her.

Lanze clapped his hands. "Okay! If this didn't work, let's move on! Just knowing that none of these items worked out is a big deal! We can just look for other items to test!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah... You're right..." Lacey muttered. Even she could tell that Lanze was just forcing himself to be unfazed by the failure, trying to cheer her up. But she couldn't suppress the malaise settling upon her. Lacey had realized that a material that produced the results that she wanted likely didn't exist at all. After using it, it dawned on her that projection magic was too complicated and too sensitive to be practical. No mage in the world would be able to use it except her. The existence of a material with perfect affinity to her magic would be a miracle.

What now? Lacey was on the wrong track, but she had no idea which direction to head next. She frowned, recalling the time she was trying out materials for the fire-resistant tree sap. Back then, she managed to find a way, so she thought she could do something again this time. As she tightened her grip on her staff, her frustration grew.

Lanze had been smiling, but he slapped himself and averted his eyes. Allen tried to think about what to say to Lacey, but couldn't come up with anything and kept quiet. He kept poring over his

notes, trying to figure out anything they could have missed.

Only Wayne was in a position to talk to Lacey in her current state. "Time for a break. Get some rest. We still have some time," he said firmly as he placed his hands on her shoulders. "Lacey, sorry about all this. I shouldn't have dawdled; I should have just told you about the king's request earlier. You would've had enough time—"

"That's right... Wayne, it's you."

"Huh?"

"Wayne, what did you say again?" Lacey asked.

"I should've just told you about the king's request earlier?" Wayne repeated.

"No, that's not it. Back when we were making the culinary paper with Ellie, Reeve, and Yorma. We soaked a bunch of materials in the tree sap and checked them one by one. What did everyone bring, and why didn't we use those?"

Lacey wasn't even asking Wayne anymore. She covered her mouth and started muttering to herself.

Since we're using the fire-resistant tree's sap anyway, why not make the tool out of the tree's bark?

Lacey recalled her words while making the camera.

Windows, mirrors, glass cups, shiny objects... They all have different shapes and forms, but we can see ourselves in them.

"The fire-resistant tree's sap was ineffective because it was part of the same material as the bark, so it easily absorbed back. Projection magic is a type of light magic, but the concept is simulating a lens with magic and having it reflect light. A clear, transparent material like water would just take the mana into itself..."

Lacey stared at the vase on the table. The vase had not been part of Lacey's drab house decor, but rather one of the items brought in by Mateo. The items throughout the house fell into the following categories: They were burnt completely, had no reaction, or had blurry and unreadable text printed on them.

"Bubbles?" Lacey mumbled. Some of the flowers had been singed, but the vase itself was undamaged. The glass vase had properties similar to those of the lens, so it ended up absorbing the

magic.

Lacey recalled the rainbow that she produced as a present to Selene. She had used light magic to create it. She combined clear, transparent water bubbles with sunlight.

A puzzle piece clicked into place in Lacey's mind.

"Wayne."

"Huh? Wh-What's going on?"

"Wayne, I'm glad you're here. Without you, I wouldn't have come up with this."

Wayne was caught off guard by the sudden compliment. Lacey grinned after seeing his expression. The past month had not been a waste. Her experiences piled up and led to this moment.

"If I can't adjust the amount of mana, then I should just not do it. I don't have to use anything with perfect affinity to my magic. I just need to find something that's *good enough*. In that case, I'll do *this*!"

Lacey spun her staff around and chanted an incantation. A beam of light shot out from her staff. Wayne and the others traced the path of light. At first, Wayne couldn't understand Lacey's actions, but soon enough, he figured it out.

"Wh-Whoa..."

Allen was the first to cry out. His mouth was agape, shocked at what he was seeing, and he took a step back. Lanze did the same. Wayne rubbed his eyes, completely in disbelief at what was before him.

The four of them took the material that they had selected to a highly skilled smithy to have it refined. A week passed as the smithy refined the material. They still had some time until the party with the royal house of Eharaja, but Lacey couldn't help but feel anxious.

It was the first time that Lacey had visited Alicia's room in a while, and the princess greeted her with an exasperated look. Still, she treated Lacey with hospitality and poured her a hot cup of tea and a plate full of cookies. Alicia's room was as dark and gloomy as ever, with just one window letting sunlight in.

"I see you still haven't taken the hint. I wonder why you can't

seem to leave me alone," Alicia grumbled. She was pouting and complaining, but she also couldn't seem to sit still. It seemed that she was also trying to find an excuse to leave her room.

"I apologize for taking so long to get back to you, Your Highness," Lacey said while holding two boxes. "May I have some tea?" She wanted to take a sip while it was still hot since Alicia had gone out of her way to pour it for her.

"Do whatever you want," Alicia said, curious about the boxes in Lacey's possession.

"May I leave these boxes on the table?" Lacey asked.

"I said, do whatever you want."

"Thank you."

Lacey sipped her tea and bit into a cookie. However, it would seem that Alicia's patience had run out.

"Just what are you trying to pull by making me wait like this?!" she bellowed.

"Wah! I'm sorry! I-I was not trying to test your patience!" Lacey frantically shook her head. Still seated, she opened one of the boxes, one that was slightly bigger than the palm of her hand. Alicia tried to peek into the box, but found that the contents were wrapped in a piece of cloth. She glared at Lacey.

"N-No! I swear, I'm really not trying to test your patience!" Lacey took the hint. She carefully lifted up the item and began unwrapping it. "It's quite fragile. It might break if it were placed in a wooden box on its own."

Alicia's beautiful brows furrowed as she looked at the object that Lacey had taken from the box and placed on the table. "What is *this*?" she asked. Her disappointment was palpable from the tone of her voice. The object was a mere piece of glass. It was a thick and rectangular piece. On its back were silver-colored metallic sticks that supported its weight, making it lean back and appear slanted.

It was a frail and pathetic-looking item. Alicia glared at Lacey. She was about to open her mouth and berate her visitor for wasting her time, but stopped. She let out a deep sigh and averted her gaze. She felt like she expected too much of the artifact maker. Her face was marked with resignation.

"Um, Your Highness, as you can see, this is just a piece of glass," Lacey said.

"Okay," Alicia said.

"I'll open this box as well. This is called a 'camera.' It's an artifact that can capture scenery and turn it into an image. I originally created it so that anyone can use it, but I modified this one specifically for you, Your Highness. I placed a special magic stone inside it. There's a special mechanism here, like this..."

"Sure." Alicia was still not looking. She was completely uninterested.

"Your Highness, I'll just try something out, okay?"

"How many times must I repeat myself? Do whatever you want."

Alicia's responses were completely canned. But Lacey was fine with that. She stood up and walked around the room.

Alicia suddenly realized that something was strange. Just as she was about to check, Lacey called out to her.

"Your Highness! Please, take a look at this!"

Alicia turned around and saw a bright light. Lacey had opened the curtains to let sunlight in, illuminating the once dark and gloomy room. It was so bright that Alicia had to squint.

One more thing surprised Alicia. The glass plate on the table now had a vivid image reflected inside it.

"Wh-What's going on?!"

Alicia took a closer look. There was no mistaking it. It was a clear image of the capital's streets.

Lacey smiled upon seeing Alicia's reaction. "Normally, the camera I made could only produce images in black and white, and it would take a while to produce one image. This camera uses projection magic to shorten the time to make an image. It can accurately capture the wavelengths of light in order to reproduce colors perfectly."

"I-I have no idea what those words mean..."

Alicia's eyes were wide open in amazement as she stared at the scenery reflected in the glass board. Then, the scenery that Alicia thought was a mere image suddenly changed. The cityscape vanished and was replaced with an image of the blue sky. Then, it

changed into another image, and another one. There were several images that appeared on the glass, one after the next.

"Wh-What?!"

"Your Highness, this is called a photograph. At first, I was thinking of making an album of them, but we didn't have enough glass boards to make multiple photographs. We spent some time looking for a material that can work as a substitute for glass," Lacey explained.

However, the use of projection magic turned out to be more complicated than everyone had anticipated. While there was no problem if Lacey was the one wielding it, it was difficult to replicate and control when cast from a magic stone. Thus, they looked for a material that didn't need any fine adjustments for use.

When she cast projection magic in front of Wayne and the others, she had used it on a window of her house. Lacey and Wayne had cleaned the window until it was clear and sparkling. It had been the perfect target. Normally, it had similar properties to the lens, and it would just absorb the projection magic cast on it, rendering it useless. However, projection magic was a type of light magic. If the glass absorbed light magic, then it would also absorb sunlight. As the glass absorbed the projection magic, it would be catalyzed by sunlight, and it would cause the image, the photograph, to appear. The particles of mana absorbed by the glass reacted with sunlight, causing it to produce a temporary image on the surface.

When Lacey cast projection magic on the window, for a moment, it seemed that nothing happened. But the moment sunlight hit the window, a colorful image appeared on the surface of the glass. It was a photograph of the vase filled with flowers. Its vivid red petals decorated the window surface, and the image made of light scattered its reflection throughout the room. The beautiful scenery took away the breath of all who beheld it.

Lacey carefully explained everything that had happened to Alicia. The princess, as a user of magic, was satisfied by the explanation, but there were a few things that she still didn't quite understand.

"Well then, why does the 'photograph' appear on this glass

board? I thought that only one photograph would appear on each one?" she asked.

"I thought so as well. But then, I had an idea. What would happen if I cast an image on a piece of glass that already has a photograph on it? This was the result. I was able to copy over several layers of images onto a piece of glass. Um, well, 'piece of glass' is a bit wordy, so I thought to call it a 'photo frame.'"

"I do not wish to know about its name right now."

"S-Sorry!"

"W-Wait, I'm not upset or anything."

Lacey had been frustrated with herself for her terribly worded explanations. She had been racking her brain trying to figure out what to say next. She had practiced what to say to Alicia several times, explaining to her just enough, no more and no less, so that she could understand.

"Um, Your Highness, you said that you were feeling lonely. So...perhaps you could take photographs of Croix with this camera and take them with you to Eharaja. I made it so that the photographs you take with this camera appear on this photo frame. If there is a problem with you taking valuable information over to a different country, I can modify this photo frame so that it can be activated with your mana. And, um... I also thought it might be a concern to have all the photographs you take show up on the photo frame, so I could make it so you could remove them before you go to Eharaja—"

"Enough."

Alicia's voice was that of rejection. It was a cruel voice that shut Lacey off completely. Lacey jumped in surprise. There was a mix of anger and disappointment in her cold tone.

Alicia crossed her arms and averted her gaze. She appeared to be dejected and disappointed in Lacey. "I was expecting you to create an *opportunity* for me to come out of my room! And what did I get? Indeed, this camera and photo frame are both wonderful! Amazing. An incredible display of the Aster artifact-maker's talents! But this is *not* what I wanted!"

Alicia was trembling and grasping her arms. Her tone became

harsher and harsher as she spoke. By the end of her rant, she was glaring straight at Lacey.

"I'm feeling lonely? Yeah, you're right. I feel very lonely having to leave my country. I *did* tell you that. But that's not it. That's not it at all! That's a completely different matter! This artifact is not what I asked you to make, nor is it something I wanted! I am *not* happy about you bringing an item that *you* wanted to make! Starseeking? Ridiculous!"

Alicia's face was red from all the shouting and screaming. Her throat was starting to hurt.

"You told me you'd give me an opportunity to get out of my room! You *promised* me!"

Lacey was unfazed and nodded at Alicia's words. "I *did* promise you, Your Highness. Of course, this is not the opportunity that I was talking about."

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"Huh? It's not?"

Alicia's voice was one of surprise. Lacey was staring at the princess, seemingly perplexed. Or perhaps it was her usual expression. Lacey's expression always lacked confidence, seemingly always trying to gauge the reaction of her conversation partner. That was Alicia's impression of the girl in front of her.

Alicia had known Lacey ever since she set off with Wayne on their journey to defeat the Demon King, before she had been called the Dawn Witch. She never liked Lacey—Lacey was younger and more talented than her, yet so timid and introverted. Every time they met, the princess would act as if she had never seen her before, but in truth, she had been looking at her, following her every move. And each time, she would feel foul and nasty emotions torment her.

Alicia had nothing. She was part of a prestigious royal lineage, but without any talent to speak of. She was no genius, and the best she could do with her magic was heating up a teapot.

Lacey stood in contrast to everything about Alicia. At first, the princess felt nothing but pure respect for Lacey. She had heard

rumors about this orphaned little girl who could cast magic that rivaled that of seasoned adults and decided to take a peek during her practice sessions. What she saw instead was a frail, precarious, and unreliable child. Despite possessing far more power than everyone present, Lacey seemed to be unaware of her own power and kept her head down all the time.

Alicia was disappointed. Her feelings of respect and envy gradually transformed into irritation. She found the rumors of the mature, red-headed Dawn Witch to be an odd contrast to the real Lacey, but in her mind, she hoped that the small child had grown into a more reliable figure to match the legends. In the end, Lacey had not changed at all, even as she returned from defeating the Demon King. Even though Lacey had talent that Alicia could never hope to match, the Dawn Witch continued to act as if she had no such talent.

Alicia did not want to admit that she was spurred by jealousy. But when Lacey's fiancé Raymond flirted with her, she felt an incredible sense of happiness. The Dawn Witch's fiancé was showering her with love and affection. Of course, it turned out that he had only been taking advantage of her naivete.

"Princess Alicia... Um, well, like I was saying..."

Alicia felt something different seeing Lacey fidget around. Indeed, her fidgeting looked no different from her usual insecure writhing. But this time, something was different. Before, Lacey would have backed down and run away once Alicia got angry at her. This time, Lacey was approaching her despite all her trembling.

Lacey looked straight at Alicia without running away and said, "Would you like to take some photographs?"

"Huh?" Alicia blinked.

"Like I said, why don't you go out of your room and take some photographs? I'm not using the camera to give you an opportunity to go out—*you* are. I explained it earlier, but the photo frame can still withstand several uses of projection magic on it. That means it can hold a lot more photographs! My original idea was to take photographs of a bride and make it into a memory, but the opposite

sounds fun too."

The opposite. Alicia had no idea what Lacey meant. Before she knew it, she was taking a step back out of confusion.

Meanwhile, Lacey was walking forward. She took a deep breath, her face red, and looked straight into Alicia's eyes.

"Your Highness, *you* will take the photographs. Capture the face of this country."

Right then, a strong breeze blew. The curtains billowed, and Alicia's dress swayed from the sudden gust. Gentle rays poured into the dark room, as if small particles of light were coming in to illuminate everything.

Lacey was gripping the camera with both hands, offering it to Alicia.

I, the princess of Croix, will use this camera to take photographs?

Lacey's words rang in Alicia's head. *What a ridiculous idea*, she thought, but the words did not leave her mouth.

Lacey's face was beet red, and so was Alicia's. Soon, the princess's fingers reached out to take the strange artifact in Lacey's hands. The camera—an object that was like a tiny room, as Lacey had put it. Alicia Castile took this tiny room in her hands and took small, silent steps out of the room she had shut herself in.

"What is with this camera?! The photographs I'm trying to take aren't showing up properly!" Alicia cried.

"The use of projection magic should've shortened the time it takes to produce one photograph, so I thought that we wouldn't need the tripod... Maybe we *do* need it after all," Lacey muttered.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that, but my slender arms can't hold this thing forever! Lacey, help me out!"

"Y-Yes, Your Highness!"

Click!

"I can't seem to get the positioning right. What's going on here? The balance? The whole castle doesn't fit in one photograph! What should I do here, Lacey?"

"Y-Your Highness, the castle is too big to fit in one photograph!"

"Excuse me?! Well then, I should just take smaller photographs of

each part!”

“What incredible effort!”

Click, click!

“Father! I need you to look more gorgeous in this photograph! I am trying to make memories here! Please try to look the most wonderful you’ve ever been in your entire life!”

“I-I am so sorry, my daughter...”

“Princess, I-I can’t believe you’re even getting photographs of the king,” Lacey said.

“Of course I am! Next, I need to get photographs of my brothers and mother! Father, that is not enough! Please decide on a pose! Yes, I would like to see a beautiful one! Hmm, that hand needs to be moved... Yes, yes, like that! Scissors! It looks like crab claws! Okay, peace!”

“Peace?! Your Highness, what does that mean?! It looks kind of cheap too! Are you okay with that?!” Lacey cried.

“It’s the nuance that matters! The nuance! This is a photograph that I’ll treasure! Who gives a damn about royal prestige, right?!”

“Your Highness, language!”

Click!

Click, click, click!

Click!

Alicia continued taking photographs. One by one, they began to pile up in the photo frame. They began to change her heart and mind.

“Your Highness?” Lacey said. She was smiling while carrying the camera around with her small body, helping Alicia take photographs. “This camera is a novel invention, and nobody is aware of it yet. But someday, it might become commonplace, and everyone will have one with them. No, I’ll make it happen. This country will soon change. After all, no place stays the same forever. Small changes will pile up and transform everything.”

Really now, Alicia thought. She was afraid of change. But here was Lacey, bravely and happily bringing about change wherever she went. Lacey, the little girl she once saw, had changed. Once she realized this, Alicia couldn’t help but speak her mind.

"Why did you work so hard for my sake?"

Alicia couldn't understand why. She had done nothing but harass and harangue Lacey. Anyone could see that she was exposing her ugly, unflattering side to this poor girl. Lacey herself probably knew about it.

"Why?" Alicia asked. She stole Lacey's fiancé. Even if Lacey didn't actually have any sort of affection toward Raymond, it didn't change what had happened.

"Why?" Alicia muttered. Lacey was perplexed. She was unable to answer Alicia's question as they climbed higher and higher up the stairs. They walked up the stone steps and finally reached the highest reaches of the castle. A cold wind blew and made it slightly difficult to breathe. The masses below looked like tiny grains from this height. It had been so long since Alicia had last walked this much, perhaps long before she had even started thinking of getting married. Her legs were exhausted and felt like they were swelling.

Below them, the citizens continued to walk through the ever-bustling city streets. Meanwhile, the sky above them was so close that it was dizzying.

"I...just couldn't bear to see you so distressed, Your Highness," Lacey muttered from behind Alicia. Her voice was so low that Alicia turned around to hear her better. Lacey was looking down at the ground.

Alicia figured that she didn't mishear Lacey's words and thought about what she might have meant. When she realized it was an answer to her earlier question, she couldn't help but laugh. "How silly of you," the princess murmured to herself as she aimed the camera at the city streets.

Click, click. She clicked the camera's button to take more photographs. According to Lacey, this button was originally not part of the device's schematics. This was a last-minute addition in order to activate the projection magic imbued within the artifact, which meant that the final product turned out to be small and flimsy. With each press of the button, the lens opened and closed rapidly. *Click, click, click.*

Alicia's hands were trembling. The tremors grew with each press

of the button, and she was having trouble catching her breath. She was glad that nobody was around to see her pathetic appearance, save for Lacey. She hesitated momentarily and tried to speak up, but the words wouldn't come out. Then, the tears started flowing from her eyes. No matter how much she tried to wipe them, they kept falling down her cheeks.

Lacey was startled. She tried to run over to her, but tripped over herself repeatedly. Still, she hurried over to the princess's side. "Y-Your Highness, what's wrong? Did something go wrong with the camera?" Lacey asked. Alicia didn't answer; to her, it was as if Lacey were too far away to hear. She only kept pressing the camera button. Alicia was about to drop the camera, so she handed it over to Lacey and bit her lip to save face, trying to keep her cries from leaking out. Of course, it was in vain, and the best she could do was cover her face with her hands.

"I'm sorry..."

Why am I apologizing? I'm the princess here. What's wrong with me taking away her fiancé? Alicia told herself. But part of her knew she was wrong.

"I'm so sorry..."

From the very start, Lacey never gave Alicia a second thought. When the princess finally realized this, she felt a sense of emptiness and irritation. But this also made her incredibly happy. When she found out that Lacey was the Aster artifact maker, she was surprised, but also felt a strange sense of pride in seeing her work. Alicia recalled the first time she laid her hands on one of Lacey's artifacts. Back then, she couldn't put a finger on what she felt, but now she knew that she must have sensed Lacey behind its craftsmanship. She imagined Lacey's visage, hiding her vast talents behind a veil of disinterest.

The hems of Alicia's dress billowed in the wind. Alicia wailed to the vast, blue sky above.

Eventually, the princess stopped crying, and she calmed her breathing. Lacey wore a perplexed expression as she checked on Alicia. The princess looked disheveled from all the crying. There was no longer any point in hiding her face out of embarrassment, so she

started to laugh it off.

"Umm... Your Highness... What did you mean—"

"Never mind that," Alicia said. "I said it wrong."

Alicia thought for a moment about how to express herself. In the end, she decided to tell Lacey how she felt in her usual, pompous manner.

"I merely wished to express my gratitude to you."

Several days later, a young man with a gentle countenance stood before Alicia. It was her second time meeting this man face-to-face, but with every meeting, she felt her feelings for him grow. This man had gone all this way from the neighboring country to see her.

"Lady Alicia, I am grateful for this opportunity to once again behold your beautiful face." These flattering words came from Prince Kipharo. At first, Alicia had thought that he was like Raymond—someone who knew the right words to make women happy and used them as a means to a devious end. But it didn't take long for her to realize that Kipharo used his words differently. Raymond's flattery was a means to satisfy his worldly desires.

Meanwhile, Kipharo's words weren't hollow, and he viewed Alicia as a looking glass into the entirety of the country of Croix. He shouldered the fate of the country of Eharaja, and he was aware of his heavy responsibility. Unlike Raymond, Kipharo was sincere, and he was exactly the kind of man that Alicia wanted. Slowly but surely, her feelings for him were growing.

"Your words flatter me, Prince Kipharo. However, this opportunity you speak of is the work of one girl," Alicia said.

"One girl, you say?"

"Indeed."

Alicia's gorgeous pinkish-blonde hair was decorated with a number of jewels. She wore a dress meticulously selected for this occasion, and put on many cosmetics to beautify herself. She surprised herself with how much she went out of her way to polish her appearance. Her maids worked hard to dress and accessorize the princess. But without Lacey's help, she would still be throwing tantrums in her room, pouting and refusing to come out.

Alicia could be said to be an export of the country of Croix. One of her jobs as princess, as the bridge between Croix and Eharaja, was to be a woman of sheer beauty. She had been neglecting one of her basic duties, and she felt ashamed of it. Lacey had reminded Alicia of many things. Even though—or perhaps because—she didn't have any noteworthy talents to speak of, she should still perform her duties to the best of her ability. In the same vein, Lacey had done her best as Starseeking to answer Alicia's problems.

Among the items Alicia brought with her to prepare for her newlywed life were the camera and photo frame she received from Lacey.

"And who might that girl be?" Kipharo wondered.

To which Alicia answered, "She is my country's most beloved artifact maker—a tiny, adorable young lady."

Meanwhile...

***

"Wahwahwahwahwah—"

Lacey was trembling and gripping her staff in her decrepit home in the capital.

"Auugh, ouugh, ouugh!"

"Lacey, are you okay? Hang in there—"

Lacey barely managed to hold on to her fading consciousness thanks to Wayne calling out to her as she collapsed onto the floor. She gulped and took a second look at the object in front of her.

"Waaah!"

A huge box containing a massive pile of gold coins was right before her. The sparkling—nay, shining hoard of currency burned through Lacey's eyes, and she had to avert her gaze. She remembered the reward money she had received from defeating the Demon King and was terrified by the huge sum in front of her.

"This is the king's reward to the Dawn Witch," explained the royal envoy. "We shall bring the rest of the sum at a later time. The reward money has been split into multiple deliveries and will be

brought here under escort. We apologize for the inconvenience."

"Ouuugh! This is enough—no, more than enough! Even the box here is already way too much! Please send it back to the king!" Lacey pleaded.

"We have been ordered by the king to have this reward money handed to you by all means—"

"Please... I'm begging you! Waaah!" Lacey no longer had any idea why she was crying, or what exactly she was begging for.

Lacey handed over the camera and photo frame to Alicia. She had realized that she wasn't the only one able to wield the camera and take photographs. Even the act of taking photographs could become a precious memory in and of itself.

"Dawn Witch—no, Aster artifact maker. I apologize for my unbecoming actions toward you," Alicia declared as she twirled her pinkish-blonde hair under the bright blue sky. She could not humble herself before Lacey as a proud member of the royal family, but she wanted to apologize to her in her own capacity.

Alicia was looking straight at Lacey, who had been caught off guard by the sudden apology. She had no idea what the princess was apologizing for until she realized that it was about her ex-fiancé Raymond, which caught her by surprise once more. After all, she thought nothing of the entire affair until now. On the contrary, the incident with Raymond had been a big opportunity for her to finally take a step forward.

Lacey was struggling to express her feelings to Alicia when she noticed that the princess's hands were turning red from gripping each other too tightly. Alicia was a proud woman, and someone of her status bowing to a mere mage was unthinkable. Lacey couldn't imagine how it felt; she figured that it would be a huge embarrassment for the princess. Even so, she needed to say something. How should she answer Alicia's apology, and how should she respond to her feelings of shame? In the first place, why did Alicia feel the need to apologize to Lacey?

Oh, I see now... Lacey thought. What does one look for when apologizing? The answer was clear to her.

"Your Highness, I forgive you. Please raise your head," Lacey said.

That was a truly humiliating thing to be told. *F-Forgive* me*?! What gives you the right—*

Alicia wanted to hit herself for thinking such things. She started to feel tears well up in her eyes, but seeing the look of relief on Lacey's face made her feel that nothing else mattered.

This might be rude to say, but... Lacey thought, but she still couldn't help herself.

"Your Highness, I loved the tea and snacks you served! Thank you so much!" she said.

It had been a few days since Lacey's last meeting with Alicia. When the princess heard Lacey's words, she realized that Lacey had figured out that she had been the one preparing the tea and snacks, and suddenly got very embarrassed. However, that embarrassment soon turned into a bashful smile. Lacey honestly found her smile to be quite adorable and wanted to tell the princess about it.

Now, Lacey was faced with a problem far exceeding her capabilities. The king was overjoyed at Alicia finally coming out of her room, and had given Lacey her reward, but what she received was far beyond her imagination.

"Seems like a pretty fair reward to me," Wayne said. "You should just take what's given to you."

"Wayne, how does *this* look fair to you? I-I can't take all of this! There's too much!" Lacey cried.

"But—"

"I-I can't take all thish!" Lacey was panicking so much that she bit her tongue. The young man sent by the king looked perplexed as he watched Lacey. If it had been Dana in Lacey's place, she would have taken as much as she could while gesturing *okay* with her fingers. Of course, Lacey believed in such a thing as receiving rewards in moderation.

"Besides, if I take all this, I would feel indebted to the royal family! That goes against everything I worked for! I can't accept this!" Lacey yelled. She never wanted to be bound to a kingdom or

ruler ever again.

"Well... Yeah, that makes sense," Wayne conceded. He placed a thumb on his chin and started thinking. He wanted to push Lacey to take everything she could—a materialistic viewpoint for the second son of a noble. A year of traveling to defeat the Demon King was enough time to change the outlook of even a young nobleman like him.

"I understand," the royal envoy said. "Then we shall grant you just this box."

"No, please take this one too! This is way too much!" Lacey pleaded.

"The king wishes to convey one more item to you. He says, 'Please enjoy yourselves.'"

"Please, listen to me!" Lacey yelled. After that, she became perplexed at the envoy's words. *Enjoy ourselves?* At that moment, the young man snapped his fingers. In an instant, several soldiers and maidservants entered the room and carted off Lacey.

"Gaaaah!" Things moved so quickly that she forgot to put up any resistance. Wayne watched with his arms crossed as Lacey was stuffed into a carriage. If there were any problems, Lacey trusted that he would use his full strength and run after them, but she wished that he wouldn't be so lax sometimes.

"Hero Wayne, if you will."

"Hm? I'm going too?"

"Yes. We shall handle the reward money for Miss Lacey and store it somewhere safe. Now, please come with us."

Lacey and Wayne were taken to the royal palace. After being dragged all over the place and manhandled, Lacey felt dead inside.

"Oh my, you're so slim and slender!"

"Maybe you don't need a corset after all. Actually, we might need to stuff your dress with something!"

"Get me a towel! Keep the goods flowing!"

Lacey had been bathed, brushed, dried, and brushed again.

"Your skin is already so fair. I don't think you need any more powder. I'm so jealous!"

It was obvious flattery. Lacey appraised her reflection after the

whirlwind of cosmetics and empty compliments. No matter how much makeup she had on, she was still tiny, and her massive head of black hair kept getting in the way.

Lacey was asked which dress she liked the most, but she didn't know which one to pick. She wore the dresses as told until one of the helpers said, "This looks good!" Lacey bowed to the maids as they sighed with satisfied expressions. She wasn't sure how to respond to all the praises being heaped upon her. The least she could do was to hold back a sigh, since that would be rude to the servants who helped her get dressed.

"Please, enjoy yourself!" The maids sent Lacey out into the party hall. She had taken so long to prepare that the sun was already setting outside.

"What's going on? Is this—" Lacey muttered.

The palace hall was filled with lovely decorations. When Lacey saw the flowers covering the entire floor, she instantly knew where she was.

The next moment, a couple called out to her—it was Alicia and a man Lacey didn't know. "Lacey!" Alicia greeted her with a big smile on her face. Her elegant dress swayed behind her as she approached. "You came!"

"Princess Alicia, is this the adorable artifact maker that you spoke of?"

"Lord Kipharo, surely you know that I cannot divulge such a secret."

Alicia, in her beautiful dress, had her arm intertwined with the young man she was talking to. Kipharo was the name of the prince of Eharaja. Lacey froze, then bowed to him like a toy soldier. She wasn't nervous because she was in front of royalty; she was nervous because that was just how she was when talking to someone new.

Kipharo let out a gentle laugh. Alicia smiled at Lacey. "Thank you for attending my wedding party."

"Oh, um, ah, yes..."

"Lacey, you look absolutely gorgeous today. I hope you enjoy the celebrations. I'm glad I could see you here. I'll be sure to treasure the photo frame and camera." Alicia's expression looked fresh, as if a

heavy burden had been lifted off her back.

"What was that about?" Kipharo asked.

"That's a secret too," Alicia replied, playfully brushing him off. She turned to Lacey. "Enjoy the party!" she said, then left with Kipharo.

Lacey stood dumbfounded. *This really* is *Princess Alicia and Prince Kipharo's wedding party,* she thought. In short, everyone in this room wearing fancy suits and dresses was of the nobility. There might even be nobles from neighboring countries present in this hall. Lacey felt nervous sweat trickling down her back. She recalled the king of Croix sending her a message telling her to enjoy. She had been dragged here by force, but the king must have known that Lacey would never have attended an event like this without resorting to extreme measures. Even then, Lacey didn't have the mental fortitude to enjoy this wedding party, the biggest event in the entire country. She couldn't understand what went on in these royals' and nobles' minds.

That said, she felt happy seeing Alicia enjoying herself.

"Oops, excuse me."

Lacey tried to sneak away and hide in a corner of the palace, but she bumped into a man.

"Are you okay? I apologize for not paying attention."

Lacey picked up a foreign accent from the man's voice. He appeared to be young and was probably a diplomat from another country.

"I'm okay. I'm sorry for bumping into you," Lacey said.

"I'm glad that you appear to be unhurt." The young man smiled at Lacey. After she bowed, her eyes followed him. The young man looked at the food laid out on the table and let out a cry of surprise. Curious, Lacey peered from behind the man and saw candy flowers displayed prominently.

Wh-What?! Is Mr. Cedric here?! Lacey looked around, but of course, he was nowhere to be found.

She recalled the fox-eyed merchant's words. *Can I sell them for a high price at the royal court?* He had been talking about the culinary paper.

L-Lanze...

Lacey did give Lanze permission as long as he didn't go overboard, but she didn't expect him to actually go through with it. She started feeling dizzy thinking about it. Allen and Lanze were proactive—perhaps *too* proactive.

"What is this...strange dessert? It's hard and shiny... How mysterious! And quite beautiful."

"There are even different shapes that aren't flowers... They look so beautiful. Can we really eat these? It seems like a waste."

"I heard that an artifact maker from Croix crafts tools to make these. They even came up with the recipe."

"My, how talented!"

N-No, I didn't! Lacey wanted to scream. She *did* make the culinary paper, but the candy flowers could be made even without that. It was an item that she made with the help of Cedric and the kids from Plume Village. It felt wrong to take the sole credit for all that work. And it was embarrassing for her.

Lacey turned away from the gossiping noblewomen. All she could do was groan and grumble. She walked back and forth, trying to decide if she wanted to correct their misunderstanding, when she heard a familiar voice call out to her.

"What the heck are you doing?"

Wayne?

Lacey suddenly remembered that he had also been taken away by the king's envoys. She surmised that his preparations took much less time than hers. In that case, she must have made him wait for quite a while. She turned around to apologize to him.

Both of them were silent. Lacey and Wayne blinked and stared at each other. Wayne's golden hair had been combed down, and he wore a collared red suit. Epaulets matching his golden hair were on his shoulders.

Lacey was the first to return to lucidity. It wasn't the first time she'd seen Wayne in a formal outfit. He had worn proper formal wear at the victory parade right after they returned from their battle against the Demon King. During that battle, Lacey had been running around behind Wayne and Dana, so she wore her usual gloomy black robe over her head at the parade.

"Hmm... Well..." Lacey muttered.

Lacey must have looked completely alien to Wayne, dressed as formally as she was. To cover for her slender figure, she picked a dress that didn't expose much skin and padded her neckline with lace. Only the bride was allowed to decorate herself with flowers during this event, so Lacey picked a large diamond ribbon collar to hang around her neck. She had trouble deciding on a dress to wear when her eyes landed on a blue dress with a hue that turned deeper as it approached the hem. Seeing this, the maids complimented her, saying that the dress suited her well.

Lacey figured that this must have been flattery. *They're flattering me. There's no way this would ever suit me,* she thought to herself. Thus, when she saw Wayne staring at her, trying to find words to say to her, her heart ached. It hurt, and she wanted to run away and vanish.

"U-Um... Wayne?"

Lacey thought to head off any mockery that might come her way. *This must look really weird. It looks funny, right? I mean, it's the first time I've put makeup on. Ha ha.*

"Um... Don't mind my look too much, okay? Even I'm surprised by it," she said.

"Yeah," Wayne muttered.

"I mean... I was really nervous and all."

"Yeah."

"I mean, look at me. My hair's so black... I'm not sure I can—"

"Yeah. You look fantastic. Sorry, I was so shocked that I didn't know what to say," Wayne said.

"F-Fantastic?" Lacey echoed.

"I've always thought that it was a bit of a waste that you never really bothered to make yourself look pretty. I've tried to imagine it, but you look even more beautiful than I could have ever imagined."

Lacey wondered if she was hearing things right. She repeated the words Wayne had just said to her in her head, trying to check every single word. *Beautiful*, he said.

"Your black hair and deep blue dress look like the night sky. But why are you still using that hair clip? I'm sure they had something

that looked much better than that thing."

Lacey suddenly realized that her back was against the wall. Wayne scooped up a lock of her hair. As his figure towered over her, completely covering her in his shadow, the noises of the party around them began to fade and feel distant.

"Wh-Why? I mean... Since I'm going to dress up anyway, I thought it might be nice to put this on... I mean, this hair clip you gave me... It looks really nice with this dress," she answered. Lacey's thoughts were all jumbled, but she somehow managed to express the feelings that had been welling up deep in her heart. Still, that last part was really embarrassing to her. She groaned and covered her face.

After hearing Lacey's thoughts, Wayne held his breath. He was so close that Lacey could hear every sound from him so clearly. It was as if all the sensations in her body had gone haywire.

"You look radiant," Wayne whispered. Perhaps this time, Lacey really had misheard what he said.

Wayne finally pulled away. But then, Lacey realized that the tempo of the music had changed. She had been so occupied with her own thoughts that she failed to pay attention to her surroundings.

"Lacey, shall we dance?"

"Huh?"

Wayne offered his hand. Even someone as boorish as Lacey knew what she was being invited to. But she had no idea how to dance.

"It'll be fine," he assured her. "You know, if you're good at dancing, you can lead someone who doesn't know how to dance."

Wayne must have had a lot of confidence in his skills to say that to Lacey. But that wasn't the only thing that she was thinking about.

Hey, are you okay? Are you hurt?

Lacey recalled that back when she ran off and came up with the idea of "shoes" for the camera, she tripped, and Wayne offered her a hand like he did just now. Back then, she wasn't able to take his hand. It wasn't that she didn't like the idea, but rather, she was too embarrassed to do so. Now, he was doing the exact same thing.

Lacey wanted to take his hand, but she wasn't able to. She asked

herself why, and she immediately figured out the feeling behind her embarrassment.

"Lacey?" Wayne called out to her. Slowly, she placed her fingers on his outstretched palm. She looked at his big smile and felt her chest tighten.

I'm—

Lacey's fingertips felt hot. Wayne pulled her forward and onto the dance floor. Music echoed throughout the venue, and the decorations sparkled gold as they reflected light.

I'm... I'm in love with Wayne.

Lacey had no idea when it began. But she was in love with him.

I thought falling in love was something that would never happen to me, she thought. Now that Lacey learned that such an emotion could be found so close to her, she swallowed those bittersweet, perplexing feelings and kept them close to her heart.

"See? It feels different when someone skilled is leading you, right?" Wayne bantered.

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right," Lacey replied.

The song finally ended, and Wayne started chatting her up with a big grin. But Lacey wasn't in the proper state of mind. She had just found out that she was in love with the young man she thought of as a close comrade. On top of that, she didn't know when it all started.

L-Lo—

Wayne was laughing to himself, giving himself a metaphorical pat on the back.

L-Love!

Lacey's head was spinning. "Hey, are you listening to me?" Wayne was calling out to her, but she wasn't even listening anymore.



Huh? B-But... But Wayne, of all people? I mean, he's the *great hero, and he takes care of me really well, and he's a nobleman, and he's really nice and gentle, and he makes great food... N-No way! He's actually perfect?!*

"Why are you staring at me so much?"

Lacey's realization sent a jolt down her spine. She looked straight at Wayne. She was no longer thinking straight. She tried listing down his bad qualities in her head—he loved pulling pranks on people, he was so caring that he acted like a mom sometimes, he was a neat freak—but no matter what she came up with, even those qualities were so endearing that it made her heart ache.

"I want to crush some herbs and stuff them down my throat," Lacey muttered.

"Come on, there's so much good food here, and you want *herbs*?"

Perhaps the herbs would help her insides recover from all the shock. Tee and Noi must have been exchanging herbal drinks right about now.

Lacey hung her head. "I'm so tired. I don't think I can keep going."

"Was all the dancing too much for you?" Wayne asked. He seemed to think it was because it was her first time dancing, but that probably wasn't why she was so exhausted.

"Yeah, maybe... I think it might be time to leave," Lacey said. She was never good with huge events like this, and she'd already seen Alicia happy and fulfilled. She'd had her fill.

"That's a shame," Wayne muttered. Lacey looked up at Wayne, but then she heard another person call out to them.

"Oh? Taking your leave already?"

"King Croix?!" Lacey and Wayne panicked and immediately stood at attention.

"It's fine. You two be at ease," the king said, lightly raising his glass. The noises around them suddenly became more hushed upon the arrival of the king. Lacey felt the gazes of the nobles upon them, with some wondering about the identity of the girl standing next to the great hero.

Lacey felt something different about the king today. He had a

warm smile on his face as he swished around a glass of wine. He felt more human to Lacey—a sharp contrast to his usual self as he looked down on them from his throne.

King Croix had many sons, but Alicia was his only daughter. He was about to send his sole, gorgeous daughter off to a foreign land. He must have had a lot to ponder, not just as a king, but as a father. And in his heart, he must have felt lonely as well.

"Why don't you two look around a bit more? It might be a treat for you to see guests amazed at your artifacts and recipes," the king suggested.

"U-Um..."

Lacey figured out the intent behind the king's message—"enjoy yourselves." That was his way of expressing thoughtfulness, and it must have been one of the rewards he intended to give her. But Lacey, being the way she is, could only give a response that might be considered unsatisfactory.

"Actually... I don't want to see people amazed at my inventions. I just want... I want to make people happy with them." Immediately after responding, Lacey went pale, realizing what she had done. She said something that might be construed as going against the king's intentions for her. "I-I apologize for saying something so out of line!" she squeaked and bowed to the king out of panic.

The king blinked in surprise, then cackled. Lacey looked perplexed at the king's reaction.

"O, Dawn Witch, you have changed so much. I heard that you did not accept the prize I gave you. That was your just reward for your accomplishments. Were you not made aware of this?"

"U-Um..."

"Your Highness, if I may have permission to speak." Wayne took a step forward as if to cover Lacey.

"I allow it."

"A reward should be something its recipient should feel pleased and satisfied with. Lacey wished for Princess Alicia's happiness, and she had already received that reward."

"Hmm, I see now," the king said with an amused expression on his face.

Wayne was smiling back at the king. Lacey felt cold sweat running down her back as she was caught between the two men.

"Then, in that case, that would mean that I have not given an appropriate and just reward to her. What say you, Duke Fylachtó?"

At some point, an old man had appeared behind them, and the king called out to him. In contrast to the deep wrinkles on his face, this old nobleman stood straight, and his posture expressed that he was still sharp and alert.

"Duke Fylachtó!" Wayne and Lacey exclaimed simultaneously.

"It has been a while," the old duke said, narrowing his eyes at the sight of the two.

"Um... Thank you so much for your help," Lacey said.

Duke Fylachtó was the lord of the territory on which Plume Village stood. When the village was attacked by nobles aiming to take Lacey's artifacts, Wayne requested assistance from the duke. With the duke's protection, the village escaped the crisis unscathed. Duke Fylachtó was excellent both as a lord and as a military leader, and during the war against the demonkin, he had stood on the front lines wielding a sword to defend the capital. It was through his participation in those battles that Wayne and Lacey became acquainted with him.

"Please, you need not bring up such matters here," the duke replied.

"O-Oh..."

The duke's answer may have seemed cold and unfriendly, but Lacey immediately understood his position. The duke's protection was for Plume Village, not for Lacey herself. The protection of Lacey's artifacts was merely a side effect of the duke wanting to protect his territory. Or at least, that was the pretext. This wasn't the appropriate place for Lacey to express her gratitude. Even Wayne wanted to thank the duke, but he wasn't allowed to do so either. They had to content themselves with a quiet bow that could be interpreted as a greeting. After expressing their courtesies, they looked up and smiled at the duke.

"What's this about? Did something happen between you three?" the king asked.

"Oh, it's just some pleasantries. Some time ago, we grilled a pretty fat pig that was causing a bit of trouble at the village. That's all," the duke answered.

"Hmm, I see. With such talent at your disposal, I'm sure some wonderful ingredients for a great meal were bound to show up at your doorstep."

"Indeed, indeed."

To outsiders, it seemed like a pleasant exchange regarding food, though only the duke was speaking in code. Lacey quietly listened to the conversation, and Wayne similarly read the room and refrained from commenting.

"In any case, about this young woman's reward. What do you think, Duke Fylachtó?" the king asked the duke once more.

"Hmm, well then..."

The two of them never mentioned any specifics, but it looked like they already knew what they were talking about. Perhaps it was the experience they'd obtained with age. The king and duke were giggling. The sight gave Lacey a bit of a fright.

"Oh, don't you worry," the king said, catching Lacey's anxious expression. "You are, after all, one of the heroes who saved this country, and I owe a great debt to you. I swear not to do anything terrible to you. If material wealth is not the appropriate reward, then I shall simply find something else that is of similar value."

I swear not to do anything terrible to you. Lacey watched as the king and duke turned around and left, leaving Lacey even more anxious. She looked at Wayne.

"Wh-What do you think he meant by that?"

"Who knows? Well, he promised not to do anything terrible, so he'll probably keep to that. The king is someone who sticks to his word," Wayne answered.

"If you say so."

"Anyway, Lacey, since we're still here, care for another dance?"

"Uh... Um... Uh—"

The second song ended right on cue as their talk with the king ended, and the third one began soon after. Lacey thought she'd had enough of dancing, but now that Wayne offered his hand, she

couldn’t quite say no to him.

“We don’t get to do this very often. And I want to take a good look at you as close as I can,” Wayne whispered to her. Then, a short moment later, he seemed to realize what he had just said and blushed. “Uh... Wait, I think I said something outrageous just now.”

Lacey couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, just one more song, then. Take the lead, okay?”

“Of course. You don’t need to worry about that.”

Lacey waited anxiously for the reward from King Croix, but several days passed without anything of note since the party. Alicia was about to leave for Eharaja. As she was about to depart, she told Lacey that she would take many photographs even while in Eharaja. Lacey saw her off with a big smile.

Lacey returned to Plume Village. She thanked Tee and Noi for holding the fort in her absence and hugged them tightly. She returned to her daily life, making artifacts in her mansion, visiting Sasanqua, and playing with the village children.

Soon—

“Please squeeze closer together! You won’t get captured by the camera if you’re too far off the edge!”

“Yorma, you’re small, so you should go in front!”

“No way! You’re smaller, so *you* should go in front!”

“You two are the same height!” Allen yelled at the twins. Kargo laughed as he watched the siblings squabble. Tricia was carrying Lane. Ellie looked annoyed at the siblings and chided them for being troublesome. There was also Ellie’s father, Theobald; his wife, Paula; and Granny, Lanze, and several others.

The first person to visit Lacey upon her return to the mansion was Theobald. He asked Lacey if he could make another camera. Of course, Lacey agreed with much enthusiasm. After sharing her experience making the special photo frame for Alicia, she wanted to create a camera that could make use of projection magic. On top of that, she also wanted to mass-produce the regular cameras. Even though it might take some time before it would happen, she’d promised Alicia that she would make photographs commonplace

among the citizens of this country.

Before all that, Lacey realized that she hadn't officially revealed the camera to the public. To that end, she gathered as many of the villagers as she could at the town square. Seeing this many people gathered in one place overwhelmed her.

"I think Wayne should've been here too!" Ellie grumbled. She was right next to Lacey while the latter was busy organizing the crowd and getting people to line up.

"Yeah," Lacey agreed. Wayne's work had piled up, and he vanished to take care of it. He probably wouldn't be showing himself for a while. Lacey felt a tinge of loneliness knowing this.

"Oh? Hey, honey, does this look weird?! Huh? Oh, how about this?!"

"I-It's not—okay, maybe it looks a bit weird."

"It does, right?! Excellent! Now let's start talking!"

"Talking? Talking about what?!"

"Big sis Lacey, sorry to bother you while everyone's all excited, but how do we do this? Like this?"

"Oh, Allen, that looks great! Thank you. Yeah, we should have the people in front sit down, then arrange everyone by height so that everyone can fit. Then—"

Lacey set up the tripod, then the adults started raising their hands.

"You need someone to press the button, right? That's a job for an old fart like me."

"Cedric, you're no old man! Apologize to Granny! Anyway, I'll handle it—"

"Kargo, you have a family! You should be sitting with them!"

The adults started squabbling over who should press the button and be excluded from the photograph. Lacey had to quell the commotion.

"Um... The button's set to go off on its own, so it's fine," she explained. "Actually, I just remembered—Lanze, I know I agreed to you selling the culinary paper in the capital, but I didn't think you'd sell the candy flower recipe too!"

"Heh heh heh! I just happened to hear about the candy flowers

when I arrived at the village! Don't you think the princess's wedding banquet was the perfect place for it to debut?" Lanze cackled.

"You went way too far this time! Mr. Cedric, please say something!"

"Personally, I don't mind as long as the bride is happy. I hope they decorated their wedding with many lovely flowers," Cedric replied.

"Oh, how kind of you."

The residents fought over petty things for a while until they all settled down and sat in their places.

"I wish we had something like this a long time ago," said one resident.

"We didn't, but we can keep using it from now on," another answered.

"We'll keep making precious memories with it," added a third.

"Big sis Lacey, smile!" Allen yelled.

"L-Like this?" Lacey tried to smile, but she got anxious about looking ugly in front of the camera. Just as she was worrying, the twins pulled her cheeks.

"Gweeh?!"

Click! The sound of the camera rang out.

***

King Croix raised his head.

"Did something just—"

The king thought he heard a sound. But it seemed like he was just imagining things.

The king let out a short sigh as he remembered his daughter, who had recently left the country for Eharaja. She had been using a strange artifact called a "camera" to take photographs, and held them close to her as she left to get married.

Alicia's marriage was sure to boost the ties between the two nations. The king had been anxious about sending over his daughter, who acted a few years younger despite her appearance. But before he knew it, his daughter had matured a little. She left with a big

smile on her face. Perhaps this was written in the stars.

Another thing bothering the king was the reward he should give to the young lady who made this all possible. She was not looking for material wealth. He had to be careful with what to give her, or it might end up tying her down to the nation once more.

"I have wasted such talent at my fingertips," the king muttered. Lacey the Dawn Witch had given the country of Croix a huge service as its most powerful mage. However, the king had to commit to his promise. If he ever laid a hand on her, she and her friends, especially that golden-haired young man, would not let it slide.

Wayne Cielanic. He would not sit quietly if the king ever overstepped his bounds. With that in mind, what should the king do, and how should he express his gratitude to the young witch?

The king sighed once more and called for one of his servants.

"Listen well to every single word that I will say, and be sure to spread it without error to every citizen in the entire country," he commanded.

"Yes, Your Highness."

The king took a deep breath, then began dictating.

***

"Word from the king?"

An envoy arrived at a small village in the countryside. One had arrived to announce the wedding of Princess Alicia just recently, so another showing up so soon was an unusual occurrence. The women stopped their work, and the men adjusted their hats to get a better look at what was going on.

The envoy began reading off the announcement.

To acknowledge the achievements of the Dawn Witch, I hereby grant her the name of "Aster."

"What does that mean?" Several people throughout the country were perplexed at the announcement. The Dawn Witch, to them, was that gorgeous red-haired girl who traveled with the great hero to defeat the Demon King. But it had been over a year since then, and the world had been peaceful ever since.

“I heard the Dawn Witch isn’t a noble, so doesn’t that mean the king is granting her a noble name?” said someone from a crowd.

“Yeah, maybe it’s like giving medals of honor to knights who earned achievements in combat. That’s not unusual, right?” someone explained.

“Wow, you sure know a lot,” another joked. At first, the crowd laughed. But soon, a different realization spread throughout everyone who listened.

“Aster? I’ve heard that name before.” Some began to search their memories for that name. They recalled the star-shaped insignia on various items that had been gaining popularity in the cities. They had heard the name from a holy woman, a warrior, and now, the king. While some were confused at the king’s announcement, a handful of young women could barely conceal their excitement.

The girls who talked about buying shoes along with their bags were also surprised by the announcement.

The Aster insignia artifacts. Their creator was a complete mystery, concealed behind a veil of secrecy. Nobody knew what this artifact maker looked like. This artifact maker appeared not long after the Demon King was defeated. Many were amazed at the incredible talent of this mysterious creator.

“This bag, this insulated thermal bag... Aster! This bag was made by the Dawn Witch herself?!”

The name of Aster—the Dawn Witch—soon spread among the citizens of Croix. Her name would soon be the talk of everyone throughout the country.

***

“All I did was grant her the name of Aster.”

The king was muttering to himself as he sat on the throne. “I gave her a name and made sure that the whole country knew about it. Nothing more, nothing less. I do not intend to take away the freedom of Lacey Aster.”

If the king gave his full support to the Aster artifacts, it would directly tie Lacey to the country once more. That was not what she

wanted. Instead, by announcing the name of Aster to the country, some would connect that name to the Dawn Witch. Some would refrain from trying to seek her out. They would never dare touch someone with that much prestige.

No matter how much she tried to hide it, people would someday find out that Lacey was the Aster artifact maker. The king tried to stave that off by making the first move. It was a flimsy, vague promise of protection, but it aligned with Lacey Aster's desire to live freely.

"Lacey Aster. How will you proceed from here on? And what will you be making in the future? I look forward to what you create from now on."

***

"Why did you pull on my cheeks like that?!" Lacey shouted at the twins, who giggled and laughed at their prank. She had been caught at the exact moment the camera took the photograph, and her strange expression was captured in the photo frame.

The twins ran all over the place before getting caught by their elder brother and father. The twins soon received an earful.

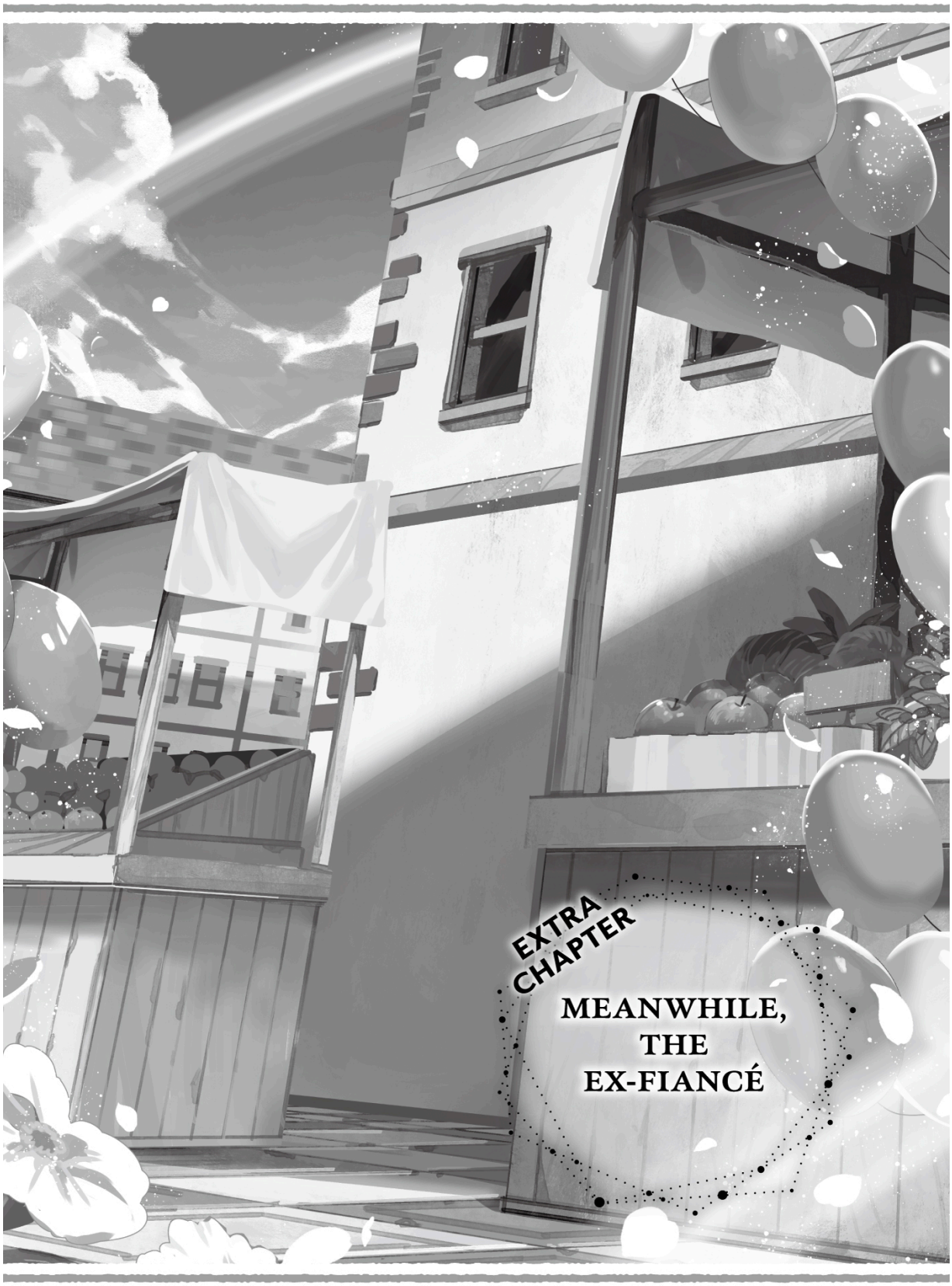
"I thought it'd stop her from getting nervous!" said one.

"I didn't mean anything bad by it!" exclaimed the other.

The twins seemed remorseful about their actions, so they were released soon after.

Lacey felt that her smile would look awkward when she tried to smile on her own. *Is this okay?* She would worry about how she looked, but she remembered that she had friends and comrades along with her. A big smile broke out on her face.

The sky above her was clear and blue.


EXTRA CHAPTER
MEANWHILE, THE EX-FIANCÉ

Extra Chapter: Meanwhile, the Ex-Fiancé

The young blond man with orange eyes raised his hoe up high and swung it down onto the ground. He appeared experienced as he plowed the soil under him. The weather was still cold and chilly, but the young man continued to work and looked refreshed as he wiped sweat off his forehead.

While he wasn't exactly a gorgeous man, his face was moderately attractive. He had gotten a significant amount of the land tilled when he stabbed the hoe into the ground and rested a hand on it. He let out a sigh.

"Another satisfying day of good labor— No it's not!!!" he shouted.

"Raymond, no shouting."

Raymond Dejafaim, the ex-fiancé of the Dawn Witch and the heir of a minor noble. His womanizing had ended with him two-timing the princess of Croix. On top of that, the hero Wayne exposed his insults to the king, which led to his disownment and exile to the hinterlands. Now, he was tilling the land for his sustenance. The young man next to him had been assigned to supervise him.

At first, Raymond kept asking why things had ended up like this. After that whole incident, Raymond had been placed under house arrest. Right after he found out that his engagement with Lacey had been canceled, he was able to taste the outside air for a moment before his limbs were bound and he was thrown into a carriage. After a long, bumpy ride, he found himself in a quiet village, then kicked out of the vehicle. He was confused and disoriented, then finally figured out that he would be living in this far-off settlement. What a turn of events indeed.

Raymond was a spoiled brat who had his entire life handed to him on a silver platter. At first, even simple, daily tasks had been a

struggle. But before he knew it, a year had passed, and he was now wiping his sweat after a day of hard labor.

"Noooo! Why have I gotten used to life out here in the boonies?!" Raymond lamented.

"You look like you're putting your all into swinging that hoe now. You looked pretty pathetic swinging that around at first."

Those who do not work cannot eat. Even this disowned city boy was not an exception to that law. Without food, he wouldn't even have the energy to throw the tantrums he would usually throw. His pride was nothing without food. Who knew that he would end up like this?

"My sexy body! It's all gone! What happened?!" Raymond ranted.

"Your face and body are so mismatched now," the other young man remarked. "You were so skinny and pathetic when you came here, but who could've known that your body gained muscle so quickly?"

Raymond wailed as his clothes slipped off his bulging muscles. "H-How am I supposed to romance all the cute girlies when I get back to the capital? Waah... This is too much... I hate it all!"

"Personally, I think there's a market for that kind of look. Also, you mean you have plans to return to the capital?"

"How could I live now without women wrapped around my finger? Why aren't you a woman? Waaah!"

"Quit it, or I'll turn you into a eunuch."

"Gaaah?!"

Raymond's bark was bigger than his bite. He might have gotten the princess to fall for him, but he had no plans of becoming king. In fact, he never had plans for the future at all. In short, he was a complete idiot. But even an idiot like him had his own strengths.

"Damn it... Okay then! I'll make my name known far and wide from this village! We'll start with these vegetables! I'm gonna grow the perfect carrots, pumpkins, and peppers, then send them all to the Dejafaim household! My brother Raymid has been sending letters mocking me... Damn it! You're my little brother, but you've gotten so arrogant just because you're the new heir!"

"I'm sure your brother's gone through his own trials and

tribulations while you were around."

The young man supervising Raymond feigned sympathy as he watched the disgraced boy till the soil. Raymond had spent days laboring, transforming his once-slender body into a mass of muscles.

Raymond had been sending the vegetables he'd grown to his little brother. He had been using his precious few glacial stones to ensure the produce would survive the long journey. Despite appearances, Raymond was particular about small details like these. It was this ability that allowed him to juggle flirting with several different women at once. Though he was a veteran womanizer, he had never been able to cross the line with any of them. In the end, he appeared to be nothing but a mere fool.

However, circumstances can change a man. Raymond's vegetables were sweet and tasty. Even a simple carrot was bursting with flavor with a single bite. As he selected vegetables to grow and send to his family, he started to realize that his efforts were being poured into a strange and unusual direction. Still, he was starting to find some joy in growing produce. This young, macho man carried a crate full of vegetables, feeling fulfilled as he worked up a good sweat.

It was his little brother who first responded to Raymond's hard work and passion. He had sent over a box containing an unusual bag. *What in the world is this?* Raymond wondered as he read the letter that came with the box.

Dear brother. I think you might be a huge idiot.

The young man supervising Raymond burst into laughter as he peered over Raymond's back and read the frank insult that opened the letter.

Dear brother. I think you might be a huge idiot.

I had the vegetables you sent over. They tasted great. But surely you must realize that your hard work is being poured into a strange direction.

By the way, I noticed that you stuffed the boxes with glacial stones. Were you not aware of insulated thermal bags?

Oh, I suppose you live in the boonies, so you must not be aware

of the latest trends here in the capital.

I feel bad for you, so I shall provide you with one.

Please make good use of it.

The letter ended, and right after, there were detailed instructions on how to use the insulated thermal bag.

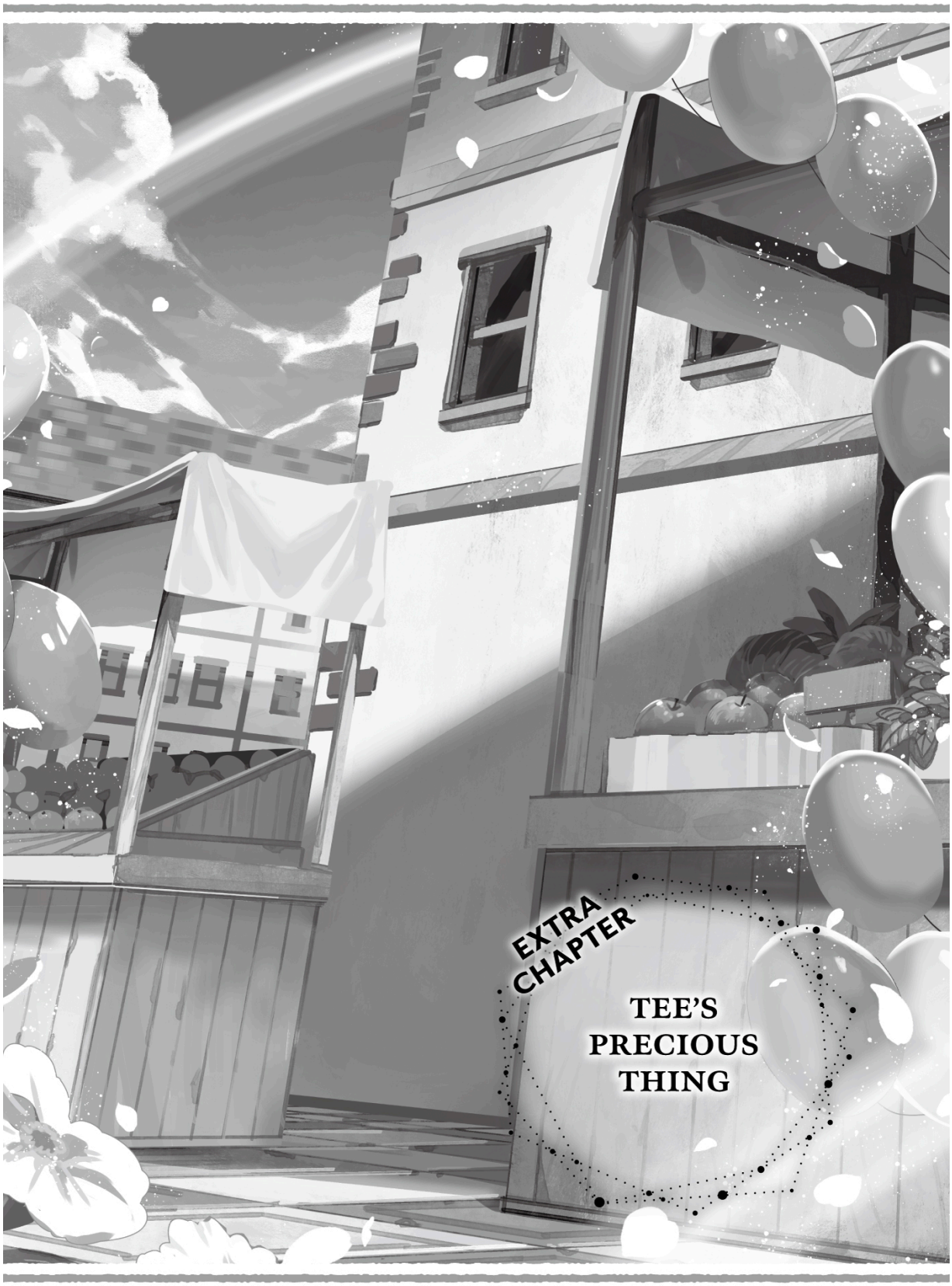
What is this? This sounds so convenient. Wait—

"How the hell would I know about that?!" Raymond yelled. While he was here stuffing precious glacial stones into boxes, some useful artifact had grown popular in the capital.

"Who the hell made this damn thing?!" Raymond cursed the artifact's creator out of frustration. He rampaged as his young supervisor cackled.

Meanwhile, somewhere else, a young lady sneezed. The young hero next to her wondered if she was catching a cold, so he wrapped her in a blanket and poured her some warm tea sweetened with honey. Of course, Raymond wasn't aware of such a thing going on.

"Who the hell are you?! You dumbass!!!"


EXTRA CHAPTER
TEE'S PRECIOUS THING

Extra Chapter: Tee's Precious Thing

These events took place the day after Selene's wedding.

Wayne was yawning as he descended the stairs of Lacey's home. At the foot of the stairs, a single creature lay in wait. It shook its red-feathered tail and wiggled its entire body at him.

"Kwee-ohhh!"

"Whoa! You sure are energetic so early in the morning," Wayne exclaimed. Tee ran in circles around him, squawking and jumping around.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! What's going on? You want to play around with me? I gotta make breakfast—whoa! Careful, I might step on you!"

Wayne tried to capture the bird, but it jumped straight onto his back.

"Kwekwekweh! Kweh!!!"

"Aren't you a bit *too* energetic? Are you trying to tell me something?"

Tee puffed up, almost as if saying that it had been waiting for Wayne to say that. Or at least, that was how Wayne saw it.

Behold! Tee looked proud as it took out *something* from under its wings.

"That's...a stuffed toy? Wait, Tee, that's *you*?"

"Wh-Wha?! What are you two doing?!" a voice yelled.

Just as Wayne picked up the stuffed toy made to look like Tee, Lacey showed up, similarly having just woken up and caught this scene in time.

"Lacey, this yours? Sorry, I'll give it back to you."

"It's...not exactly mine. Not exactly mine, but—"

"Kweh!"

Tee once again puffed its chest and looked at Lacey, who was fidgeting with her hands clasped together. Wayne put two and two together.

"Did you want to show off? You sure got something nice there," Wayne said and gave Tee a pat on the head. Tee squawked in reply, and this time, it left to show off to Noi, balancing the stuffed toy on its back.

Wayne watched as Tee left, then turned to Lacey, who had made herself small beside him. He smiled at her.

"Looks like Tee's really happy with the gift."

"Yeah."

Wayne knew that Lacey had been working on something at night during the past few days. She even asked him if giving someone a present was a good way to celebrate an event. He remembered her looking anxious and fidgety as she asked.

Wayne noticed that Lacey's ears, which were peeking slightly from behind her long black hair, were turning red.

"I'm glad for you two," Wayne said. His words were sincere. Lacey looked at him, her face as red as a beet, and gave him a cute smile. Wayne felt his heart skip a beat.

"Wayne?"

"O-Oh, right! Things troubling me, right? Th-There's nothing right now, really! Well, uh—"

"Yeah?" Lacey was blinking at him with big eyes.

"Guh," Wayne grunted.

"Guh?" Lacey echoed.

"G-Guh-reat doll you made for Tee, huh?" he exclaimed. He wasn't trying to paper over his embarrassment. He wasn't, but he somehow felt relieved when he managed to find an appropriate topic to talk about.

"Really? I was worried that it wouldn't look right!" Lacey, completely oblivious to Wayne's complicated state of mind, enthusiastically took the compliment.

"Really," Wayne added, sensing a hint of anxiety in Lacey's voice. "How'd you make that? The way you sewed it looked different from the usual way those stuffed toys are made. I really liked the way the

stitches accentuated its shape. Maybe you have a talent for that."

"It's not much different from constructing a magic formula, I think... I'm pretty good at visualizing objects spatially and giving them form. But it's the first time I made a stuffed toy, so I asked Mrs. Tricia—Allen's mother for help."

Lacey was still fidgeting. Wayne watched her talk with a gentle expression on his face.

It's hard to believe that you looked like you'd given up on life entirely not long ago.

Now, Lacey looked so enthusiastic and lively, talking about her newfound interests.

"I've always been interested in sewing. I thought that I might be able to pull it off. But I was worried that giving a hand-sewn item as a present might be too much. I really thought hard about it—"

"What are you talking about? You've already made so many of those sachets and thermal bags."

"I-I mean, I got help from the villagers for those! That's completely different!"

At some point, Wayne's feelings of surprise and amazement were replaced by a perplexing sense of loneliness. He wished that he could have watched over her growth more closely. But most of all, he felt happy. He was glad that he could be right here by her side.

"Okay. I still have a few days of vacation left. Maybe I should start making something too," Wayne announced.

"Huh? Wayne, you're going to make a stuffed toy?"

"I cook all the time, but I've never tried to sew anything. I should try making one for Noi this time. Can you teach me how you did it?"

"Of course! Let's do it!"

"Okay then! But first, we should have breakfast. Let's eat, then start working."

"Yeah!"

Two creatures watched Wayne and Lacey as a gentle atmosphere developed between them. Tee and Noi were in a room, peering at them through the door.

"Grr-oink," Noi grunted. He was excited at the thought of having

his own stuffed toy. But before that, he looked at Tee, trying to see if it wanted to join Lacey and Wayne.

"Kweh-kwe-kwe-oh!" Tee put a wing on the door and replied with a satisfied nod. It had the stuffed toy on top of its head, its wings tucked in. Tee seemed to love the toy a lot. To Tee, this moment with Noi, as they watched Lacey and Wayne talk, was something precious.

"Grr-oink!" Noi responded with a happy grunt, smiling and showing off his sharp tusks.

And so, before Lacey and Wayne even made the camera, they finished making another stuffed toy.



Afterword

Long time no see! Hyogo Amagasa here. Thank you for taking the time to pick up volume 3! We've reached volume 3! Let's go, volume 3! There are a lot of moments here that I really loved from back when this was a web series, and Lacey's artifact-making is going to get more and more fun from here on.

I only have one page for this afterword, so I'll be blabbing from here on. First, I have an important announcement: The manga serialization of *Lacey Longs for Freedom* by Chidori Karasu has begun on Comic Gardo! Moreover, volume 1 of the manga will also be sold around the same time as volume 3 of the novel. It's a wonderful adaptation that will make you feel warm just by reading it.

Lacey in the manga is very cute, and also very sloppy, but even that sloppiness is really cute! It's full of charming moments that will make you smile, so please check out the manga as well!

Once again, I thank the illustrator Kyouichi, my publisher, my editor, you, dear reader, and everyone involved in the release of this book. I hope to see you all again someday.

—Hyogo Amagasa











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Lacey Longs for Freedom: The Dawn Witch's Low-Key Life after Defeating the Demon King Volume 3
by Hyogo Amagasa

Translated by Amanogawa Tenri Edited by Aldia Elwood

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