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A Surprisingly Happy Engagement

for the **Slime Duke** and the

Fallen
Noble Lady

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“Are you Francette?”

Her voice was low and rich. She spoke bluntly for a woman, but strangely enough, it suited her.
What a mysterious person.

Magritte de Dumelie Siren

One of the monster dukes—the siren duke—a bold beauty nicknamed the Golden Lioness of the Magical Research Bureau. She's a big fan of Francette's sweets business, the Lakeside Duck Bakery.

A CAVE INVESTIGATION
WITH SLUMES!

“Understood.”

“Fran, please
stand back.”



FRANCETTE TAKING CARE OF
GABRIEL WHEN HE'S SICK!



"Okay, Gabriel, open wide."

I peeled the orange with a knife and removed the thin skin around a segment before bringing it to Gabriel's mouth. I pushed my shame aside and gave him a pleading look, hoping that he would get it over with quickly. He ate the piece of orange.



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Prologue: The Fallen Noble Lady Francette's Tumultuous Life

I am Francette de Blanchard, daughter of one of the kingdom's most distinguished nobles, Duke Mercœur. My life changed in the blink of an eye when Prince Mael rescinded his engagement to my older sister, Adele, sending our family into ruin. My diligent and graceful sister hadn't done anything wrong. She had simply fallen victim to the schemes of those who wanted to get closer to Prince Mael.

My father had no ambition—he was the ultimate pushover. So he accepted the punishment without putting up a fight and proceeded to live a carefree life with his mistresses. On the other hand, my mother, who was a princess of a neighboring country, went back to her homeland with my exiled sister.

I knew I'd have a stabler life if I went with my mother, but I chose to stay in the kingdom. It wasn't that I was worried about my father. He was the kind of person who was loved everywhere he went, so he'd be able to stubbornly survive in any situation. So why didn't I go to the neighboring country, then? Because I'd completely lost faith in humanity.

After my sister was accused of terrible deeds and our family lost all of our assets, our close friends distanced themselves from us and looked at us as if we were criminals. It made me realize that no one had ever seen me as myself—only as a daughter of Duke Mercœur. Now that I was no longer the daughter of a powerful duke, there was no value in associating with me. The reality sank in like a chill spreading through my stomach, overwhelming me with an indescribable fear.

Even if I went with my mother to the neighboring country, people would only show me respect as the daughter of their former princess. It would be no different from when I was treated as the daughter of Duke Mercœur. If we fell victim to another scheme, everyone would leave me again. I didn't want to repeat that experience—it had felt like sitting on a bed of nails. So I stayed in

the kingdom. I won't deny that my reasons were pessimistic, but after making my decision, I was determined to prove my own worth.

After that, I moved into the one-story house in the old part of town that my father was renting with what little money he had. Although I'd learned how to cook, clean, and do laundry at the orphanage where I volunteered, this was the first time I had to do these things every day for the sake of surviving. At first, it was a disaster. I'd burn pots and pans and ruin my meals, struggle with stained laundry for hours, and wax the floor incorrectly, leading to many a fall. But I told myself it wasn't as hard as the schooling for noblewomen—and I'd had a strict teacher—so I managed to hang in there.

My father rarely came home, so I found a new family member to take his place. This was Alexandrine the duck, who laid an egg for me once every few days, enriching my life. She was very affectionate with me, but everyone else knew her as a ferocious duck. This neighborhood wasn't as safe as the noble district, so it was great to have her as a bodyguard.

A year after my family's downfall, when I had become comfortable with my new life, I began baking sweets to consign to a pastry shop. It wasn't a lot of money, but it was money I'd earned through my own hard work. Sales were going well and I was even considering increasing my output when, one day, I encountered a mysterious creature: an adorable light-red slime named Wibble. Not only was it tamed, it was smart enough to understand human language.

I brought Wibble to the knights first, but they said they couldn't take custody of living things. So I ended up taking it in until its owner, Gabriel, could be found. I'd never lived with a monster before, but Wibble was more talented than I ever could have imagined. It could heat up the bath in an instant, clean the house, and help me with the cooking. Before I knew it, I didn't want to see the slime go.

Wibble made my life more enjoyable, and I realized that although I was poor, I had much more freedom now than back when I'd lived as the daughter of Duke Mercœur. I absentmindedly assumed that these relaxing days would continue for many years to come. However, one day, my life took yet another turn when I received a letter from my father that said nothing but "Sorry."

Shockingly, my father had gotten involved with a married woman, and the husband was demanding two hundred thousand geld as compensation. It was a large sum—the kind of amount a wealthy noble family would prepare for their daughter's dowry. From the sound of it, my father had fled the capital because he had neither the money on hand nor the good faith to pay it over the span of years. To make matters worse, not only had he taken the married woman with him, but her husband was the president of Fastoux Trading, a world-famous company. From the apology letter, I could guess that my father had expected the demands to come to me. And yet he had fled the capital anyway.

Within minutes of the letter's arrival, a group of thugs came to my house to collect the compensation my father hadn't paid. In this moment of desperation, an unexpected savior appeared: a young man, around twenty years old, with long pearl-white hair tied in a ponytail, silver-rimmed glasses, and an intelligent air. He was Wibble's owner, Gabriel, and he'd run into me by coincidence while searching for his slime.

Gabriel could've just taken Wibble and gone, but instead, he paid off my father's two-hundred-thousand-geld debt. I couldn't imagine why he'd do such a thing for me, but it turned out that he also had an unavoidable issue to deal with: marriage. Apparently one of his relatives was accusing him of disgracing their family name by not getting married. And so, he proposed that I marry him in exchange for the two hundred thousand geld he'd paid in my stead.

Needless to say, I was surprised. I'd lost contact with my numerous engagement candidates after my family's decline, and even the word "marriage" itself seemed foreign to me at this point. If I were as beautiful and talented as my sister, I'm sure I would've had suitors regardless of my status. But even though we were born to the same parents, we were nothing alike in appearance or personality. I liked the wisteria-colored eyes I'd inherited from my mother, but my father's brown hair only made me look even more plain. So I didn't expect anyone to want to marry me, not when I hadn't restored my honor since the incident that had tarnished my entire family's reputation.

Gabriel began to explain his reasoning. Much to my surprise, he was the slime duke, one of the grand monster dukes. It was a title passed down from long ago, originally bestowed by the king to the heroes who had saved the world

from seven evil monsters.

The prince who had slain the Dragon had been given the title of Grand Dragon Duke.

The fisherman who had slain the Siren had been given the title of Grand Siren Duke.

The adventurer who had slain the Ogre had been given the title of Grand Ogre Duke.

The charcoal maker who had slain the Treant had been given the title of Grand Treant Duke.

The knight who had slain the Fenrir had been given the title of Grand Fenrir Duke.

The priest who had slain the Harpy had been given the title of Grand Harpy Duke.

And the lord who had slain the Slime had been given the title of Grand Slime Duke.

The monster dukes had the highest rank after royalty, meaning that Gabriel was in a very respectable position. But even at the age of twenty-two, he had yet to find a fiancée. The reason was the land where he lived, a lake region named Triste.

In Gabriel's words, "You will rarely see a clear blue sky there. All year round, it's nothing but damp, depressing, more damp, and more depressing. The houses are all made of stone and blackened by moss, making the entire town darker than you could believe. It rains often and there are frequent storms. Because of this, there are long stretches of time when it's difficult to go outside. The residents are all shy and introverted, perhaps because they don't get to socialize much. On top of that, many young people are complaining that they can't live in such a place and are leaving for the city. The population decreases every year. And don't even get me started on the slimes. There are more slimes than humans! Slimes in the gardens, slimes in the fields, slimes sticking to the windows, slimes in the wells... You wake up to the sound of bouncing slimes, you realize it's noon when the slimes start to hum, and you listen to the slimes

snore as you go to sleep. From morning to afternoon to night, it's nothing but slimes, slimes, slimes."

Essentially, it was a land of deep fog with a difficult climate all year round, a declining population...and slimes. His territory was well-known for being unattractive to young prospective brides. However, I owed him for saving me from Fastoux Trading, and he had already paid two hundred thousand geld on my behalf. I didn't have an aversion to slimes, seeing as I'd been living happily with Wibble, and right now, I felt like I'd be fine living anywhere. So I accepted his marriage proposal.

However, we couldn't get married right away. We needed my father's permission. Until he was found, I would live in Triste as Gabriel's fiancée.

Just before the move, I received an unexpected visitor: our kingdom's second prince, Axel. Unlike Crown Prince Mael, Prince Axel approached everything fairly and never let himself be influenced by selfish feelings. He was a handsome man with a strong sense of justice. He also held the title of dragon duke, which was given to the most skilled swordsman in the royal family.

Prince Axel was visiting my home in the old part of town because he'd heard that I'd been attacked by ruffians from Fastoux Trading. Apparently he was worried about me—he even offered to become my guardian so that I would no longer be in danger.

When I told him I was engaged to the slime duke, Gabriel, he looked relieved. After my sister's engagement to Prince Mael, Prince Axel had looked after me as if I were his own younger sister. I'd assumed that our ties had been severed after the incident, but he still showed me the same kindness as before. Now that I was engaged to Gabriel, I wouldn't have to make him worry anymore.

And so, together with my duck, Alexandrine, I made the journey to the slime-filled land of Triste. There, I met many new people. Gabriel's mother, Maria, was a very spirited individual. She was terribly afraid that I would become one of the many people who left Triste in favor of a large city. Then there were my lovely attendants Nico, Coco, and Rico (who were triplets), and the wise and beautiful steward, Constance. They and the other servants made Gabriel's home very lively.

I also met Gabriel's second cousins, Diane and Liliane. They were hostile towards me for some reason and played a nasty prank. But most troublesome of all was Gabriel's great-uncle. He wanted to marry one of his granddaughters to Gabriel, so he kidnapped me and sold me to a brothel. Wibble helped me escape, but we were soon discovered. Gabriel came to my rescue, and at the same time, I reunited with my father, who was working as one of the brothel's guards.

My father was detained for the crime of eloping with a married woman, but Prince Axel had my marriage to Gabriel authorized as a special exception. All of the obstacles between us were now gone.

Unfortunately, news of my father's arrest spread, and it became a scandal. However, there's a saying from a foreign country that goes "Gossip only lasts seventy-five days." People would forget with time.

Between starting a new business in Triste, getting kidnapped, and watching my father get arrested, it had been a hectic time. But things had finally settled down as of late, and after a thorough discussion, Gabriel and I decided to get married in one year's time. Until then, while preparing for the wedding, I wanted to do something to help develop the region.

Chapter 1: The Noble Lady Francette Shows Hospitality

Daily drizzles, a warm and humid breeze, slimes clogging up entire ponds—such was spring in Triste, apparently. One would assume that early spring was the breeding season for slimes, but it was actually a bit different in nature. Slimes reproduced by division. The current weather was the most comfortable for them, leading to them multiplying in droves.

Gabriel went around the ponds on a daily basis, ordering his tamed slimes to swallow up the wild ones and bring them back so that they could be processed into various things like lenses and fertilizer. The products were very good, but since they were made from slimes, he couldn't find buyers for them. As a result, he offered them to locals at a low price instead.

Gabriel returned from today's rounds looking weary again. His pearl-white hair was damp from being exposed to humidity all day, and his fogged-up glasses obscured my view of his beautiful ice-green eyes. He didn't have to say anything for me to know that he was utterly exhausted.

"Fran, I have returned," he said.

"Welcome back."

We had a custom of embracing each other once a day, which was supposed to help us become ideal partners. I tried to initiate today's hug, but he stopped me for some reason.

"Um, I've been outside all day in Triste's infamous humidity," he said. "I'm probably the claggiest thing in the world right now, save slimes themselves. Let me take a bath first."

"That doesn't matter." I ignored his reservations and hugged him. He went stiff as a board, but after I gave him a few pats on his back, he gently hugged me back.

"You don't have to force yourself on days like this."

“I’m not. This is a hug of appreciation for all of your hard work.”

The daily embrace was also intended to deepen our relationship. There was still some awkwardness, but we would surely get used to it eventually. A year from now, we were going to be married, and I hoped we’d be able to hug each other naturally by then.

“How were the slimes in the ponds?” I asked.

“Three years ago, we had a once-in-a-century outbreak. This year is even worse.”

“Oh my! That sounds terrible.”

“It is.”

“I wish there was something I could do to help.” I knew I’d only be getting in the way if I tried, but I couldn’t help but worry when I saw how fatigued he was.

“You’re already providing me with a great amount of support.”

“Did I do something?”

“Simply thinking about you waiting for me at home gives me energy.”

“Oh, that’s what you mean.”

“It’s not something to be taken lightly! It’s an incredible contribution!”

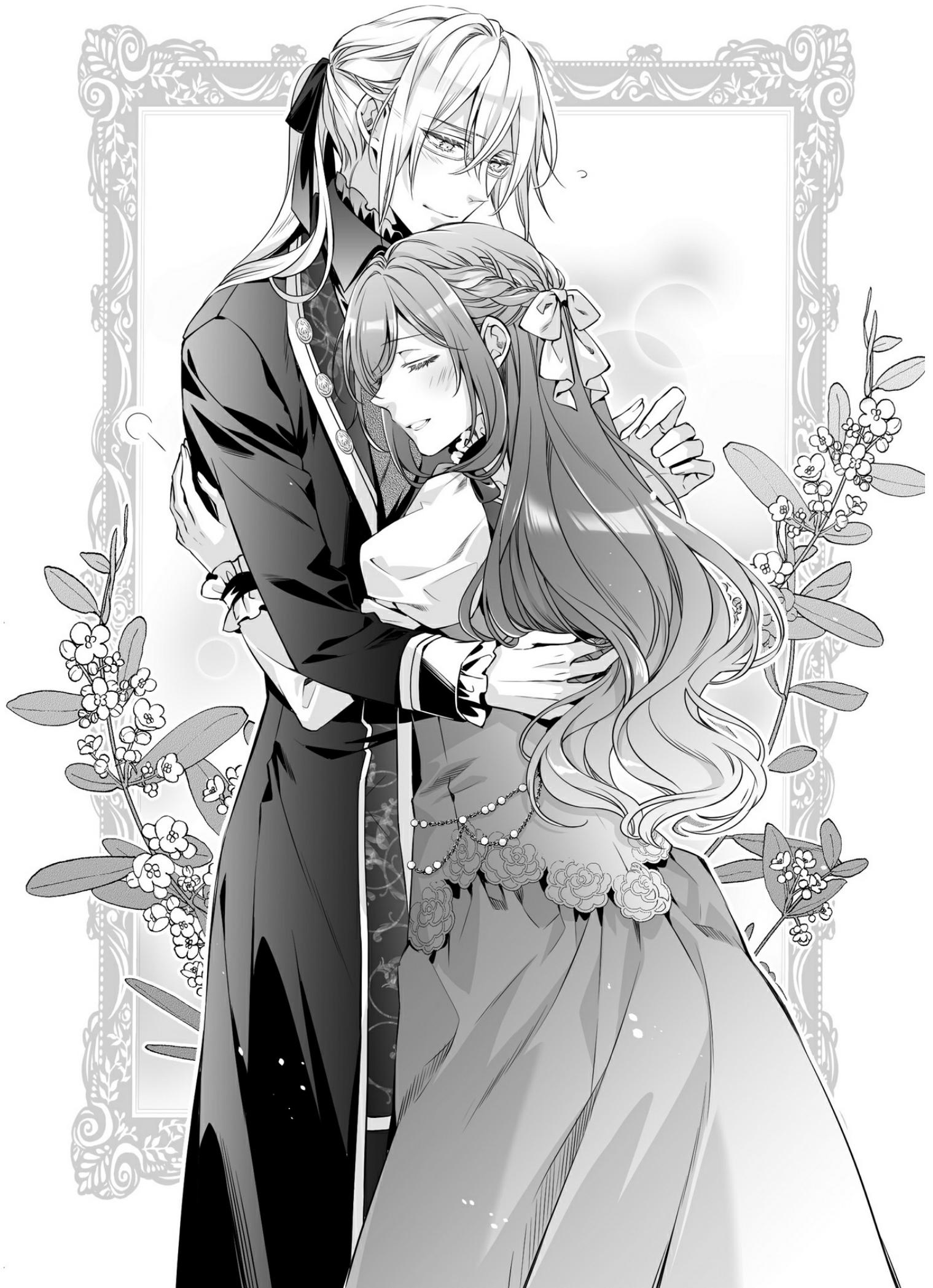
Gabriel explained that until now, he’d been going out to exterminate slimes in the ponds without telling anyone, not returning home until the middle of the night, when he’d sneak in through the back door. Neither his mother nor the servants knew what he was doing.

“This year, since you’ve been making everyone aware of my work, my mother doesn’t give me suspicious looks anymore, and the servants prepare waterproof boots and linens for me.”

“Couldn’t you have just told them yourself?”

“It’s a pain.”

The sigh that left my mouth was so deep, I wondered if it’d reach the world’s core.



Gabriel wasn't a good talker, and he struggled with social interactions. If only he would try harder to show people his hard work and accomplishments, they would see him differently. It felt like such a waste.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's a hassle for you too, isn't it?"

"Not at all. I do it because I want you to be more respected and loved by the people around you."

"I'm happy just knowing that you care about me."

Gabriel's idea of happiness was far too modest. He was allowed to be greedier than that. Then again, his lack of ambition was why he didn't feel the need to show off to others, and perhaps that was the reason I was so attracted to him. I'd just have to do my best to show him my love so that he'd feel happy every day.

There was a quiet knock on the door. It was Constance, the slime duke family's beautiful steward. She looked dashing in her tailcoat, and her back was so straight, you'd think there was a rod of some sort inside it. Her short hair suited her well, and the men's clothing looked completely natural on her.

"The bath is ready, my lord," Constance said matter-of-factly, not showing any emotion.

Gabriel nodded, and the steward took her leave.

"Oh, why don't I wash your back?" I asked.

"Huh?!" Gabriel jumped in surprise as if my suggestion had been absurd. I'd only meant it as a show of appreciation, though, since he'd been laboring all day.

"Sorry, I guess it'd be a bother to you."

"No, that's not—"

"Gabriel, welcome baaack!"

Wibble the cute light-red slime rocketed into the room and slammed into its owner. Gabriel, tired from a long day's work, was easily sent flying.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

“Y-Yes, I’ll manage...”

Wibble was the first slime that Gabriel had ever tamed, and normally, it was harmless. However, for some reason, it was very forceful with Gabriel. Perhaps it was because they were trusted companions who had known each other since childhood. Still, this kind of physical bonding wasn’t safe.

“Wibble, you can’t body-slam Gabriel like that,” I said.

“Why?”

“Humans aren’t as resilient as slimes. You don’t want him to get hurt, do you?”

“*Wibble wouldn’t like that.*”

“So apologize and promise that you won’t do it again.”

“Okaaay.” The slime meekly approached its owner and apologized. “Sorry, Gabriel. *Wibble won’t do that anymore.*”

“I greatly appreciate it,” said Gabriel.

Wibble looked relieved.

“Gabriel, you have to tell Wibble when you don’t like something,” I said. “Otherwise, it isn’t going to learn.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Because...Wibble is my friend.”

Since Triste was so remote, Gabriel hadn’t been able to interact with other nobles his age when he was a child. The most he’d been able to do was watch the children in the village play from afar. Wibble had probably been his only friend.

I could understand why he would allow it to get away with a bit of mischief, but this wasn’t good for Wibble either. Wibble wasn’t an ordinary slime—it had transformed into a spirit. This was a phenomenon that occurred with beings that attained exceptional power and intelligence. Wibble was no longer a monster.

Gabriel had explained that Wibble had become stronger than before, so it needed to be properly educated. Out of the many slimes he had tamed, Wibble was the only one that had transformed into a spirit. The inner workings of the miracle remained mostly unknown.

“Gabriel, let Wibble make it up to you by washing your back.”

The slime’s suggestion made me envious. After all, Wibble was extremely proficient at washing. It used its tentacles to scrub away every last impurity, leaving your skin as smooth and polished as a boiled egg.

“No, it’s fine,” said Gabriel.

Wibble extended its tentacles and began dragging Gabriel towards the door.
“Go with the flow, go with the flow!”

“Where do you learn those phrases?!”

The two headed for the bathroom in a friendly manner. I think.

As I smiled and saw them off from the hallway, I spotted my mother-in-law, who looked pale.

“Mother, what’s the matter?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing bad. We’re going to be inviting guests over, but...”

Apparently it had been ten years since the slime duke family had last done so. But now, Prince Axel was coming and going anyway, and Triste was becoming more well-known.

“Miss Francette, what should I do to welcome our guests?!”

“Huh?”

“It’s been so long since anyone’s come here, I’ve forgotten how to show hospitality! Will they even show up? They wouldn’t lie about visiting, would they?!”

“Mother, please calm down.” My mother-in-law had become paranoid after seeing many people leave Triste. “They wouldn’t write you a false letter.”

“Y-Yes, you’re right. They wouldn’t lie...”

“Yes, so there’s no need to worry.”

Just when I thought she'd calmed down, she panicked again. "Sh-Should I order first-flush tea from the capital?!"

"Mother, your guests are coming from the capital too, so you don't need to do that. How about serving them Triste's tea?"

"Our damp tea, covered in fog?"

"It's very delicious."

I offered to go over ideas with her tomorrow, which fortunately seemed to calm her down.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I cause you, Miss Francette."

"Don't worry about it. I enjoy thinking about things with you."

"Thank you." My mother-in-law went back to her room, relieved.

As soon as she left, my personal attendants, Nico, Rico, and Coco, came up to me. Nico was carrying Alexandrine the duck.

"Lady Francette, Lady Alexandrine has returned from the garden pond," Nico said. "She ate a lot of greens today."

"I see. Thank you."

Nico was an animal lover and took good care of Alexandrine for me. She was a cheerful and energetic girl.

Rico stepped forward next. "Lady Francette, three letters have arrived for you."

"Thank you."

Rico was the stoic and grounded one. She was in charge of assisting me and kept perfect track of schedule items that slipped my mind. My life in Triste would have been in shambles if it weren't for her.

Coco hesitantly came forward last. "Lady Francette, I drew a few new illustrations for the Lakeside Duck Bakery."

"May I see them?"

"Yes!"

Coco was a skilled artist and used to be tired all day long because she sacrificed sleeping time for drawing. I'd recognized her talent and told her to draw during working hours instead.

Lakeside Duck Bakery was the brand name I sold my sweets under. I used Coco's illustrations for the packaging, and they had become popular in the royal capital. Her amazing talent helped us raise awareness of Triste through sweets.

"Thank you, Nico, Rico, Coco. You may retire for the day."

The triplets bowed in unison and left. There was still some time before dinner, so I decided to relax in my room. I placed Alexandrine in my lap and went through the letters and Coco's illustrations.

The letters were from my sister, who was worried that I might be facing problems here. After being banished from the kingdom, she was now crown princess of the neighboring country. She must've been very busy, yet she had still taken the time to show concern for me. My current life was very fulfilling, so to prevent her from worrying about me, I wrote in my reply that I was the happiest I'd ever been.



Today was the start of another enjoyable day. The slime duke family ate breakfast together every morning as a rule. Gabriel and his mother were early risers, so they were fully awake. Maybe it ran in the family. I envied them so much.

As usual, I was the last to arrive. "Gabriel, mother, good morning."

"Good morning, Miss Francette."

"Yes, good morning."

The dishes laid out on the dining table looked scrumptious as always. When you had a skilled chef, you looked forward to every meal.

Today's breakfast was a bowl of rich café au lait, warm bread fresh out of the oven, a truffle omelette, and thick slices of bacon. Everything was delicious. It was like starting the day with a dose of happiness.

Gabriel claimed that Triste had nothing of note, but from my perspective, it

was full of charm. Spring was when the sweet violets were at their height of beauty, their fragrance carried by the wind. Early summer had delicious white eels, and in autumn we could enjoy picking mushrooms and berries. This was also the only place where truffles could be harvested in such high quantities. Winter was the season for escargot, with edible snails appearing every which way. Triste was a good source of luxury ingredients; it just wasn't well-known. We also had plump trout, frogs with a subtle but rich flavor, and poultry fattened before the winter. There was an abundance of delicious food.

After negotiations with merchants, some of our products had begun to be sold in the capital. We even had some merchants coming here directly to buy fresh ingredients, to say nothing of the tourists coming just to eat Triste's truffles and escargot. In order to make the village function as a tourist destination, a new inn, restaurant, and general store had been opened. Perhaps due to the increase in job availability, there were even some locals who'd returned to the village after previously leaving. Triste was becoming much livelier than before.

After breakfast, I spent a bit of time relaxing in Gabriel's room. Today, he showed me the collection of books in his study. They covered a wide variety of subjects, including economics, medicine, community welfare, and military affairs.

"My mother called it a boring collection," he said.

"That's not true at all."

There was a book I was interested in, so I asked if I could borrow it.

"Read as many as you like," he said.

"Thank you."

It would've been nice if we could have indulged in reading together, but there was still work to be done. Gabriel had to make his rounds again. He had a gloomy expression on his face, so I hugged him from behind. The sound he let out was more shocked than surprised.

"What's wrong, Gabriel?" I asked.

"Nothing, but I work hard every day in anticipation of the hug I'll receive from

you when it's over."

"Have you lost your motivation now that I've already hugged you?"

"No, I was just shocked that today's hug ended so soon."

I laughed at the unexpected reason. "I'll do it again when you come home."

"Really?"

"Yes, so don't be so discouraged."

Gabriel nodded happily. "What are your plans for the day, Fran?"

"I'm going to bake cookies at the village workshop."

"I see. Please bring an escort with you whenever you go outside."

"Yes, I know."

"And no matter where you go, be sure to bring Wibble with you."

"Of course."

Gabriel insisted that Wibble and I go everywhere together. It seemed like he was making a big deal out of nothing, but the fact was that slimes weren't the only threat in Triste. I had already been kidnapped by his great-uncle once before, so I couldn't refuse the protection.

"Be cautious of slimes as well. And—"

"Gabriel, stop nagging. You're acting like her dad," Wibble said, coming up to us and interrupting him.

Gabriel fell silent. He was probably so worried about me that he couldn't help but warn me about every little thing. It was a sign of his love.

"I'm sorry, Fran..."

"It's fine. I appreciate it. My real father never once worried about me." He was the kind of parent who ran away with his mistress, leaving me with his debt. I *wished* I could've had a father who worried so much about his daughter that he couldn't help but nag. "I'm glad that you care."

"Fran...!"

We were both moved, but this wasn't the time to be teary-eyed.

"I have to get going now," I said.

"Likewise."

I parted ways with Gabriel and pumped myself up for another productive day of work.

Together with Rico and Wibble, I headed to the village to make cookies at the Lakeside Duck Bakery's workshop. Our cookies, made with Triste's naturally growing sweet violets, were extremely popular in the capital. I used to bake them in the castle kitchen with the chef, but since we couldn't keep up with demand, a workshop had been set up in the village. It wasn't a newly constructed building, though. The village had several vacant houses that belonged to nobles and merchants. We'd bought the one with the largest kitchen and had some work done so that it could be used as a workshop.

We employed many women from the village to help make the sweet violet cookies. Thanks to them, we were able to drastically increase our output and send more products to the capital. My days used to be hectic, but after delegating most of the processes to other people, I now had time for myself.

My next stop was the fowl knights, whom Alexandrine had been staying with as of late. They were a unit tasked with protecting poultry from monsters and thieves. Triste was sustained by livestock farming, so the knights' role was crucial.

Rico and I went with our escort to the knights' station. The moment we opened the door, Alexandrine charged out—and nearly delivered a flying kick before realizing it was me and landing on the ground.

"Whoa, Alexandrine!" A man came to pick her up. His armor had a duck's side profile engraved on it. He was a member of the fowl knights, and if I recalled correctly, his name was Noel. "Why, if it isn't Lord Gabriel's young wife!"

"Good day." I greeted him and mentioned that I'd come to see how Alexandrine was doing with her work, but her actions had already spoken for themselves.

"Oh, Alexandrine's doing a fine job. Whenever someone suspicious approaches the henhouse, she quacks and drives them away."

Alexandrine had been recruited by the fowl knights for her ferocious nature. The increase in tourism meant that all sorts of people were coming to Triste, some of whom were intrigued by the idea of fowl knights and would peek into the henhouse without permission.

“Do people from the city find this interesting?” Noel asked.

“I understand how they feel,” I said. Gabriel had shown me around the flour mill before, and it had been so interesting that I’d suggested setting up a guided tour. The tours were a success and continued to be flooded with applicants to this day. “We might want to set up a tour of the henhouse too.”

“Yes, if we know in advance, we can accommodate visitors.”

Noel said he would raise the topic with the captain of the fowl knights. I’d hoped to speak with him directly, but apparently he was on patrol.

“Do you think the fowl knights could use more hands?”

“Oh, yes. It’d be reassuring to have two or three more people.”

The fowl knights currently had around twelve members, but they had night shifts to cover too, so it was troublesome if anyone took a day off. This season was probably especially busy because of the slime outbreaks. There had been an incident about fifty years ago where slimes swallowed up all of the poultry, so we couldn’t let down our guard.

Alexandrine pecked furiously at the basket Rico was holding, reminding me of what was inside.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” I said. “I made cookies and sandwiches for you all. Please have them if you’d like.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. We really appreciate it.” Noel politely accepted the basket and smiled shyly.

After I left the station, the rest of the day was busily spent doing business with merchants and attending the village’s women’s association meeting. It was almost dusk when I headed home.

After dinner, I had tea with Gabriel. Constance came by with two letters on a silver tray, both addressed to Gabriel.

“At this late hour?” he asked.

“They seem to be wyvern mail from the capital,” she explained.

Wyvern mail was a courier service that made use of tamed wyverns to quickly cross long distances. They could deliver in mere hours what would normally take several days by carriage.

“Who could they be from?” Gabriel asked.

The moment he saw the sender’s name, his face stiffened. *Who would provoke such a reaction from him?* His hands trembled as he unsealed the first envelope and took out the letter inside. Partway through reading, he gulped in surprise. At this point, I could no longer pretend I hadn’t seen anything.

“Gabriel, who is it from?” I asked.

“The siren duke.”

That was one of Gabriel’s fellow monster dukes, Magritte de Dumelie Siren. I had exchanged letters with her several times because she loved Lakeside Duck Bakery’s cookies, but now that she was buying them in the capital, I no longer had to ship them to her, and our correspondence had ceased.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“She says she’s coming to Triste.”

Apparently the siren duke had the rare opportunity to take a long vacation, and she had chosen to spend it in the relaxing region of Triste. In her letter, she wrote that she also wanted to purchase the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s Triste-exclusive pastries: the cream-filled cakes and cream puffs shaped after swimming ducks that we only sold locally, because they didn’t keep for long. More and more tourists had been coming to Triste for those sweets, and the siren duke must’ve heard the rumors.

“That’s wonderful,” I said. “If an influential monster duke visits, the region will gain even more recognition.”

“No, I’d rather not have word spread among the siren duke’s connections...”

The siren duke was the head of the Bureau of Magical Research. She was said to be a highly talented and accomplished magic user.

“All of her associates are unique individuals,” Gabriel continued.

“I see.” I’d always wanted to talk to the siren duke, so this was a good opportunity for me. “We’ll have to prepare a warm welcome for her.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“How would you entertain someone who’s unconventional enough to be called the Golden Lioness of the Magical Research Bureau?”

“What is she like?”

“First of all, she doesn’t bring any attendants with her. She does everything with magic—even opening and closing doors. It’s not rare for someone to carelessly approach her and get swallowed up by the tornado she summons to get around.”

“Sh-She moves by tornado?!”

“Terrifyingly, yes. And sometimes she doesn’t go home, instead opting to sleep outside with a barrier around her magically created bed.”

I’d imagined the siren duke to be a graceful noblewoman, but apparently, that wasn’t the case. My newfound curiosity only made me want to meet her even more.

“Magritte—er, I mean, the siren duke...”

Gabriel had called her by her name just now, which wasn’t something he’d do unless he was very close to her. He also knew a lot about her. A hazy feeling welled up from somewhere within me and began to swirl around in my chest. It was a complicated sensation, like a bundle of tangled threads.

“Fran, is something the matter?” Gabriel asked.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

“May I continue?”

“Y-Yes.”

“I was going to offer her a room in the castle, rather than in the village inn, but I doubt she’d accept.”

“I’ll have it prepared anyway, just in case.”

“Thank you, Fran.”

He hugged me gently, as if to show his appreciation. His warmth eased my restless feelings. He then opened the other letter. This time, his stiff expression changed to a gloomy one.

“It’s a notice for the annual monster duke meeting,” he said. “It’s held in the royal capital. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t attend.”

“Do you have to do difficult work there?”

“No. We essentially just report on the monsters in our territories.”

Gabriel explained that the number of monsters was trending down in comparison to the past, but they could never be too careful. The monster dukes kept detailed records of the quantities and power levels of the monsters appearing in their territories and shared them at the meeting.

“The monster dukes are all on the eccentric side,” he lamented as he began to describe them. “Have you seen any of them aside from Prince Axel, Fran?”

“No. I accompanied my sister to salons and social gatherings, but I don’t recall ever encountering any of the monster dukes. In fact, before meeting you, I thought of them as storybook characters.”

I recounted everything I knew about the monster dukes—which was essentially only what I’d heard from Gabriel. The treant duke was a cardinal of the Holy Church—an elderly man who would come up to you with a smile and pester you for donations. The harpy duke was the leader of the Inquisition, a scary man who chased those who’d caught his merciless eye to the ends of the world. The fenrir duke was the youngest, a beautiful boy. The ogre duke had never once shown their face.

“And then there’s the siren duke, who we know has a sweet tooth; Prince Axel, the dragon duke; and you, the slime duke.”

“It’s a crazy list, isn’t it?”

“Indeed.” If I were attending that meeting, I’d want to turn tail and run.

“The atmosphere is completely devoid of friendliness. I can only describe it as

uncomfortable. Until now, my only motivation for going to the capital was to buy your consigned sweets.”

“Huh?”

“Did I say something strange?” Gabriel tilted his head.

“Er, you just said you bought my consigned sweets.”

“Oh!” He hurriedly covered his mouth with his hand, but it was too late. I’d already heard enough.

“Come to think of it, Solene—the girl who works at the shop—said there was a regular customer who always bought my pastries. He was tall and spoke in a beautiful manner. So it was you, Gabriel!”

“Oh...no, I...”

I squeezed both of his hands in mine and expressed my gratitude. “Thank you, Gabriel. Since you bought my pastries, I was able to make a living after my family lost everything.”

“I-I’m glad to hear that. I really am.”

“But how did you know they were mine?”

“Urk!” His eyes suddenly darted around in panic. He gave an awkward grimace.

“I want to know everything about you—including this. Will you tell me?”

“Y-Yes. It all began the year your sister was banished. The atmosphere at the monster duke meeting had grown so awful that I decided to go outside for a breath of fresh air before returning home. Out on the street, I spotted you walking by yourself. You were wearing a tattered dress, but I recognized you immediately. I wanted to call out to you, but I didn’t know what to say.”

That was understandable. I wouldn’t have known what to say to a fallen noble either.

“I wanted to thank you for helping me at the soiree, but I was afraid you might not be comfortable if I offered you financial assistance, seeing as how we barely knew each other. As I walked along, mulling over what to do, I realized I

was essentially following you.”

“Oh my! I didn’t notice at all.”

“That’s because I concealed my presence. I followed you to a pastry shop in the old part of town that catered to commoners. When I saw you delivering sweets, it suddenly dawned on me—I could indirectly support you by buying them. I asked which days your sweets were stocked, and from then on, I’d teleport to the capital to buy them.”

“You were buying them for such a long time. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be! They were delicious, so I always looked forward to having them.”

“Thank you so much, Gabriel.”

The pastry store had been lined with sweets made by professional chefs. There was no way anyone would choose to buy the ones made by an amateur like me. At first, I’d had no sales except for the few that the people at the store had bought to help me out.

“I felt bad for making them help me, so I was considering quitting,” I said.

“I’m glad I made it in time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me, though?”

“I mean, don’t you think it’s creepy that I was buying up all of your pastries?”

“Not at all. I was always curious about who the customer was. I wish you would’ve told me.”

“I couldn’t find the courage to.”

“It’s thanks to you that I was able to get by. If my pastries hadn’t sold, I would’ve sought refuge in a convent.”

“If you’d gone to a convent, we’d never have met each other again, would we?”

“Exactly.” Because of Gabriel, my hard work had been rewarded and I had been motivated to stay strong. I couldn’t thank him enough. As I was trying to think of a way to repay him, the idea struck me. “Oh, I know. When you go to attend the monster duke meeting, may I accompany you to the capital?”

“You want to come with me?”

“Yes. I can stay by your side to help you take your mind off of it.” The Lakeside Duck Bakery was running smoothly. Constance was helping out too, so it would be fine for me to leave for a few days.

Gabriel looked at me, surprised. Perhaps my suggestion had been too sudden.

“Um, would I be bothering you?” I asked.

“No, I appreciate it. Thank you, Fran. With you around, I won’t be depressed.”

I was relieved and happy to be able to help.

“The monster duke meeting is being held the month after next, in early summer.”

“Welcoming the siren duke comes first, then.”

“You don’t have to worry too much about her. She’ll find a way to enjoy herself no matter where she goes. That’s just how she is.”

Hearing him talk about the siren duke as if they were close friends gave me mixed feelings. What exactly was their relationship? I wanted to ask, but if he were to say, “She’s important to me,” I didn’t think I’d be able to recover. So I chased my conflicted feelings to the bottom of my heart and put a tight lid over them.



A week later, the siren duke came to Triste. Gabriel had doubted that she would even stop by the castle, but as it turned out, she visited us first thing upon arriving. She was accompanied by three attendants and over fifteen guards. It was a much larger group than I had anticipated.

“Welcome, Your Grace,” I greeted her.

“Thank you.” She nodded with an air of composure as she swept her hair back.

Magritte de Dumelie Siren was a beautiful woman, tall and slim with blonde hair and blue eyes. Her gaze was sharp and full of confidence—looking at her eyes made me feel as if I could get lost in them. Her gorgeous golden hair

swayed in the wind. Even just standing there, she looked like a work of art.

The siren duke narrowed her eyes. “Are you Francette?” Her voice was low and rich. She spoke bluntly for a woman, but strangely enough, it suited her. *What a mysterious person.*

“Yes, my name is Francette de Blanchard,” I replied.

“No need for stiff greetings. We’ve exchanged many letters, have we not?”

Noblewomen were supposed to greet each other with a curtsy, but the siren duke offered me her hand instead. She was expecting a handshake. I’d never done anything of the sort. I nervously reached out my hand, and she shook it firmly.

“I’ve always wanted to meet you,” she said.

“Me?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’d like to chat with you later.”

What in the world would a woman of her status, wealth, and ability want to discuss with me?

“Um, about what?” I asked.

“There’s someone I’d like to introduce to you.”

“Huh?”

She turned around for some reason and said, “Your Highness, you should greet her.”

“Y-Your Highness?!” I repeated, assuming I’d misheard.

A cute little girl peeked out from behind the siren duke. She looked around seven years old and had cream-yellow hair and sky-blue eyes. I recognized her from a painting. She was the king’s youngest daughter—and Prince Axel’s younger sister—Princess Griselda. She hardly ever appeared in public, let alone at social gatherings, so this was my first time seeing her in person. That solved the mystery of why the siren duke had arrived with so many guards.

“Wh-Why is Her Highness here?” I asked.

“She really wanted to go to Triste, so I brought her with me. She’s very fond

of the sweets you make at the Lakeside Duck Bakery.”

I gasped, the shock nearly making my knees give out. I never would've expected the siren duke to bring Princess Griselda with her. The entire slime duke household should've been here to welcome them, yet I only had Constance, Nico, Rico, and Coco at my side. *Why is this happening?* I groaned internally.

Gabriel had gone out to exterminate slimes. He had left early, stating that there was no need to welcome the siren duke. Meanwhile, my mother-in-law had declared that she would not see anyone today because she wanted to read a newly published book that she had been looking forward to. What would have happened if I hadn't been here? Just thinking about it made me shudder.

Princess Griselda was looking up at me shyly from behind the siren duke. I placed my hand on my chest, knelt down, and introduced myself to her.

“I am Francette de Blanchard, daughter of Duke Mercœur.”

“Hello,” she said hesitantly. “My name is Griselda.”

“It’s an honor to meet you.”

“S-Same.”

She seemed to be a reserved girl. Perhaps it was good that we hadn't given her a grand welcome. Still, why was she here?

“Sorry for the lack of warning,” the siren duke said. “I mentioned that I was going to try the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s Triste-exclusive sweets, and she said she wanted to come with me. It was a last-minute decision.”

“I see,” I said. “We’re honored to have Her Highness here.”

“Aren’t you glad, Griselda?”

The princess nodded shyly. Judging from how casually the siren duke was addressing her, the two of them were probably related in some way. Looking at them again, I couldn't help but think that the siren duke bore a slight resemblance to Prince Axel. Princess Griselda had blonde hair and blue eyes too. With the princess standing next to the siren duke, the two of them could've been mistaken for sisters.

"Um, I don't mean to keep you standing outside, so please allow me to show you to the parlor," I said. "We have prepared a variety of Lakeside Duck Bakery sweets for you."

Princess Griselda's tense expression softened the moment I said that. It was true—we had prepared plenty of sweets for the siren duke's visit.

"Please come with me," I said. I turned to Constance and silently gestured for her to rush to inform my mother-in-law of Princess Griselda's presence. The capable steward understood my wordless message and nodded.

Coco ran ahead of us to arrange an additional guest room, while Rico and Nico headed to the kitchen to prepare tea. I guided our visitors to the parlor with a smile, trying my very best not to let my nervousness show.

When we arrived, my mother-in-law was already there. She greeted the siren duke and princess with an air of elegance.

"Princess Griselda, welcome to the home of the slime duke. And, Your Grace, it has been a while."

"I'm glad to see you're doing well, Maria," the siren duke said.

"Thank you."

My mother-in-law had presumably dashed here from her room, yet her appearance was flawless and she wasn't out of breath. She must've gotten dressed up before reading in anticipation of the siren duke's visit. It was nothing short of impressive.

"Miss Francette has been looking forward to your visit, Your Grace. She has prepared many sweets for you, so please enjoy them," she said with a beaming smile.

"I hope they're to your liking as well, Your Highness," I added.

Nico brought in the desserts I had prepared for this day. First was a berry-flavored custard pudding in the shape of Wibble. I'd used icing to draw eyes and a mouth on it, making it look just like the real thing.

Wibble entered the parlor with perfect timing. "*Welcome, guests!*" It bounced up and down in greeting.

I was secretly terrified that it might've scared Princess Griselda, but the girl simply pointed at Wibble and asked the siren duke, "Is that a tamed slime?"

The siren duke nodded, and the princess looked relieved.

"It has transformed into a spirit, so it isn't an ordinary slime," my mother-in-law quickly added.

"A slime spirit?!" Princess Griselda's eyes sparkled—as did the siren duke's.

"I suspected as much," said the siren duke. "It has much more magical power than a regular slime. I thought it might've been because of its contract with Gabriel, though."

As I listened to her speak, I couldn't help but notice how she called Gabriel by his first name alone. For a man and woman to both refer to each other that way, there had to be a special relationship between them. *No, no, what am I thinking?* I chased the idle thoughts out of my brain.

The moment Princess Griselda compared Wibble with the pudding in front of her, she gasped in realization. "This pudding looks like the slime spirit! It's so cute!" She seemed pleased, which was a relief.

The next dessert brought in was a butter cake decorated with candied violets.

"This one is a flower cake! I've never seen such a pretty cake before."

Her voice had barely been audible earlier, but now she spoke excitedly. It was such an honor to see her react this way to my homemade sweets.

More desserts were laid out on the table, including a sweet violet steamed cake, honey cheesecake, and grilled apples. They were all exclusively sold in the store near the workshop. The final dessert to be brought in was a chocolate bavarois. This one had been a bit of a challenge for me.

"What is this?!" Princess Griselda looked at it in confusion, since it wasn't an ordinary bavarois.

"This is a dessert made in the image of this lake region," I explained.

The doughnut-shaped bavarois was modeled after the mountains where slate was mined, and the hole in the center was filled with blue jelly to look like a lake. It was decorated with candied violets and whipped cream. It wasn't a

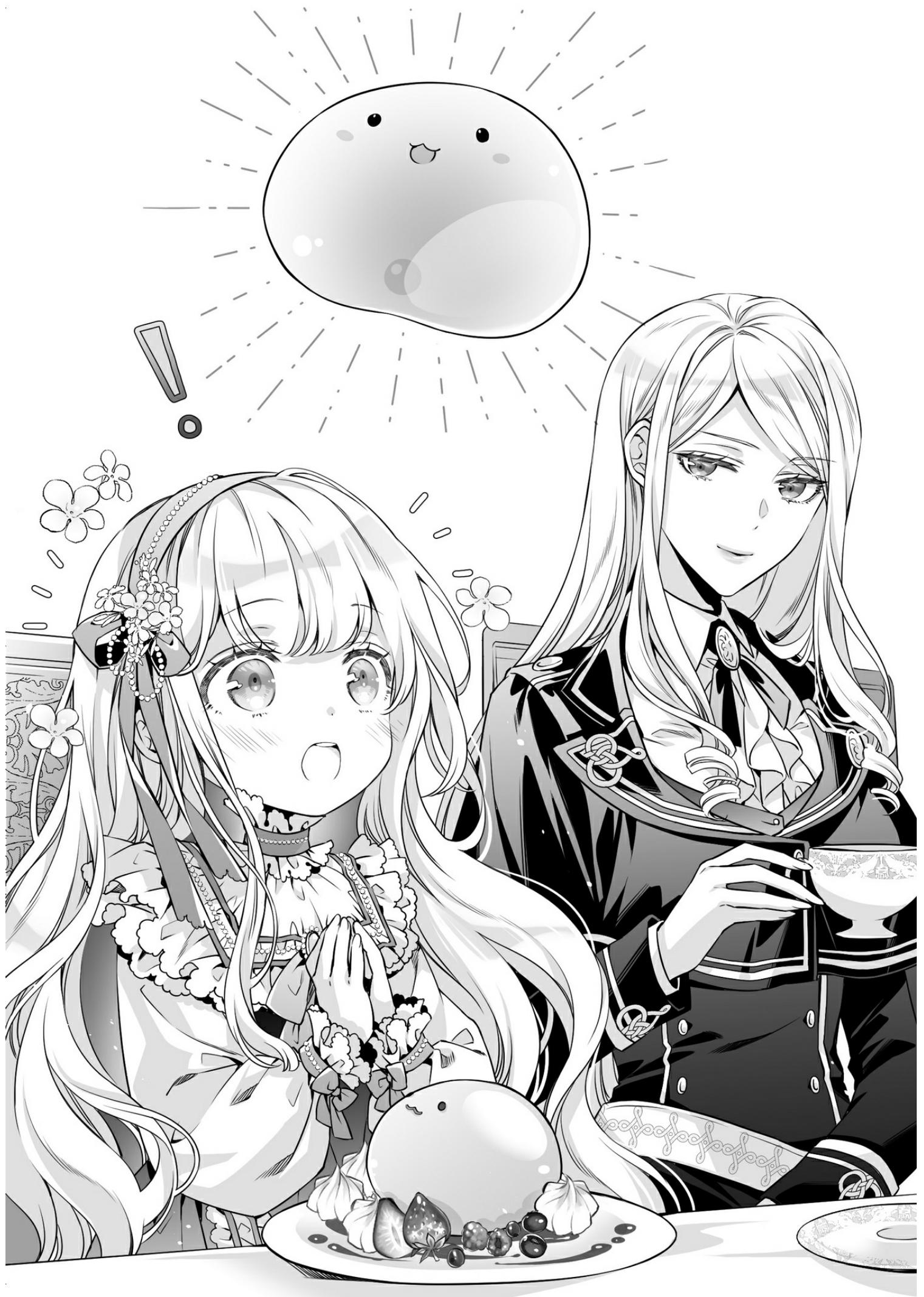
beautiful sight, but one could tell from a glance that it was supposed to be Triste. My hope was that people would develop a fondness for the region while eating it.

“It’s a Triste bavarois that can only be eaten here,” I said.

“Wow! I can’t believe Triste turned into a dessert,” Princess Griselda said. I was relieved that she liked it.

The princess decided to start with the Triste bavarois. She gently picked up a scoop with her spoon and brought it to her mouth. “Yummy! It’s so soft and smooth.” After saying that, she continued eating without another word. I was glad that it was to her taste.

The siren duke was silently eating the Wibble pudding. During the taste-testing session, I had been told, “It’s too cute to eat!” But the siren duke ate it without complaint.



“Lakeside Duck Bakery’s sweets are truly exquisite,” she remarked.

Considering their lineage, both Princess Griselda and the siren duke would have grown up eating the finest of desserts. It felt strange seeing them take a liking to my humble creations.

I noticed the siren duke staring at me and flinched like a frog being eyed by a snake. With a strained smile, I asked, “Is something the matter, Your Grace?”

“Francette. Why are you able to make these sweets despite being a noble lady?”

“I was taught by nuns.” I explained that the convent sold sweets every week on Sandpiper Day, so the nuns who worked at the orphanage knew a lot of recipes.

“So you learned how to make sweets because of the charity work you did at an orphanage.”

“Yes. I also ask the slime duke household’s pastry chef for advice when developing new products.”

“I see. Mystery solved.” The siren duke added that the queen was also fond of Lakeside Duck Bakery’s sweets and had asked her to bring back souvenirs. “She wanted to come with me too, but that was obviously going to be difficult, so I turned her down.”

Now *that* would have been a security issue. Thank goodness the siren duke had stopped her. Still, I didn’t know how to react to the fact that even the queen wanted sweets from the Lakeside Duck Bakery. It was certainly an honor, but there wasn’t anything special about them, so it didn’t make sense.

“Isn’t it strange how everyone’s crazy for Lakeside Duck Bakery?” the siren duke asked.

“Y-Yes,” I replied, startled. Had she read my mind? Perhaps my face had been an open book.

The siren duke furrowed her brow and crossed her arms. “The desserts we usually eat are nothing but sweet!” Princess Griselda nodded in agreement.

Thinking back, I realized that the desserts on the market had always been too

sweet for me, leading me to only eat the ones made by our household pastry chef. But why would the ones served at the royal palace also be too sweet?

“Hundreds of years ago, sugar was an incredibly valuable commodity,” the siren duke explained. “It was a special ingredient, available only to those of noble birth. As production increased, commoners gained access to it, but it retained its prestige for quite a long time. Pastry chefs found it odd for nobles and commoners to eat the same sweets, so they doubled the amount of sugar in their recipes to make special sweets to sell to nobles. Sweets with too much sugar don’t taste good, but since they were too expensive for commoners to buy, nobles loved them for many years regardless. Since those recipes were passed down to the current generation, overly sweet desserts continue to be sold.”

“I didn’t know there was such a long history behind it.”

The siren duke explained that some nobles believed eating too many sweets would ruin your skin and make you gain weight. Lakeside Duck Bakery’s desserts—which weren’t as sweet—had drawn the attention of that crowd when they’d entered the market. Even those who had always hated sweets thought that they were delicious.

“When I heard that the Lakeside Duck Bakery adopted recipes used by commoners, I realized why they tasted so good,” she said.

“I understand why they became so popular now,” I said. The sweets I made were traditional ones that had been passed down from long ago, so they had been able to appeal to many people.

“Worry not, though. After falling in love with Lakeside Duck Bakery’s sweets, I went around to all of the commoner pastry shops, but yours were the best, Francette.”

“I’m very honored to hear that.”

It was probably thanks to the advice I’d received from the slime duke household’s pastry chef. The sugar-filled recipes hadn’t reached this area, so everything he made was delicious. I’d adjusted my own recipes after consulting with him on the ratios of sugar, butter, and flour to use. In other words, I’d improved the traditional commoner recipes to better suit the tastes of today.

"I'm so full and happy," said Princess Griselda, who appeared to have finished eating all of the desserts while we were talking. "Thank you, Francette." She smiled at me, sweet as an angel. Needless to say, it made me feel giddy.

I assumed they would continue to relax here over a cup of tea, but for some reason, the siren duke stood up.

"After eating all those sweets, we need to get some exercise," she said with a serious expression. "Let's go for a walk somewhere."

Her slim figure must've been the result of hard work. No one could stay beautiful forever without putting any effort in.

"Hm, but where to go?" she asked.

"I want to walk in a field of sweet violets!" Princess Griselda exclaimed excitedly, her eyes sparkling. "I've always wanted to see the beautiful flower field from Lakeside Duck Bakery's package art!"

The art she spoke of had been drawn by Coco. I turned around, and sure enough, Coco was blushing happily. I would've loved to bring the princess to that field, but we were currently in the middle of slime season. Would it be safe?

I unfolded my fan. "Mother, would it be all right to bring Her Highness to the field of sweet violets?"

"She has many guards with her, so it should be fine," my mother-in-law said. "The siren duke is here too."

"Um, I think it would be better to call for Gabriel, though." I had the feeling that the slime duke would be a more suitable guide than me.

My mother-in-law shook her head. "Her Highness seems to be shy. Now that she's spent some time with you, I think she would be more at ease with you than Gabriel."

"You have a point."

I'm sure we'll manage, I thought as I prepared to head out.

An hour later, I brought our guests to the field of sweet violets near the castle. It was already past the middle of spring, but the wind was cold. Princess

Griselda was wearing a thick cloak, so she was probably fine. Personally, I felt a bit chilly with my thin shawl. I hadn't dressed appropriately for the weather.

I'll feel warmer after moving around, I encouraged myself as I turned to face Princess Griselda. "Sweet violets are in season right now, so there will be flowers blooming as far as the eye can see. You'll smell their fragrance on the wind as we approach the field." Just as I said that, I noticed their scent.

"You're right!" Princess Griselda exclaimed. "I don't see the sweet violets yet, but I can smell them!"

Candied violets and violet perfumes were still popular in the capital, so we were exporting them in bulk from Triste. The sweet violets here had such a strong fragrance that more and more people were specifically looking for ours.

Passing through the forest trees, we arrived at the vast, open hill covered in sweet violets. The flowers were in full bloom.

The siren duke's eyes widened in astonishment. She must not have expected there to be so many of them. "This is nothing short of incredible."

"It's so pretty! And it smells so nice!" Princess Griselda tugged at my hand, wanting to get closer to the flowers.

"It's like something out of a dream—a scene from a storybook."

In spring, Triste was slightly foggy even during the day, giving this place a fantastical atmosphere. The mist in the air also carried with it the rich scent of the sweet violets.

"It's not possible right now because the ground is muddy, but when it dries up in early summer, you can take afternoon naps here," I said. "Nothing feels better than sleeping surrounded by this sweet fragrance."

"I'd love to sleep in a bed of sweet violets! I want to come again in the summer," Princess Griselda said happily. There could be no greater compliment than that.

"Princess Griselda, would you like to pick some flowers and make candied violets?"

"Do you think I can do it?"

“Yes, it’s easy.”

We crouched down and began picking violets. Princess Griselda had never picked flowers before, so her eyes sparkled as she did it.

“Is this enough?” she asked.

“Yes, it should—” The moment I began to speak, I felt goose bumps all over my body. Something had wriggled in my peripheral vision. Just as I held out my arms to protect Princess Griselda, a transparent blob jumped out. By the time I realized it was a slime, the knights on guard were already cutting it down.

“Princess Griselda, are you all right?!” I asked.

“Y-Yes.”

One of her attendants pulled her away by the hand. The chills weren’t subsiding. As I was wondering why, the siren duke shouted for me to come back.

“Francette, behind you!”

I turned around to see a horde of slimes. The one that had just been defeated was glowing ominously. This was the resonance effect that Gabriel had explained to me before—some slimes had the ability to signal to their allies after dying. There were only a few knights here. How were they going to take on such a huge group of slimes? I stood there, frozen in fear.

The siren duke stepped forward. Just as I was wondering what she was going to do without a weapon, she began to sing in words I couldn’t make out. Was it an ancient tongue? I didn’t know. The air was tense but not unpleasantly so. As her beautiful voice rang out, the approaching slimes suddenly looked like they were in pain. Not only that, but their cores shattered and their bodies melted into mush.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” I exclaimed.

“This is Rhapsody,” Princess Griselda replied. “Magritte can defeat monsters with her singing.”

It was a secret technique passed down in the siren duke family, apparently. Long, long ago, it was this singing that had vanquished the siren monster that

had drowned many sailors at sea. And now it had defeated every last slime in the horde.

“This is the siren duke, the Golden Lioness of the Magical Research Bureau!” Princess Griselda exclaimed.

The way she fought certainly did her nickname justice. She turned around and gave us a faint, reassuring smile. Then, as if nothing had happened, she said, “Let’s head back, everyone.” As she walked past me, she patted me on the shoulder as if to cheer me up.



A ghastly pale Gabriel was waiting for us when we returned to the castle. He immediately dropped to one knee in front of Princess Griselda. “I apologize for my late arrival. I am the slime duke, Gabriel de Griet.”

Princess Griselda hid behind the siren duke as she nodded in acknowledgment. She really was a shy girl.

The princess wanted to rest for a while, so I asked Constance to show her to her guest room. Rico was ordered to bring her some tea and light snacks.

Gabriel let out a loud sigh in front of the siren duke. As if that wasn’t disrespectful enough, he even shouted in an accusing tone, “Why did you bring Princess Griselda with you?!”

“She’s normally so passive, but she insisted on coming here no matter what. That’s why.”

“You didn’t have to bring her during slime outbreak season!”

“I didn’t know.”

“I’ve been reporting on it at the monster duke meeting for years!”

“Maybe, but your reports drag on and make me want to fall asleep, so it completely slipped my mind. I do feel bad about it.”

“This is why I can’t stand you!”

“Whoa, whoa,” the siren duke said while patting Gabriel on the shoulder. It was as if she were calming down a horse. “We did get attacked by a horde of slimes, but they were easily defeated.”

“You were raided?!”

“It wasn’t much of a raid. It ended as soon as it began.”

“That’s not the issue here! Slimes are fiercer and more dangerous than usual in the spring!”

“You call those weaklings fierce?”

“You don’t know how terrifying slimes can be!”

The atmosphere was getting so hostile that I instinctively intervened. “I-I’m so

“Sorry! It’s my fault for not stopping them from going to the sweet violet field!” I’d realized the dangers before we’d set out, yet I’d assumed we would be fine with Princess Griselda’s knights on guard. It had undeniably been my judgment call.

Gabriel averted his gaze from me and said in a low voice, “My mother was there when the decision was made, wasn’t she? That means it wasn’t your fault, Fran.”

He spoke as if I were an outsider. Certainly, I was only his fiancée, not a relative. But I had still been living here as a member of the slime duke family. For the first time in my life, I *wished* I’d been blamed. It felt like there was distance between us.

“Now, now, let’s not make this awkward,” the siren duke said.

“It’s awkward because of *you*!”

“That’s not true. Every relationship has its slumps. Don’t worry about it.”

“We are *not* in a slump!”

The siren duke seemed much closer to Gabriel than I was. Anyone would have thought they were a couple, especially with their matching tall and slender frames. My heart pounded unpleasantly. I wished I could run away.

“Fran, are you feeling unwell?” Gabriel asked.

“Huh?”

“You look pale.”

I instinctively avoided the hand that Gabriel extended. A dizzy spell struck me at the same time, but I managed to endure. The mood was even more awkward now that I’d rejected his concern.

“I’ll be fine after a bit of rest,” I said. “Sorry, but please take care of things from here.” I felt bad making Gabriel entertain our guests on his own, but then again, I wasn’t an official member of the slime duke family yet. It probably wasn’t any of my business to begin with.

“Fran, you didn’t get injured in the slime attack, did you?”

"No, I'm fine. Princess Griselda's knights and the siren duke protected us." I bowed deeply to the siren duke, who was watching us, and left.

I rushed to my room, clutching my throbbing chest.



I took a long soak in the bath Nico had prepared for me before rolling into bed. I wasn't hungry, so I declined dinner. Even though I hadn't eaten anything, watching Alexandrine eat her greens was enough to make me feel full. I couldn't help but feel like my condition was growing worse. I'd probably caught a cold from walking around underdressed for the chilly weather. I was disappointed in my lack of self-care.

It was too early for bedtime, but I felt like I had a fever, so I lay down regardless. As I was resting, Nico brought me an ice pack. She must've prepared it for me because I'd mentioned having a headache when I got into the bath. After that, she placed a wet cloth on my forehead, and Coco brought me sandwiches in case I felt hungry. I slept soundly thanks to their efforts.

I drifted awake in the middle of the night and felt something pleasantly cool on my forehead. It was colder than the wet cloth but not as cold as ice. Wondering what it was, I touched it, and it wobbled. I was very familiar with this texture.

"Wibble, is that you?!"

"Yup." The slime slipped off my forehead onto the pillow and pressed itself against my cheek. It felt very cool and nice.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Gabriel said to stay with you."

"Oh." He must've left Wibble with me out of concern. Thinking about him made my heart ache, probably because it reminded me of how alienated I had felt earlier.

"Fra, what's wrong? You look glum."

I didn't know how to describe the way I was feeling. Perhaps I was at a loss because I'd never felt emotionally distressed like this since meeting Gabriel.

“I’m very anxious.”

“*Why anxious?*”

“I’m afraid that even if Gabriel and I get married, he won’t truly rely on me.”

Today, it had been made clear that there was a wall between us. It had probably always been there, but I must’ve been too oblivious to notice it before. That wall was tall and thick, so it wouldn’t be easy to get over it. But the siren duke seemed to clear it with ease. I couldn’t help but think that their relationship was special.

“Is it really okay for me to marry Gabriel?”

“*If you don’t, he’ll be in trouble!*”

“Oh, right.” I’d completely forgotten that this was a marriage of convenience. After spending so much time with him, I’d deluded myself into thinking that he’d proposed out of love at first sight. “I wonder why I feel anxious even though all I have to do is fulfill my role.”

“*It’s ‘cause you don’t know Gabriel well enough, Fra.*”

“I don’t?”

“*What’re his hobbies? His talents? His favorite foods?*”

“I have no idea.”

Gabriel complimented all of my pastries and always went along with my ideas. I’d heard that he did research on slimes, but I didn’t know what exactly that entailed. Come to think of it, he didn’t talk much about himself. It felt like I did all of the talking and went around doing whatever I wanted. I hadn’t even known until recently that he had been buying my sweets back when I lived in the capital. He wasn’t trying to hide his interests from me—he simply never had a chance to tell me because I was the one talking all the time.

“Oh no, what should I do? I’m so ashamed of myself!” It was selfish of me to feel anxious when I didn’t know anything about him.

“*It’s okay, Fra. You just have to learn.*”

“Y-You’re right. By the way, do you know what his favorite pastry is?”

“He said your cherry clafoutis was delicious. He was happy when he talked about it.”

“I see. I’ll make it for him when I’m feeling better.”

“*Wibble will help!*”

“Thank you, Wibble.”

That night, I fell asleep with Wibble in my arms.

The next day, my fever had fully subsided, but I stayed in recovery mode in case whatever had afflicted me was contagious. We couldn’t have it spreading to Princess Griselda or the siren duke.

I called Nico, Rico, and Coco and asked them to make candied violets with Princess Griselda. I’d wanted to take care of it personally since I was the one who had suggested it, but the situation left me with no choice but to let them fulfill the promise in my place.

Alexandrine stayed with me instead of going to the fowl knights’ station, perhaps because she was worried about me. Between her quacks and Wibble’s conversation, I wasn’t lacking in company.

My appetite seemed to have returned—I was able to finish the oatmeal porridge the head chef had made for me. I was feeling much better now. After lunch, Rico brought me a lovely bouquet of bluebells, saying that it was from Princess Griselda, who had picked the flowers herself during her stroll through the garden. Looking at the beautiful purple blooms soothed my heart. I had them displayed on the round table at my bedside, and I wrote a thank-you card, which I asked Rico to deliver.

From what I’d heard, Princess Griselda had had a fulfilling day. She had made candied violets with the triplets as planned, and Gabriel had taken her to see the workshop and stores, where she had bought souvenirs for the queen. They had also gone for a walk around the village.

As for me, I decided to do something I normally couldn’t: embroidery. But my mother-in-law came by and took it away, because “sick people shouldn’t be embroidering.” She lent me a book she was reading instead. I thought it’d be a romance novel, but it turned out to be an action-packed adventure story. It was

surprisingly engrossing, and I finished it in one sitting. I'd have to ask my mother-in-law what she thought about it later.

In the evening, I took a bath and lay down on my freshly replaced sheets. Perhaps because I'd been so busy as of late, the day had felt like a nice vacation.

I'd taken a nap in the afternoon, so I didn't think I'd be able to fall asleep anytime soon. As I was considering borrowing another book from my mother-in-law, the siren duke paid me a visit.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Better now. I should be able to send you off tomorrow."

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard."

"Thank you for your concern."

The siren duke and Princess Griselda were returning to the capital tomorrow morning. They had only planned to stay for a short time to begin with.

"Um, Your Grace..."

"Yes?"

"You said you wanted to talk to me about something, didn't you?" I was worried that she might ask me to break off my engagement to Gabriel.

The siren duke suddenly made an awkward expression. "No, Gabriel told me to leave it for later."

So it *did* involve Gabriel. Depression weighed on me like a lead ball on my chest. But before I could drown in negative thoughts, I remembered what Wibble had said: I was only feeling anxious because there was so much that I didn't know about Gabriel. *This isn't like me!* I encouraged myself in my mind.

"Let's discuss it another time, after you've recovered," the siren duke said.

"Understood."

Seeming to recall something, she held her hand in front of her mouth and laughed. "Gabriel was acting strangely today."

"Did he do something wrong?"

“Well, there was definitely something wrong with *him*. He was supposed to be giving the princess a tour, but he was so worried about you, he barely paid attention.”

“I’m sorry for the concern I caused.” Yesterday, I’d rejected his hand. Perhaps it was weighing on him.

“He was struggling to eat too. I felt bad watching him.”

“Was that also because of me?”

“Yes, without a doubt.”

I needed to apologize as soon as possible, then. I’d done something terrible.

“Gabriel thinks of nothing but you, and he can’t even come see you. Poor guy.”

“Um, why can’t he come to see me?”

“He thinks he’d be disturbing your sleep.”

“That must be why he didn’t come last night until after I’d fallen asleep.”

“Is that so? Well, he’s an awkward guy. As frustrating as it gets, really.”

He was being so considerate of me, but I had no idea. “I should’ve told him that I would’ve been happier to see his face, huh?”

“Yes, absolutely. People can’t read minds, even if it’s their fiancée. They end up making assumptions and coming to their own conclusions.”

The siren duke’s words made my heart pound. The alienation I’d felt yesterday could have been an unfair assumption on my part. And even if I’d been correct, it would’ve been better to ask Gabriel himself why he felt that way. We needed to have thorough discussions if we were going to learn more about each other.

“I’ll let him know you’re doing better than expected,” she said.

“No, I’ll tell him myself. I had a full day of rest, so I feel fine now.”

I was about to get out of bed, but the siren duke stopped me.

“Wait. If you walk around now, you might get sick again. I’ll tell him, so don’t

worry.”

“But—”

“I’ll also let him know that you want to talk to him in person.”

I nodded reluctantly and agreed to stay put. “Um...thank you, Your Grace.”

“I should be thanking *you*.”

I tilted my head, wondering if I’d done anything worthy of gratitude.

With a faint smile, she continued, “I’ve never seen Griselda enjoy herself so much before. She’s the kind of girl who never asks for anything, not even from her parents and brothers. So thanks.”

The siren duke left the room. Not five minutes later, Gabriel arrived, with Wibble wrapped around his arm in a thin spiral. As soon as he saw me, he cheerfully came over.

“Thank you for coming at this hour, Gabriel,” I said.

“It’s fine. I’d heard from the steward that your condition had improved and was hoping to speak with you in person, but I was afraid it might be a bother.”

“Not at all.” Apparently we’d both been holding back. I never would’ve realized if he hadn’t told me. “Please have a seat.”

“Thank you.” He had an awkward expression. It must’ve been because of my strange behavior yesterday.

“Um, I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“Huh? Yesterday? Sorry, what are you referring to?”

“You offered me your hand, but I didn’t take it. Did you forget?”

“No, I remember, but that’s not the issue right now.”

What is the issue, then? “Is something bothering you?”

“No, er, how do I say this? You may be my fiancée, but I still feel guilty entering an unmarried woman’s bedroom.”

So that’s what he was worried about. It’s a little late for that, though.

“But you came here last night, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Were you awake?”

“No, Wibble told me.”

“Is...that so?”

He still seemed to be holding back his words. I wished he would speak openly with me like he did with the siren duke. I was filled with a mixture of frustration, longing, and the slightest bit of sadness. *How should I express these feelings?*

Wibble peered into my face. “*Fra, are you angry?*”

The slime’s words made me realize: perhaps I *was* angry—at Gabriel, who changed his attitude depending on whom he was talking to. Why was he so overly reserved towards me? For the sake of learning more about him, I worked up the courage to ask.

“Gabriel, are you holding back when you talk to me?”

“What...makes you think that?”

“I just...have a feeling.”

I wasn’t brave enough to say that it was because he treated me differently from the siren duke. We were engaged, so I wanted him to talk to me about anything, even if it meant being harsh. But after all this time, he was still treating me delicately, as if I were some kind of princess.

“I am not trying to hold anything back from you,” he said.

“Then why didn’t you blame me for bringing the siren duke and Princess Griselda to the sweet violet field?” If we’d been open with each other, surely he would’ve blamed me. I’d put our important guests in harm’s way.

“I felt that I was at fault, because the incident would not have happened if I had been there to welcome the siren duke. You did nothing wrong.” He bowed deeply. “I am sorry for making you uncomfortable by not sharing my true thoughts.”

“*Gabriel is awkward! He doesn’t know how to rely on anyone!*” Wibble added.

“Yes...I’ve always done everything by myself, so part of me assumes that I *have* to do everything by myself.” He looked at me as if he were about to cry.

Gabriel had inherited the title of slime duke at a young age, after his father had disappeared. He'd fumbled his way through everything, all alone, with no one he could depend on. In an environment like that, it was no surprise that he thought it was normal to take responsibility for everything himself. Besides, it was also my fault for not clearly telling him that I wanted him to rely on me. Just as I didn't know about him, there were probably things he didn't know about me. In that case, there was only one thing I needed to say.

I took his hand in mine and pleaded, "Gabriel, I want you to rely on me. I want us to work together."

At first, I had chosen to marry him in exchange for the two hundred thousand geld he'd paid in my stead. But now, I wanted to be his support. It was just a matter of whether he'd accept me.

"I'd love for you to think of me as your other self, but I know I'm not capable enough yet," I continued. "I'm going to spend as many years as it takes to become a dependable wife for you, so please, talk to me about everything—even the things you think are trivial."

"Fran...!" He gently pulled me into a tight hug. "Thank you. I'm so happy," he whispered in my ear.

My heart raced. It felt like we understood each other a bit better now, and the thought filled me with joy. After embracing for a little while, I let go of him. I missed his warmth already, but we couldn't exactly stay like that forever.

"Gabriel, thank you for bringing Wibble to me last night," I said.

"Did it help?"

"Yes, it was very reassuring. I would've been happier if I'd been able to talk to you, though."

"I see. I'll try not to hold back from now on."

Those were the words I'd wanted to hear. I was so happy; I couldn't help but hug him again.

Blushing all the way to his ears, Gabriel gently hugged me back and whispered, "There's actually something I want your help with, Fran."

“What is it?”

“We can discuss it when you’re feeling better. Please rest for today.”

I was dying to know what it was, but he was right—I had to use this night to recover. He helped me lie down, and Wibble snuggled into bed with me. Apparently the slime would be sleeping with me tonight as well.

“Good night, Fran,” said Gabriel.

“Yes, good night.”

After the bedroom door was shut, I suddenly realized that I’d completely forgotten to ask him about his relationship with the siren duke. It was fine, though. We had plenty of time. Even if I’d missed my chance today, there would be many more opportunities to come.

Chapter 2: The Noble Lady Francette Starts a New Endeavor

The siren duke and Princess Griselda left the next morning, after breakfast. I saw them off with Gabriel and my mother-in-law.

Once the carriage was out of sight, my mother-in-law heaved a dramatic sigh. “I never expected Princess Griselda to come here. My lifespan has shortened a hundred years.”

“You seemed fine to me,” said Gabriel.

“Don’t be silly. How could I be fine? I only seemed calm because of the experience that comes with age.”

I wanted to become a noblewoman like my mother-in-law, who didn’t let her emotions show. I was grateful to have someone close by whom I could look up to as an example.

After my mother-in-law left, I turned to go back to my room as well, but Gabriel stopped me, taking my hand in his.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“No, I just wanted to express my gratitude. Princess Griselda seemed to enjoy her stay in Triste, and it’s all because of you. Thank you so much.”

The praise made me blush. “I was laid up in bed for most of it, though. I can’t take all of the credit.”

“That’s not true. You spent days planning for the siren duke’s visit, didn’t you? I was surprised when I heard how many different sweets you’d prepared.”

“That was with the help of the pastry chefs.”

“None of it would have been possible without your planning, though.”

His excessive appreciation was making me extremely embarrassed, probably because I’d never been recognized for my efforts before. No matter what I had

accomplished, everyone had thought it was only natural for a daughter of Duke Mercœur.

“Fran, I’m proud to have you as my fiancée,” Gabriel declared.

“Th-Thank you. I’ll continue to work hard to be worthy of that title.”

“What more could you possibly do? You’re already working tirelessly every day.”

“Not as much as you, though.”

All things said and done, perhaps the two of us were similar. We still weren’t completely open with each other, so it was important to speak what was on our minds without holding back.

“Are you available this afternoon to discuss what I mentioned yesterday?” Gabriel asked.

“Yes, of course.”

Constance had forbidden me from leaving the house today, so I was going to spend the morning making Gabriel’s favorite dessert, cherry clafoutis.

“Fra, Wibble will help!”

“Thank you, Wibble. I appreciate it.”

I went to the kitchen with my capable helper, put on an apron, and stood in front of the counter, filled with motivation.

“Fra, you’re making clafoutis for Gabriel?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Gabriel will be really happy!”

“I hope so.”

Clafoutis was a local specialty of Triste, and its taste differed from one family to another. I’d previously learned how to make it from the slime duke household’s pastry chef. There had been talk of selling it at the Lakeside Duck Bakery—we had even made a prototype product—but in the end, people liked their family recipes the most, so we hadn’t gone through with it. At the Lakeside Duck Bakery, we made sweets that had been loved for generations, so

our biggest rivals were the mothers of every household.

The clafoutis recipe passed down in the slime duke family was the one that Gabriel's aunt, Mrs. Molière, had called her favorite dessert. Unlike most of the clafoutis sold in the capital, which were made by filling being poured into tart dough and then baked, this recipe typically skipped the dough and had one pour the filling directly into a baking dish.

"Let's begin, Wibble."

"*Got it!*"

The first step was to make the most important part of the clafoutis: the appareil—in other words, the liquid mixture. I added almond powder to flour and mixed in granulated sugar, then poured in beaten eggs bit by bit, stirring them in. Then I mixed in fresh cream, milk, and vanilla beans. Thanks to Wibble passing me the ingredients one after the other, the batter came together smoothly.

Next, I had to prepare the cherries that would be the highlight of the dessert. Cherry season had yet to come, so I was using cherries that had been harvested last year and stored as compote. In Triste, clafoutis was typically made with sour cherries. These cherries were extremely sour when eaten raw, but after being cooked, they suddenly turned sweet. Sour cherries weren't produced in enough volume to export, so they were only consumed within Triste. As a result, the clafoutis here tasted different from that of the royal capital.

Since I was using cherry compote, I added less sugar to the batter. I coated the inside of a baking dish with a generous amount of butter, lined up the cherries, and poured the batter in. After I baked the dish in the preheated oven, the clafoutis was complete. It'd been a while since I last made it, but it came out surprisingly well.

"*Wow, it came out nicely!*"

"It really did."

"*Gabriel's gonna cry while he eats it.*"

"I don't think he'd go *that* far."

Trying the clafoutis would have to wait until Gabriel's return. I could only pray that it tasted as good as it looked.

There was a gentle breeze that afternoon. It was a warm day, so I decided we'd have tea in the garden's gazebo. I'd added my own twist to the clafoutis by sprinkling powdered sugar over it and holding a heated ladle to it, giving it a crisp texture.

The almond trees were in full bloom and very beautiful. Gabriel arrived as I was admiring the flowers.

"Fran, I'm sorry to keep you waiting!"

"Don't worry. I just got here too."

He must've been in a hurry. He didn't seem to realize that there were petals in his hair and on his shoulders. I stood on tiptoe and reached for them, but he stepped back, startled.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "You have a lot of flower petals stuck to you, so I was going to brush them off."

"F-Flower petals! I see! Sorry, I was just surprised."

"It's not your fault. I should've said something first."

He had probably reacted that way because he wasn't used to me doing such a thing. Perhaps I needed to spend much more time with him before he would become fully accustomed to my presence. I'd have to look after him more and get him used to me.

Getting back on track, I introduced today's dessert.

"I baked clafoutis this morning. Hopefully, it came out nicely."

"Ah, I love clafoutis."

"That's great."

I saw Wibble wink at me from the corner of my eye. Thanks to the slime's intel, I'd been able to make something that Gabriel would love.

I cut the clafoutis with a knife and placed each slice on a plate, which went

well, fortunately. Coco brought us piping hot tea. As she poured it into the cups, a fresh spring fragrance wafted through the air.

“Let’s eat,” said Gabriel.

“I hope it’s to your taste.”

The last time I’d baked clafoutis was last year in early summer—peak cherry season. I’d used compote this time, so I was nervous about whether it’d taste good or not.

“This clafoutis has a layer of caramelized sugar,” Gabriel remarked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I’ve never seen it made this way.” He took a bite, and his eyes immediately widened. “This is delicious!”

After hearing his reaction, I took a bite as well and nodded in agreement. The crème-brûlée-like surface added a bitter layer to the sweetness, giving the clafoutis a mature taste that made it even more delicious.

“Fran, do all clafoutis in the capital have this kind of crispy surface?” Gabriel asked.

“No, this is usually done for a different dessert called crème brûlée.” I had experimented with it today because I was sure it would be a good fit for the clafoutis batter.

“I see. So this flavor is the result of combining your knowledge with Triste’s local clafoutis.”

“Yes, exactly!”

“Incredible.”

I couldn’t help but hope that our marriage would go as well as the clafoutis had. It was challenging to combine different things, but I was willing to put in the effort.

Gabriel finished his slice in no time at all. He even had a second slice—he seemed to really like it.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was supposed to discuss something with you, but I

ended up enjoying the tea and sweets instead.”

“It’s fine. I had fun.” I knew we were only having this tea party because he needed to talk to me, but I thought it would be a good opportunity to learn more about him, so I asked, “What kind of sweets do you like?”

“Me? I’ve never had much of a sweet tooth, but for some reason, I’ve come to love everything that you make.”

“I-I see. I’m glad to hear that.”

I’d already heard that he was the one who had been buying and eating all of my sweets, but it was embarrassing to hear it from his mouth again. Apparently he originally hadn’t been a fan of sweets, though. I was honored that he liked mine.

“Do you have any hobbies?” I asked. “What do you usually like to do?”

“Well...generally, work takes up my entire day, but if I must give an answer, I like listening to what you talk about.” His unexpected hobby filled me with shame. “I feel bad that I’m the only one enjoying our conversations, though,” he added.

“Really? I thought I was talking too *much*.”

“Not at all! Please talk to me even more.”

I pressed my fingers to my burning cheeks to cool them down and nodded. “Okay. But I want to hear about you too.”

“Me?”

“Yes, I want to know more about you. Even the little things count.”

“No one has ever said that to me before... I’m so happy.”

I was relieved to know that he hadn’t been keeping things from me out of an unwillingness to talk. Wibble was right—I knew far too little about my fiancé.

Gabriel and I had a casual chat after that. It was probably the most leisurely time I’d had since moving to Triste. He told me stories about his childhood, his mother’s heroics, and his father. Hearing about his experiences and thoughts helped me understand him more. I had an older sister, but Gabriel was an only

child. That had probably contributed to him never learning that he could rely on others. At the same time, it made me realize how spoiled I'd been, relying on my sister for everything. Needless to say, I was grateful to her. I'd have to keep spending more time with Gabriel like this.

"Thank you for telling me so much about yourself," I said.

"Likewise, thank you for listening."

The more I listened to him, the more I realized how different our personalities and thought processes were. It had been wrong of me to try to understand him based on my thoughts alone. *From now on, if I have any doubts, I should bring them up without hesitation.*

"We should get back on track now," Gabriel said.

"Right." It was unusual for Gabriel to ask me for help. What could this be about? I sat up straight and listened carefully to what he had to say.

"It's about the monster duke meeting."

He was referring to an annual meeting where the monster dukes scattered across the land would gather in the capital and discuss the current monster situations in their domains.

"There's always an exchange of souvenirs," he continued. "Everyone brings local specialties, but I never know what to choose. One year it was chicken ham, another year it was berry jam, and another year it was pickled mushrooms. I've just about run out of ideas. Would I be able to leave it to you this year, Fran? You won't need to prepare anything rare or special, because the gifts brought to the meeting will be reported on in the newspaper."

"Oh, I see. So not only are you exchanging souvenirs, you're advertising your local specialties."

"Correct."

If someone brought a fancy, rare product, the demand bolstered by the advertisement would outstrip the suppliers' abilities to produce them.

"May I ask you to do this for me?" he asked.

"Of course. Leave it to me."

Gabriel had assigned me the important task of selecting the souvenir to bring to the monster duke meeting.



Despite spending all of last night groaning about what to bring to the monster duke meeting, I couldn't come up with any ideas, so I summoned Nico, Rico, and Coco to ask for their input.

"A souvenir to bring to the monster duke meeting, you say?"

"That's quite the responsibility you've been given."

"I hope we can be of help, but..."

Since it was a souvenir, it'd be best not to choose something commonplace. But at the same time, something too rare would be difficult to sell later on.

"I want to bring something that makes you think, '*This* is what we want the newspaper to report on!'" I explained.

"That's a difficult assignment," Nico said with a frown.

"Lady Francette, we don't have anything here that people in the capital would find unique," Rico said, stating the sad truth.

"You can find anything in the capital," Coco murmured, explaining what I already knew.

"I was afraid you'd say that," I replied.

The triplets nodded in unison.

"If we think of it from the perspective of something we can produce at a stable rate, it'd have to be the sweet violet cookies," I mused.

They were already on sale in the capital, though, so there was nothing special about them. The siren duke had bought more than twenty boxes to bring back as souvenirs too. Giving out more of them wouldn't leave an impression at all.

"Ahhh, I just don't know." Lakeside Duck Bakery's sweets were still doing very well in the capital, but they didn't contain preservatives, so they couldn't be eaten over a long period of time. "It'd be nice to bring something that can keep for a while. Cakes last two days, baked sweets around five...maybe a bit longer

in cold storage, but not every home has one.”

“How about candy, then?” Nico suggested.

“True—candy can be stored for a long time.” I’d learned from one of Gabriel’s books that sugar absorbed moisture easily and was resistant to bacteria growth. That was why candy, which was high in sugar and low in water content, was suited to long-term storage. “But violet candies are one of the capital’s specialties.” Even if we made them now, they wouldn’t beat equivalent sweets that had long since been a household name. “Are there any sweets that are low in moisture like candy?”

“Like candied violets?”

“Can we make it so that they can be stored for a long time, though?” Candied violets made from fresh flowers had to be consumed within the day. I folded my arms as I pondered the possibility.

“Lady Francette, how about making a sweet-violet version of an unusual sweet that’s popular in the capital?” Rico suggested.

“That’s a good idea!”

Last year’s trend in the capital had been crystal candy, sweets that looked like edible gemstones. They were made by mixing sugar, agar, and food coloring. If I recalled correctly, the company making them had gone bankrupt from carrying too much stock. Placing all of their bets on a single product had probably been a mistake, seeing as how trends in the capital changed at a cutthroat pace. I decided to discuss it with the pastry chef, but I also needed to have a backup plan in case we weren’t able to make a new type of crystal candy from sweet violets.

“I want something that will surprise the recipient when they see it,” I said. In other words, I wanted to do something with the packaging. We usually sold our products in cans, but I wanted to try competing with something different.

We continued to brainstorm for about an hour, but we still couldn’t come up with a sure winner.

“Let’s have a short break,” I said.

“I’ll prepare tea, then,” said Nico.

“I’ll bring the sweets,” said Rico.

“I’ll ready the bath,” said Coco.

The triplets disappeared, leaving me to mull it over on my own.

“I-I just don’t know what to do!” I lamented.

“I’m sure you’ll think of an idea after having something sweet to eat,” Rico said, having returned with a dish which she placed gently on the table.

“Hm? What is that?” I’d never seen a sweets dish like that before. It was egg-shaped and palm-sized, with a pearl-like luster and a duck painted on the lid. There were berry-flavored candies inside.

“These are candies that Nico bought.”

“No, it’s the dish itself that I’m curious about.” It was my first time seeing a sweets dish of this shape and size. I was very attracted to its silhouette.

“This is a bonbonnière—a porcelain candy dish that has been used in Triste since ancient times.”

“Porcelain?! The Triste region produces porcelain?”

“Yes... It was a very long time ago, but there was a period when Triste made porcelain at the request of a noble.”

Apparently Triste had invested a lot of money into this business, but the noble had gone bankrupt. After that, the workshop had begun producing porcelain for commoners.

This gave me a flash of inspiration—what if we put candied violets into these bonbonnières? I’d never seen a candy dish of this shape in the capital before, so people were bound to take interest in it.

“Rico, do you know anything else about bonbonnières?” I asked.

“Nico might know more than me.”

“Okay.”

Nico returned at the same time as Coco. Apparently the bonbonnière was one

of her prized possessions, so she told me about it in detail.

“Oh, it was given to me by my mother!” she exclaimed. “I really wanted it because of the duck on the lid. Bonbonnières filled with candy were originally given out as party favors at weddings. It was a way of sharing your happiness with the attendees. They aren’t made anymore, though, so they’re rare items now.”

“I see.”

Nico explained that for weddings nowadays, small candy baskets were woven instead. No bonbonnières had been made in the last decade.

“Why did the bonbonnière tradition die out?” I asked.

“I don’t know. My mother said it was gone before she knew it. I got this one from her five years ago, and I’ve been very careful not to break it.”

It felt like a waste that such a lovely item wasn’t being produced anymore.

“I was thinking of putting sweet violet crystal candy in bonbonnières to give out as souvenirs,” I said.

“Oh, that’s a wonderful idea!”

But if nobody was making bonbonnières anymore, then it was just that: an idea. Perhaps my mother-in-law would know more about them than the triplets. I decided to pay her a visit after finishing our tea break.

“Bonbonnières? Oh, yes, I remember those,” my mother-in-law said. “It was a commoner tradition, though. At my wedding, the guests were given porcelain teacup sets. I don’t think we produce any porcelain products at all anymore, let alone bonbonnières.”

“Why isn’t porcelain being produced anymore?” I asked.

“I don’t know. The business only began because a noble requested our craftsmen’s services, so we don’t have much information about the situation at the time.”

I had assumed that the raw materials for the porcelain would be minable here, but even that was unclear.

"I can't remember whether the workshop is still around or not," she continued. "Gabriel might know more about it than me."

"I'll try asking him, then."

If I could complete my vision of sweet violet crystal candy in bonbonnières, it would surely be the highlight of the news report. I really wanted to make it a reality.

While waiting for Gabriel's return, I took a walk in the garden. Wibble tagged along as my guide.

"Wibble takes lots of walks too!"

Apparently the slime liked to drink the morning dew. What an adorable hobby.

Today, I was brought to the slime house, where the other slimes besides Wibble lived.

"This is it!"

"Huh? This?!"

It was a wonderful one-story house that I had previously assumed was servants' lodgings. It was much nicer than where I had lived in the old part of the capital. Gabriel's five other tamed slimes lived here.

Wibble knocked on the door and a red slime peeked out from inside.

"Welcooome!" It had a cheerful disposition.

Next to appear was the yellow slime. *"Come on in!"* it said with an innocent smile.

I went inside and was startled to see the blue slime clinging to the ceiling. *"Get in!"* This one seemed to be standoffish.

The black slime glared at me and snorted. *"Hmph!"* It didn't have the nicest attitude, but it was smiling, so I assumed it was welcoming me.

Lastly, the green slime jumped out in front of me. *"Boo!"* It must've been trying to surprise me, but I had seen it squirming in my peripheral vision, so I hadn't been scared. This one seemed to be a mischief-maker.

The slime house had a stone interior and was made to look very natural, with a large water tank, rocks, and plants. It was cool and comfortable. The slimes bounced in a circle around me—perhaps it was their way of welcoming me.

“Um, you all seem to be doing well, huh?” I said.

The slimes responded verbally, but since they were all talking at once, I was lost as to what they were saying.

“*Disperse!*” Wibble commanded.

The slimes obeyed, scattering off to do their own things as if nothing had happened.

Gabriel’s tamed slimes generally stayed at the slime house until they were summoned to fight. He had introduced me to them one by one when I had first arrived in Triste. The others hadn’t been given names like Wibble had, apparently because it would make the contracts more restrictive, placing a heavier burden on the slimes. Wibble was Gabriel’s one and only special slime.

There were a variety of slimes inhabiting Triste. Slimes normally didn’t have elemental attributes, but the ones in this house were extremely rare specimens.

The red slime had fire properties. It had been found during the investigation of a suspected arson about five years ago, but it hadn’t been the culprit. It had been at the crime scene because it had the ability to swallow up fire. Thanks to it, the flames hadn’t spread farther. Gabriel had never seen a fire slime before, so he had tamed it immediately.

The yellow slime had lightning properties, which it had obtained after being struck by lightning. Gabriel happened to have seen the large thunderbolt, and later, he had gone to the site of impact and found this slime.

The blue slime had water properties. Gabriel had caught it in a lake by chance when he was fishing for frogs.

The green slime had wind properties. Gabriel had caught it one day when it had been riding the strong early-summer winds around.

The black slime had physical properties. Gabriel had found it destroying an abandoned house and formed a contract with it on the spot.

These slimes with special properties were called “unique slimes,” and they were only found in Triste. Adventurers who tamed monsters would come here in search of them as if it were a treasure hunt. However, no unique slimes had been spotted in the past twenty years except for the ones Gabriel had discovered. No wonder he was the slime duke.

Gabriel’s unique slimes were adorable creatures that liked to talk and play. They weren’t half as articulate as Wibble, but it was amazing that the monsters could speak at all. Wibble must’ve been an exceptionally smart slime.

“Come to think of it, what’s your attribute, Wibble?” I asked.

“*Dunno. Wibble is Wibble.*”

I’d never seen a light-red slime before, but apparently it wasn’t just me—Wibble had been the first one discovered in history. Even Gabriel, who had a contract with it, didn’t know everything about its biology.

The unique slimes suddenly stopped what they were doing, as if they’d been alerted to something. The next moment, they dashed out of the house.

“Huh?! What’s gotten into them?” I asked.

“*Gabriel is back.*”

“Really?!”

Since they were linked by their contracts, they knew right away when Gabriel entered the castle premises. This reminded me, though—I had been waiting for Gabriel’s return as well. I chased after the slimes that were already bouncing away in the distance.

By the time I caught up, Gabriel had arrived at the front door. The unique slimes were happily hopping around him in a circle.

“W-Welcome back, Gabriel,” I said.

“Thank you. You seem to be out of breath. What’s wrong?”

“I was at the slime house, and they suddenly ran off because you came back, so I ran through the garden too.”

“I’m sorry you had to do that.”

“Also, there’s something I want to ask you about.”

“I have a bit of free time right now.”

“It’s not urgent, so let’s leave it for after dinner.”

“Very well. Later, then.”

The conversation felt rather unemotional. I wished I could’ve given him a warmer reception, like a fiancée should. My parents hadn’t been very close, so they’d never had such exchanges. Without a loving couple to use as an example, I didn’t know what to do.

On the spur of the moment, I grabbed Gabriel’s hand as he was turning to go inside.

“Is there something else, Fran?” he asked.

“C-Can I...give you a welcome-back hug?”

I’d done it before, but specifically bringing it up suddenly filled me with embarrassment. *Gabriel must also think it’s not worth stopping him for*—or so I thought, but he opened his arms for me, and I leaped into them.

“I’m glad you came back safe,” I said.

“And I’m very glad to be welcomed home like this.”

This was definitely how it was supposed to go. My happiness outweighed my shame.

“It pains me to let go, but I’ll see you later,” said Gabriel.

“Yes.”

He went to his room with the unique slimes in tow.

“Wibble, are you sure you don’t want to go with him?” I asked.

“*Wibble likes Fra, so Wibble will stay with Fra forever.*”

“Oh my, what an honor.”

Before doing anything else, I had to catch my breath. My heart was pounding, and it probably wasn’t just from running here at full speed. The unexpected physical contact with Gabriel must’ve made it race even more.

When I returned to my room, Constance brought me a glass of cold water. She had also prepared a portion for Wibble, who happily drank it down. She peered into my face, concerned about my uneven breathing.

“Lady Francette, are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s getting better. Thank you.” I hadn’t run like that since I’d been a child. It was painfully clear that I was out of shape. “Constance, have you ever chased slimes before?”

“I’ve been chased *by* one, if that counts.”

“Oh...I guess that’s how it normally would be. I’m sorry for asking you a weird question.”

“Don’t be. It was chasing me because I played a prank on it, so I fully deserved it.”

“Oh, is that so? It’s hard to imagine you playing a prank on a slime.”

“It happened when I was seven or eight.” Apparently the stoic Constance had been quite rambunctious as a child. “I haven’t changed, though.”

“You’re still reckless?”

“Perhaps.”

Constance was busy every day, so we’d never talked like this before. The conversation gave me a glimpse of an unexpected side of her. I’d learned from my relationship with Gabriel that if you were too reserved with someone, you’d never understand them better.

“I’d like to talk with you more,” I said.

“With me?”

“Yes. It can be like today—just a quick chat while we’re doing something.”

Her expression was tinged with bafflement. She was probably confused by this sudden request from someone with whom she had never spoken about personal matters.

“Sorry, I just thought your story about playing a prank on a slime was cute,” I clarified. “I’d like to hear more stories like that.”

“I see. I don’t think I have any interesting stories, though.”

“That’s not true. I’d love to hear about anything, no matter how small.” I’d reciprocate, of course. I had no shortage of random stories to tell. “Would it be a bother?”

“No, not at all. I’m happy that you feel that way.”

“Great.”

I would probably be interacting with Constance for a long time, especially now that she was helping the Lakeside Duck Bakery more often. I didn’t know if she would open up to me as much as Nico, Rico, and Coco, but I wanted us to get to know each other.

After dinner, Gabriel and I sat down with cups of hot milk and discussed the day’s events. The slime outbreak seemed to have settled down, and Gabriel had been surveying the damages across the territory.

“This year, they clogged irrigation canals, destroyed huts used by hunters, and flooded ponds, but that was to be expected,” he said.

These all sounded like serious issues to me, but apparently, they had all been resolved.

“Fortunately, there were no major damages and no one was hurt.”

Around twenty years ago, there had been an especially bad outbreak that had resulted in fifty casualties. In order to prevent a repeat of that tragedy, Gabriel monitored the slimes’ movements every year and exterminated as many as he could. He looked satisfied with his accomplishments, but I had a feeling that it must’ve been extremely fatiguing. Perhaps he could handle it now while he was healthy, but there was no guarantee that he could keep up these patrols forever.

“Gabriel, have you ever thought of hiring people?” I asked.

“Hiring people?”

“Yes. You’re the ruler of this land, so I can’t help but wonder if you should have a capable army like the king does.”

“You have a point. But I’ve been working alone for so long that I don’t feel

safe delegating to others.”

I knew that feeling all too well. I was the same way with the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s operations. Luckily, I had someone I trusted—Constance—but if it weren’t for her, I probably wouldn’t have had anyone else to ask.

“I’ve been aware for a while that things shouldn’t stay this way,” Gabriel continued. He was very talented, so he generally did everything by himself. You would be hard-pressed to find someone as capable as him. “If I could at least delegate the patrols and slime exterminations, it would greatly ease my burden.”

“Sounds like you’re describing a knight squadron.”

“Slime knights?” he murmured.

“That’s it!” I exclaimed. “I think it would be great to have slime knights. The villagers wouldn’t have to live in fear of slimes anymore either.”

“Is that so...?”

“I’m sure of it.”

We could use the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s revenue to set the slime knights’ operating budget. There were currently plans to build a second workshop, which would increase production. I could only provide a rough calculation at the moment, but I showed Gabriel our estimated sales and asked him if the idea was plausible.

“Using the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s proceeds to fund the slime knights? Are you sure you’re all right with this?”

“Yes, I’ve always wanted to use the revenue to benefit Triste.”

“Thank you, Fran.”

We didn’t know where to start, so we decided to consult with Prince Axel at the monster duke meeting.

“There might be similar militias in other regions,” I said.

“Indeed. I’ll ask around.”

As we were smiling and making plans, a low gong rang out from the

grandfather clock, prompting me to remember my original purpose.

“Oh, right,” I said. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“Is Triste’s porcelain workshop no longer producing anything?”

“If you’re talking about the workshop on the village outskirts with the large furnaces, I checked on it about a month ago. It has a slime-warding barrier, so it remained intact despite the yearly outbreaks. The noble who had it built paid a lot of money for the magical reinforcement.” It just went to show how valuable porcelain must’ve been at the time. “I’ve never seen any chimney smoke rising from it, but I won’t know the situation unless I ask, since it isn’t under my jurisdiction. Do you need it for something?”

“I was hoping to bring sweets in porcelain bonbonnières to the monster duke meeting.”

“I see. What are bonbonnières?”

“They’re candy dishes.” I showed him the one I’d borrowed from Nico.

“This is a bonbonnière?”

“Isn’t it cute?”

“Yes, it looks like quite a high-quality product.”

The bonbonnière was more carefully made than the typical porcelain on the market, since it had come from a workshop that catered to a noble. The duck painted on it was beautiful—it alone would have required considerable technique.

“I don’t recall ever seeing one before, though,” Gabriel added.

“Apparently they were popular with commoners. They used to put sweets in them to give out as party favors to wedding guests, but the tradition is gone these days, so bonbonnières aren’t used anymore.”

“I didn’t know the villagers had such a tradition. How intriguing.”

It was such a shame that this lovely product wasn’t being made anymore. I’d hoped that we could use this opportunity to revive the bonbonnière as one of

Lakeside Duck Bakery's packaging styles, but...

"Fran, let's go to the workshop tomorrow."

"Can we?"

"Yes. If we're going to make bonbonnières, the sooner the better, no?"

"Thank you, Gabriel!"

And so, we set out to make my bonbonnière dream come true.

The next day, Gabriel, Wibble, and I headed to the porcelain workshop, making our way through the early summer forest on two horses. The vegetation that had begun to gain color with the coming of spring was now deep green. It really felt like summer was here.

A small bird flew by in front of me.

"Hey, Gabriel, what's the name of the bird with blue wings and a yellow belly that I often see around here?" I asked.

"Blue wings and a yellow belly... That would be the blue tit."

"I've never heard of them."

"If I recall correctly, they can only be found in Triste."

"Is that so? They're very cute and pretty."

When I'd been living in the old part of the capital, birds would fly into my yard all the time, but I didn't know the names of half of them. Here, though, Gabriel taught me everything I wanted to know.

"I'm so lucky to have such a knowledgeable fiancé," I said.

"I didn't think you'd be so happy just to learn the name of a bird."

As we chatted, we arrived at the village. We were going to ask about the porcelain craftsman before going to the workshop. First, we stopped by the bakery, from which he was said to buy a large amount of bread once a month.

"The old man from the workshop? He's a real grouch," said the proprietress. "Everyone thinks he's stubborn and cranky. But he's definitely skilled, and he

always provided us with porcelain at a really low cost if we said it was for a wedding.”

From the sound of it, he wasn’t a bad person. The main issue was whether he’d hear us out. We bought some bread as thanks for the information and left the village.

“Let’s head over to the workshop now, Fran,” said Gabriel.

“All right.”

There was a building at the entrance to the forest on the village outskirts that seemed like the one we were looking for.

“Is that the porcelain workshop?” I asked.

“Most likely.”

The building had a number of cylinders jutting out of it, high in the air as if to reach the heavens. Each one probably corresponded to a kiln inside. It was a much larger workshop than I’d expected. There were also several windmills set up.

“I didn’t think much about it when I did my annual visit, but if they were producing porcelain at this scale, they were probably mining kaolin in this area,” said Gabriel.

Unlike earthenware, porcelain was made with clay derived from a stone called kaolin. There were other differences between them as well.

“Earthenware is fired at low temperatures, while porcelain is fired at high temperatures,” he continued. “It is said that porcelain is the smoother and more beautiful of the two. For a long time, there was only one country that knew how to make porcelain, making it a very precious commodity. Other countries recruited alchemists to research how to produce it. The workshop here was likely built around the time when the methodology had just been discovered. Nowadays, many countries have developed their own production methods. Porcelain is still loved by the nobility, but you no longer have to pay the price of a precious jewel for a single cup. The porcelain produced here likely brought in a huge fortune.”

"It's impressive that they were able to conduct that kind of business in the slime duke's territory."

"My ancestors must have been very tolerant."

Then again, the noble who'd made that fortune had now lost it. The failure of porcelain as an industry in Triste had just been one of those unavoidable, historical events that couldn't be ascribed to any particular individual.

"What is the craftsman like?" I asked.

"As you heard, he's a stubborn old man. I come by every year during the slime outbreak season, but he always insists that the workshop is fine because of the barrier and turns me away as if I'm a nuisance."

"Now I'm afraid he might not talk to us."

"We'll find a way to negotiate."

I'd brought some Lakeside Duck Bakery sweets as a gift, but would he accept them? I was starting to doubt that as well. "Maybe food or alcohol would've been better than sweets."

Wibble, who was wrapped around my arm, patted my shoulder in encouragement. "*Fra's sweets are yummy, so it'll be fine!*"

"Thanks, Wibble." I couldn't lose heart before even trying. I worked up my courage and prepared to face the stubborn old man.

The curtains were open, and there was laundry hanging outside. The craftsman was probably home. Gabriel knocked on the door and received an immediate response. The door swung open with great force.

"Ugh, who's knocking on doors this early in the morning?" asked the middle-aged man who had suddenly appeared. He had a bushy beard like a dwarf and looked like a very stereotypical craftsman. "You again? I told you this place is fine!"

"No, I've come about a different matter," said Gabriel.

"What?"

The atmosphere was getting tense, so I quickly intervened. "Um, I was

wondering if I could ask you a few questions about this workshop!"

"And who do you think you are?!"

"*We brought sweets!*" Wibble's carefree voice rang out, much to my horror.

"You brought food, eh? Well, you should've said so sooner," the man said, inviting us inside.

I certainly hadn't been expecting that reaction. I looked at Gabriel, but he simply urged me to hurry inside, so I entered the craftsman's home. The first things I saw were large shelves of beautiful porcelain, neatly arranged. If there hadn't been anything else around, I would've thought that this was a noble's collection room. There were several bonbonnières displayed among the pieces. This was definitely the porcelain workshop.

"Have a seat," the man said. "I'll make tea."

The simple room had nothing but four chairs, a fireplace, and the shelves of porcelain. It was probably only used for daily life, and his work was done elsewhere. The craftsman looked to be somewhere in his midfifties to sixties. His shaggy beard covered most of his face, making it hard to determine his age. As Gabriel had said, my first impression was that he was a stubborn old man.

Ten minutes later, the craftsman returned with a tea set on a tray. "It's made with wild plants from the forest."

We were offered a drink that was green enough to be vegetable juice. Gabriel's face visibly stiffened.

"It doesn't look appetizing, but it tastes great with honey," the man added. He explained that the honey had been freshly harvested this morning and that his hobby was beekeeping. "I've also got vegetables, chickens, and fruit trees here, not just honey. I hardly ever have to go to the village." He seemed to live a self-sufficient life. "I'm proudest of the honey, though. Taste it and you'll see."

Wibble peered into my cup and whispered, "*It's not poisonous.*" Amazed that the slime could tell, I poured a generous amount of honey into the tea and had a sip.

"Oh, it's delicious," I said.

“Told you so.”

I had been expecting a grassy flavor, but the honey mellowed it out. It tasted much better than it looked.

After seeing my reaction, Gabriel followed my lead. The furrow in his brow quickly faded. “Er, it’s good.”

“Glad to hear it,” said the man.

I presented the basket of bread and sweets to the craftsman. “The bread was purchased in the village, but the dessert is handmade. I hope they’re to your taste.”

“I don’t like eating fancy noble food, but fine, I’ll take it.” He took the basket with a haughty attitude and looked inside. “Wait, what is this dessert?!”

“It’s something that has been passed down in Triste since ancient times.”

I didn’t know if the craftsman had been born in Triste, but I had chosen this thinking that a local dessert the region was familiar with would be better than something that was currently trending.

He picked up a slice of the walnut tart without hesitation.

Walnut trees were everywhere in Triste, and in autumn, children would pick as many as they could. Most of the walnuts they brought home were made into tarts, which the children loved very much.

The craftsman took a bite of the tart. A moment later, tears began to stream down his face.

“D-Does it taste that bad?” I asked, startled.

“No, that’s not it. It’s just—it tastes like the tarts my late wife made. We used to pick walnuts together every year, and she’d make tarts for me. It was our tradition. I thought I’d never be able to eat them again.”

He explained that it was something he had looked forward to every year. But ever since his wife had passed away, the walnuts in his garden had been left to rot. Listening to his story made my heart ache.

“It’s a miracle,” he said. “I can’t believe it.” He gobbled down the rest of the

tart. Apparently he had quite the sweet tooth. After finishing the last slice, he wiped his tears away. His gaze had been lowered, but when he looked up, I saw that his expression wasn't glum. "I haven't had any sweets in a while. This was great. You have my thanks."

I was relieved that he had enjoyed it.

"You're the current lord of Triste, right?"

"Yes, my name is Gabriel de Griet Slime. This is my fiancée, Francette de Blanchard."

"I see... I'm Adam Daux."

"It's nice to meet you, Adam."

The craftsman bowed deeply. "Sorry for everything."

"Huh?"

"You came by every year out of concern, but I always shunned you." It turned out that he had been rejecting Gabriel's help for a reason. "This land was occupied without permission by a noble's orders. I couldn't face you 'cause I was scared you'd kick me out."

It was as I'd suspected. Adam's family wasn't at fault, though—it was the noble who had ordered them to make porcelain on the slime duke's land.

"I'm just a measly little craftsman—taking this place from me would be like taking candy from a baby. The fact that you didn't means you were letting it slide. I knew that, but I just couldn't bring myself to talk to you... I'm really sorry."

Gabriel shook his head. He had no intention of blaming or punishing this man.

"But my family occupied this land and its blessings for a long time. You can't let me off scot-free, can you?"

Gabriel shook his head again and proceeded to speak in a gentle tone of voice—the kind that one would use to advise a young child. "You've already lived quietly here for generations, providing the villagers with bonbonnières for their weddings. I'm not going to condemn you."

According to the bakery's proprietress, Adam had sold the villagers bonbonnières at a very low price, not commensurate with the porcelain's value, saying to treat them as wedding gifts from him. It had probably been out of guilt over occupying this land for so many years. Gabriel understood that, which was why he hadn't kicked the man out or punished him.

"Y-You'd let it slide?!" Adam exclaimed.

"The villagers said you weren't a bad person," said Gabriel.

"They probably called me a stubborn and cranky old man."

"I won't deny that. However, I also heard that you worked hard for many years and that you and your wife were kind to people who came to you when they were getting married."

"That was in the past. I haven't been able to make porcelain for the last decade."

There it was—the reason we were here. I felt compelled to ask, "Why can't you make porcelain anymore?"

The craftsman lowered his gaze, his expression darkening. There must have been some kind of problem. "There's a cave deep in the forest where kaolin can be mined, but it's been taken over by slimes."

So there *was* a source of kaolin in Triste. "Gabriel, did you know about this?" I asked.

"No, I did not."

More importantly, this valuable mining site had been taken over by slimes. Adam furrowed his brow and continued with a pained expression, "I thought I could just kill those weak little slimes, but I couldn't."

"Were there too many?" Gabriel asked.

"No, that wasn't the problem. There was a ridiculously tough slime, hard like a rock. No matter how hard I hit it, I couldn't make a dent. It actually almost killed *me*."

"What?!" I exclaimed. Was it a unique slime?

I looked at Gabriel, who simply nodded and asked, “If the slime is defeated, will you be able to make porcelain again?”

“Yeah. Haven’t done it in ten years, but the muscle memory should still be there.”

“Very well. In that case, I will go to defeat it, and if I succeed, I will order bonbonnières from you.”

“You’re giving me work, Your Grace?”

“Yes. We require your bonbonnières.”

Adam was probably the only craftsman who could make such beautiful and refined bonbonnières. I wanted to get my hands on them no matter what it took.

“All right,” Adam said. “If you’re willing to go that far, I’ll take your order. But only if I get the kaolin.”

“Thank you.”

Gabriel decided to head over to the cave right away. *This is where we part ways*, or so I thought, but he turned to face me and said, “Fran, be cautious of slimes while we’re in the cave.”

“Huh?!”

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s just—you’re bringing me with you?”

“Of course. I’ll protect you if anything happens.”

“Thank you, Gabriel.” I knew I’d only slow him down, so I’d assumed that he would leave me behind.

“Did you think I’d tell you to wait here?”

“Yes.”

“I’d feel more anxious leaving you somewhere out of my sight. Besides, I’m confident when it comes to slimes. Then again, this building has a slime-repelling barrier, so I suppose it *is* safe here.”

“I trust you more than I do an invisible barrier.”

“Thank you. That, um, makes me happy.” Gabriel looked away out of embarrassment. The gesture didn’t hide his blush, though, seeing as how his ears were bright red.

When Adam was ready, we set off for the cave. Gabriel summoned his five unique slimes, much to the surprise of Adam, who had never seen such colorful slimes before.

“And here I thought the light-red slime was an unusual sight,” Adam said. “It’s my first time seeing slimes like these.”

“They’re called unique slimes,” said Gabriel. “Each one is the only one in the world of its kind.”

“Is the slime in the cave one of those too?!”

“No, the one at the mining site is likely a rock slime. You can find others relatively easily around Triste, so it isn’t a unique slime.”

I’d never heard of a rock slime. *I thought slimes were supposed to be soft and squishy.*

“Wibble, guard Fran,” Gabriel continued. “Same with the rest of the slimes—put Fran’s safety first.” The unique slimes all nodded. “Let’s go, then.”

We walked through the forest for about thirty minutes before arriving at the cave. It was my first time seeing a white cave. We went in, each carrying a magicite-powered lamp. It was clammier than it was outside, but surprisingly, it wasn’t very dark because of the glowing mushrooms growing inside.

Adam, who was leading the way, turned around and told us about the cave while running his hand along the rock wall. “All of the rock here is kaolin. The whiter the stone, the more mana it contains and the better the porcelain it makes. For bonbonnières, we used kaolin from the deepest part of the cave, which was as beautiful as pearls.”

But now, the rock slime was preventing him from getting near that area. That was why the craftsman hadn’t been able to make bonbonnières for the past decade.

"Can you not make bonbonnières with the kaolin in this area?" Gabriel asked.

"Afraid not." Adam took his pickax from his bag, swung it down on the rock wall, and picked up one of the chunks that tumbled down. He pointed at it and said, "The kaolin near the cave entrance has too many impurities." There were dark lumps mixed in with the rock. "It also isn't pure white. It has a grayish tinge that turns black when you fire it. Bonbonnières need to be made of beautiful white porcelain. Even worse, impure kaolin makes for extremely fragile porcelain. Kaolin is finicky to handle—porcelain's usually fired at high temperatures, but if you heat it up too quickly, it cracks."

In other words, it was a delicate process.

"A bonbonnière is a gift from a new family—a clean slate that hasn't been dyed by anything yet," the craftsman explained.

"I see," said Gabriel.

If that's the meaning behind bonbonnières, would it really be appropriate to use them as packaging for the Lakeside Duck Bakery? Now I'm not sure.

"Um, if you do manage to make the bonbonnières, would I be allowed to use them for my business?" I asked.

"I don't know if I should be saying this when I haven't made anything yet, but you guys are getting married, aren't you? Just think of it as a large-scale gift from the grand duke and his wife. Don't sweat the small stuff."

"Thank you so much. I appreciate it." I was relieved that it would be fine.

"This is as far in as I can take you."

"You have my deepest gratitude," said Gabriel. "You should return to your home for now. If we aren't back by evening, please deliver this letter to the slime duke household."

"Understood. Your fiancée's with you, so don't bite off more than you can chew, Your Grace."

"I am well aware."

Gabriel and I parted ways with Adam. Not wanting to be a burden, I was gripping the umbrella Gabriel had given me before. Not only could it defeat a

regular slime with a single strike, it was imbued with a protective spell so that it could be used as a shield when opened. When the battle with the slime began, I would have to open the umbrella and protect myself.

“Now then, shall we head for the deepest part of the cave, Fran?” Gabriel asked.

“Yes, let’s.”

We’d been told that the cave was quite large. It would take at least two hours to reach the deepest part. According to the craftsman, there were branching paths farther inside, but all we had to do was take the one that had the most glowing mushrooms.

“Glowing mushrooms naturally grow in places with a lot of mana,” Gabriel explained.

“So if we follow the trail of mushrooms, we’ll reach the deepest part of the cave where the highest-quality kaolin is, right?”

“Correct.”

Gabriel led the way, followed by the red, yellow, and blue slimes. The black slime bounced along beside me, while the green slime took up the rear. There were small puddles in the cave, and I could sense the presence of wild slimes. However, none of them dared to challenge the slime duke to a fight.

After about an hour of walking, we took a short break. Gabriel drew a monster-repelling magic circle on the ground and activated the spell. He also took a picnic blanket out of the small bag hanging from his belt and unfolded it for us.

“We’ll be safe in here, so please have a seat,” he said.

“Thank you.”

Gabriel proceeded to take various items out of his bag, including a bottle of tea, candy, chocolate, and sandwiches. Things that easily exceeded the bag’s capacity were laid out one by one.

“Hey, Gabriel, how does that bag work?” I asked.

“It’s made out of slime.”

Apparently it was another one of his inventions that utilized the special characteristics of slimes.

“Slimes swallow creatures that are larger than themselves, instantly taking them into their bodies. I process slimes into bags, using their active cores to apply that ability.”

“If the core is still active, does that mean the slime is alive?”

“No. The slime itself is dead, but I make the bag after successfully separating the slime’s body from its core. I dry the slime to form the shape of the bag, soak the core in disinfectant, and finally use magic to fuse them together.”

“It sounds complicated.”

“I think you’d be able to understand if you watched the process.”

Just as I was about to say, “If there’s ever a chance, I’d love to,” the unique slimes clung to me with all their might. Gabriel’s story about turning slimes into bags must’ve frightened them. Feeling sorry for them, I patted each one. Even Wibble, who wasn’t scared for some reason, held out its head to be patted. Figuring I had no choice, I obliged.

“I’m surprised you prepared so much,” I said.

“I was thinking we could have lunch somewhere, but I certainly didn’t expect it to be in a cave.”

“Definitely.”

It had been hot and humid when we first entered the cave, but now that we were deeper inside, it was much cooler.

“Fran, are you cold?” Gabriel asked.

“No, I’m fine.”

“If you get cold, Wibble will warm you up!”

Come to think of it, Wibble had done that for me on cold days in the old part of the capital. I hadn’t even had the money for firewood at the time, so I had been really grateful.

“I can give you my jacket too,” said Gabriel.

“Gabriel’s clothes are too heavy for Fra!” Wibble jumped onto my shoulder and transformed into a cape, light as a feather. *“Fra! Just lemme know if you’re cold.”*

“I will,” I said. “Thank you.” I looked at Gabriel, who was sulking.

“I can’t best Wibble in anything,” he lamented.

“Why, that’s not true.”

“Tell me what you think I’m better at, then.”

No matter what I said, Wibble would probably fight back. But if I didn’t say anything, Gabriel would be unhappy.

“U-Um...your passion for work,” I said.

Gabriel’s expression softened. Perhaps giving an honest answer had been the right move.

“Grr! Wibble works hard too!”

“There are days when you skip work to spend hours in Fran’s room,” Gabriel objected.

“That’s ‘cause Wibble loves Fra more than work! Gabriel loves work more than Fra.”

“Who told you that?!”

Oh no. Maybe I added fuel to the fire. I regretted saying anything.

“I love Fran more than work too!” Gabriel insisted.

“Then stop working!”

Now *that* would be a problem. I wanted him to love both...but perhaps that was selfish of me. At any rate, I had to intervene before their argument became too heated.

“There’s no benefit in comparing yourself to others,” I said. “Everyone has their good points.”

“What are Wibble’s good points?!”

“I would like to know as well!” Gabriel exclaimed.

“I-I’ll tell you when we get home.”

Thankfully, those words were enough to end their verbal battle. Moving on, I gave water mixed with honey to Wibble. The unique slimes wanted to drink too, so I made the same mixture for them. The sight of the slimes happily drinking water was nothing short of adorable.

“Gabriel, can I have one of those sandwiches?” I asked.

“Go ahead! Please feel free.”

“Thank you.”

Apparently he had asked the head chef to make them this morning. I opened the basket and found three different types of sandwiches: cucumber, ham, and egg.

“Oh, these are all my favorites,” I remarked.

“I thought so, which is why I requested them from the head chef.”

“Have I ever mentioned liking these ingredients?”

“No, but you seemed happier when you were eating them compared to other sandwiches.”

“I’m that easy to read, huh?”

“Only when it comes to sandwiches. You like cucumber the most, don’t you?”

“That’s right.” I loved the cucumber sandwiches served alongside afternoon tea, but I hadn’t been able to eat them after my family’s ruin. Believe it or not, cucumbers grown carefully in a glass greenhouse were a luxury item. “After my family went bankrupt, I wanted to cry when I saw the price of cucumbers at the market. Even beef tenderloin was nowhere near as expensive.”

“It must’ve been a shock.”

“Apparently cucumbers are hard to grow in the capital.”

The royal capital was located rather far north, and sometimes there was frost in early spring. Although cucumbers preferred cool climates, they were extremely susceptible to frost. Procuring them from other areas took several days, so in order to obtain the crisp, fresh cucumbers that sandwiches called

for, there was no choice but to grow them in a greenhouse. This restricted the quantities that could be grown, so the price had inevitably skyrocketed.



“For nobles living in the capital, cucumbers are a symbol of wealth,” I explained.

“I see. I had no idea. In Triste, cucumbers are grown outdoors in abundance and enjoyed by commoners. They are around the same price as other vegetables.”

While listening to Gabriel’s explanation, I ate one of the cucumber sandwiches. The cucumbers were delightfully crisp and sweet. They were very delicious.

“Vegetables really do taste better when they’re grown under the sun,” I remarked.

“Is there a difference between outdoor and indoor farming?”

“Yes. I feel like cucumbers grown in greenhouses are a bit watery. It’s probably a difference in methodology, though.”

Watery cucumbers soaked the bread and ruined its flavor. One time at a tea party, I had eaten a cucumber sandwich that had been left out for a while, and it hadn’t been a pleasant experience. The cucumber sandwiches made by the head chef here weren’t watery at all, and the bread was soft and fluffy, so I could smell the wheaty aroma.

“Cucumbers are in season right now, so perhaps they taste even better than usual,” Gabriel said.

“They are?! No wonder they’re so delicious.” Cucumbers were available all year round in the capital since they were grown in greenhouses. As a result, I’d completely forgotten that they had an ideal season, which was apparently early summer. “I still can’t believe that Triste has such wonderful cucumbers, though.”

I began to wonder if we could make a fortune by exporting cucumbers to the capital, but then I shook my head. If Triste’s cucumbers were to enter the market, it would harm the farmers who were growing them in greenhouses. We had also received complaints from wholesalers when we had sold truffles and snails in the past. No matter how delicious Triste’s food was, we couldn’t destabilize the market. Focusing on short-term profit would only cause

problems. The cucumbers would have to continue to be consumed locally.

“When nobles visit, you should serve them cucumber sandwiches,” I suggested. “They’ll be overjoyed.”

“You’re right. I never thought of cucumbers as something to serve guests.”

After we’d eaten the delicious sandwiches, it was time for dessert. “Are these chocolates from the capital?” I asked.

“Yes, I ordered them, but I’m not sure if they’ll be to your taste.”

I was surprised that he had gone to the trouble of ordering them just for me. I’d never seen the brand before, so I didn’t know what to expect. The chocolates were wrapped in silver paper. I excitedly opened one and ate it.

“Oh, it’s delicious!” It wasn’t too sweet, and it had an orange flavor. It was a refined chocolate with a smooth texture.

“That’s good to hear. Apparently it’s imported. I asked the siren duke to send me some.”

“The siren duke?”

“Yes, during our usual correspondence.”

I realized how noticeably depressed I felt upon hearing about Gabriel and the siren duke, even though I had been trying not to harbor these dark feelings. I was supposed to be getting to know him better so that he could be as open with me as he was with the siren duke. What did I have to do to get him to rely on me instead of her? I knew plenty of great confectionery stores in the capital.

“*Fra, what’s wrong?*”

I snapped back to attention at Wibble’s voice. *We’re in a cave overrun with slimes. I shouldn’t be thinking about other things. The next time something like this happens, I should just tell Gabriel that I know where to get delicious sweets too.*

I stopped my wishy-washy thinking and changed the subject. “Gabriel, I feel energized after eating all of that good food. Let’s keep going!”

“Yes, let’s. People will worry if we take too long to return.”

After Gabriel packed the picnic items into his slime bag and erased the magic circle with his foot, we set off again. As we progressed through the cave, the glowing mushrooms became bigger and brighter. It proved that the surrounding kaolin was richer in mana.

“The air is thick with mana,” Gabriel remarked. “Fran, do you feel unwell? Are you having difficulty breathing?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“That’s good. If you feel anything unusual, please tell me right away.”

Gabriel’s face seemed slightly pale in the light of the magicite lamp. Perhaps he was sensitive to mana because he was a magic user.

Wibble, who had been wrapped around my arm, climbed up to my shoulder and whispered, *“We’re almost at the deepest part!”*

“You can tell, Wibble?” I asked.

“Wibble can sense a strong slime!”

At last, it was time to battle the rock slime.

“Hey, Gabriel, do you have a plan for defeating the rock slime? Physical attacks probably won’t work, will they?”

“I’m assuming that it most likely has slatelike characteristics, as is common with rock slimes in Triste. You often see them in rocky areas, but they’re a bit difficult to deal with. Slimes are normally weak to physical strikes, but rock slimes can’t be defeated that way. There’s no need to worry, though. Rock slimes have weaknesses too. Slate is lightweight and easy to process, but on the other hand, if it repeatedly absorbs rainwater and dries out, it will crack easily. The rock slimes also have this property, so they can easily be destroyed by alternating water and wind attacks.”

It was a strategy that Gabriel had been able to come up with because he understood the properties of slate.

“Most of the houses in Triste have slate roofs, don’t they?” I asked. “Considering how often it rains, do they have to replace the roof every time it cracks?”

“No. While Triste does have a lot of rain, there isn’t much wind and the sun rarely comes out. As a result, cracks don’t happen too often. Plus, if you apply the slime paint I recently invented, you’ll never have to worry about it at all.”

“Slime paint?!”

“Yes, it’s paint that has been made windproof and waterproof by dissolving slimes into it.”

It was such a groundbreaking invention. “You have something for every occasion, don’t you?”

“Unfortunately, most of the villagers were unwilling to paint their roofs with slime, so I can only use it to preserve my residence and vacant houses.”

“If you have something as useful as that, why don’t you present it at the monster duke meeting?”

“Would anyone even be interested?”

“I’m not sure, but Prince Axel was impressed by your research, so I think it’s worth a try.”

“Yes, you’re right. Thank you, Fran.” Gabriel smiled gently, making my heart race.

I realized that the unique slimes were watching us. This wasn’t the time for idle conversation. “Let’s keep going,” I urged.

“All right.”

Despite not being able to use magic, even I was starting to feel shivers down my spine with each step forward. The rock slime occupying the deepest part of the cave must’ve possessed a tremendous amount of mana.

At last, we reached our destination. The space looked fantastical, full of glowing mushrooms and surrounded by pure-white rock walls. There was a bumpy rock lying on the ground that seemed to be sentient—upon noticing our presence, it turned around, revealing very simple eyes and a mouth. It clearly was not an ordinary rock.

“Is that the rock slime?!” I asked.

“It appears to be.”

Upon closer inspection, the rock slime was covered with a thin, transparent membrane. The stone layer underneath prevented me from seeing its weak point—its core.

The black slime slammed into it, but all it resulted in was a high-pitched clanging noise. The rock slime didn’t seem to take any damage.

“Fran, please stand back,” said Gabriel.

“Understood.”

The rock slime attacked as soon as it saw us. I moved away from Gabriel and crouched down, opening my umbrella to use as a shield.

The unique slimes began their assault. First, the blue slime splashed the rock slime with water, and the green slime blow-dried it. The black slime finished off the series of attacks with a body slam, but the rock slime didn’t break. It seemed like a single round of wetting and drying wasn’t enough to defeat it.

Gabriel deployed a protective spell to guard the unique slimes from attacks. A magic circle appeared before my eyes as well. I was touched that he was still worried about me despite having to focus on the battle.

As planned, the unique slimes continued to alternate between water, wind, and physical attacks, but the rock slime didn’t appear to be taking any damage. Perhaps it had high defense because it had taken in so much mana.

Looking closely, it seems to be repelling the water? I observed the rock slime carefully and realized something. Slate in Triste came in dark colors like black or gray. But the rock slime in front of us was pure white like the kaolin around it.

“Hey, Wibble, what if the slime we’re fighting isn’t made of slate?” I asked.

“Hmm...” Wibble peered at the rock slime. “*Oh, maybe!*” it murmured.

Gabriel had been so preoccupied with casting spells that he hadn’t noticed. I quickly called out to him, “Gabriel, I don’t think that’s a normal rock slime! It’s probably a kaolin slime!”

“What?! I’ve never heard of a slime containing kaolin! This must be a unique slime, then!”

If the slime was made of kaolin, then no amount of water, wind, or physical attacks would be able to harm it. Gabriel would need to change his strategy.

“How am I supposed to defeat a kaolin slime?” he muttered.

I suddenly remembered what the craftsman had told us about the porcelain creation process. “Gabriel, Adam said that kaolin cracks if you heat it up too quickly.”

“Ah, I see. Understood.”

Gabriel ordered the red slime to attack, and it spat out a fireball that cleanly hit its mark. After that, the blue slime splashed water onto it. However, the kaolin slime merely recoiled for a second—it didn’t seem to take any damage.

“Is the fire too weak?” I wondered.

“*Probably.*”

Gabriel’s slime only had the fire attribute, so it couldn’t deal a fatal blow to the kaolin slime without the stronger advanced fire element called inferno.

“How can we increase the temperature of the fire?” I mused.

“*Gabriel’s thinking about it right now.*”

“I’m sure he is.”

The unique slimes were jumping around quickly to confuse the kaolin slime, probably buying time for Gabriel to devise a new strategy. All I could do was pray that he would think of one.

Gabriel’s eyes widened as if he’d come up with an idea. “Fran, could you stay inside Wibble for a while?” He meant it literally—in the past, I had asked Wibble to swallow me in order to escape the brothel I’d been sold to.

“Wibble, is that okay with you?” I asked.

“*Yup!*”

“Let’s do it, then.”

Wibble swallowed me up with ease. Inside the slime, it felt like I was floating underwater, but it wasn’t difficult to breathe at all. I gulped and watched Gabriel, wondering what he was planning to do.

First, he ordered the blue slime to create a ball of water, which the yellow slime struck with lightning.

“Is he trying to electrocute the rock slime?” I asked.

“Hmm, dunno.”

I have a feeling that kaolin isn’t conductive...

The continuous flow of electricity made the water evaporate, leaving nothing behind. The next moment, the black slime swelled up and swallowed the kaolin slime.

“Wh-What are they doing?!” I exclaimed.

“The black slime is sturdy—strong against impacts!”

“Right.”

The green slime created a small tornado and pushed the black slime far away. The red slime was the last to jump out, breathing fire on the black slime. Right after the black slime swallowed the flames, an explosion occurred inside of it.

“Eek!” I screamed.

“Ahhh!”

Despite the loud blast, there was no damage to our surroundings. What had happened in that brief second? I couldn’t understand at all.

The black slime spat out the kaolin slime, which was now completely charred. The black slime sat there nonchalantly. I was relieved that it hadn’t been injured by the explosion inside its body.

Gabriel crouched down in front of the kaolin slime and began to recite some kind of spell.

“Wibble, what is Gabriel doing?” I asked.

“Probably making a contract so it doesn’t cause any more trouble.”

The kaolin slime recovered after accepting the contract, and the blue slime showered it with water, cleaning up its blackened body. Now that it was safe, I stepped out of Wibble.

“Fran, are you all right?” Gabriel asked.

“As you can see, I’m totally fine.”

“Thank goodness.” He hugged me and whispered in my ear, “It’s thanks to you that I was able to win the battle.”

“What? But all I did was realize that the rock slime might be a kaolin slime.”

“I was too busy casting spells to notice. You contributed enormously to this victory!”

I was really glad that I had been able to help Gabriel. It meant that bringing me along had been worth it.

“How did you defeat it, though?” I asked.

“I used water and electricity to create a flammable vapor, which caused a strong explosion.”

“I don’t really understand the theory behind it, but in other words, you used the unique slimes to produce a temperature high enough to damage the kaolin slime, right?”

“Correct. I couldn’t have come up with the plan if it weren’t for what the craftsman told us about kaolin’s properties.”

It was a good thing that we had been able to solve the problem.

“Hey, Gabriel, let’s bring a bit of kaolin back with us so that Adam can check its condition,” I suggested.

“That’s a good idea.”

The black slime struck the wall, allowing us to obtain a lump of kaolin.

“I’m not thrilled about having to walk for two more hours to get back, though,” I said.

“There’s no need to worry.”

Gabriel held out his hand, so I took it. A magic circle appeared at our feet, enveloping us in bright light. The scenery around us spun, and I landed on the ground again in Gabriel’s arms.

“T-Teleportation magic?!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, I can teleport anywhere I’ve been before.”

“R-Really?!” He *did* have that ability, now that I thought about it. “But we always went to the village or the forest on horseback, didn’t we?”

“Th-That was only because I wanted to enjoy traveling with you... I-It was a selfish choice on my part.”

“No, I don’t think it was selfish at all. I enjoyed it too, actually.”

Since moving to Triste, I’d learned how to ride a horse under the guidance of Gabriel and my mother-in-law. My chats with Gabriel during leisurely horse rides had become moments of relaxation for me.

“Whenever you’re tired, just let me know and I’ll teleport us instead,” Gabriel said.

“I will; thank you.”

As we were talking, hand in hand, a voice suddenly called out to us.

“Y-You guys are back?!” It was Adam, surprised by how quickly we’d returned.

“We went to the deepest part of the cave on foot, but I used teleportation magic for the return trip,” Gabriel explained.

“I see. How’d it go?”

Instead of replying, Gabriel held out the kaolin we’d brought back with us. Adam took it, his eyes wide.

“Th-This is...!”

“How is the quality?” Gabriel asked.

“It’s incredible! It’s even better than the kaolin ten years ago!”

I didn’t know if it was because the kaolin slime had affected it with its presence, but at any rate, the quality of the stone had improved.

“This’ll make great bonbonnières! How many do you need?”

“I’m sorry to answer your question with a question, but how many would you be able to make in the next half month or so?” Gabriel asked.

“If my old colleagues accept the work, as long as we have the kaolin, we can make a hundred. If you need them to be painted, then fifty.”

It was a special occasion, so I wanted painted bonbonnières. I showed Adam the sweet violet design drawn by Coco, and he said that it would work.

“The problem’s the kaolin,” he continued. “My legs and back aren’t as good as they were ten years ago, so it’ll be hard to make several trips to the cave within a day.”

“My tamed slime can carry the kaolin for you,” said Gabriel.

“It can do that?”

“Yes, it’s the kaolin slime that was in the deepest part of the cave. I made a contract with it.”

“A kaolin slime?!”

“Yes, it’s perfectly safe, so don’t worry.”

The slime had been occupying the mining site for the past decade, but now it was tamed. After explaining that there was no danger, Gabriel summoned it. The kaolin slime appeared on top of the magic circle, its expression softer than it had been in the cave. It even seemed friendly.

Adam stared at it. “It really is a kaolin slime,” he said, impressed.

“I’m sure it’ll be of use when you’re making bonbonnières,” Gabriel replied. Apparently he had made the contract with the intent of having the kaolin slime help with the mining work.

“How does a slime made of kaolin come about?”

“It likely became this way by eating the kaolin in the cave.”

“Ah, I see. Slimes are mysterious creatures, huh?”

“I think so too.”

Gabriel ordered the slime to bring back kaolin from the deepest part of the cave. “*Okaaay*,” it replied, rolling towards the cave.

“It’ll probably be back by tomorrow,” Gabriel said.

“What should I do when it returns?”

“You don’t have to do anything, but if possible, I would appreciate it if you gave it some water.”

“Got it. Send me the contract later.”

“Shouldn’t you hear what the compensation will be before deciding whether to accept the job?”

“Nah, it’s fine. I know you guys wouldn’t cheap out on me. I’ll gladly take the job.” Adam bowed.

“Thank you very much for accepting our request.”

“No, I should be thanking you. I thought I’d never be able to make bonbonnières again. You’ll be impressed, I promise.”

We waved goodbye to Adam. The sun was starting to set, so we used teleportation magic to go home. It had been a very fulfilling day.

Chapter 3: The Noble Lady Francette Makes Bonbonnières

The next day, I headed to the porcelain workshop with Nico, Rico, and Coco.

On the way there, Nico looked out the carriage window and exclaimed, “There’s a lot of stuff piled in front of it!”

Wondering what she was talking about, I peered outside and saw a mountain of pure-white stones. “That’s kaolin,” I explained.

I knew Gabriel had ordered the kaolin slime to carry it over, but I hadn’t expected it to bring back such a large haul at once. The kaolin slime was rolling around in front of the pile of stones. There was a washbasin nearby, so it looked like it was well watered.

Right when the carriage stopped in front of the workshop, Adam came over and said, “Oh, it’s just you today?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Um, that’s quite a lot of kaolin.”

“Yeah, I didn’t expect it to bring me so much.”

The kaolin slime had probably carried the stones in its mouth.

“Anyway, I’ve been crushing kaolin all day. It’s been a while since I’ve run the windmills at full blast.”

“Oh, so those windmills are for crushing kaolin.”

“That’s right. They also remove impurities from the stones, and they’re powered by magicite in addition to wind. They had to be specially constructed because Triste doesn’t get strong winds very often. I’ve been maintaining them regularly for the past ten years, so they’re safe to use. Also, I asked my old buddies and everyone’s willing to take the job.”

Adam explained that his past colleagues were now working in a variety of other professions, including shoemaking and glassmaking. Since this was a

special request, they'd agreed to help out. Apparently, even after the porcelain workshop had halted its operations, they had continued to drink together every week. Yesterday had been one of their meeting days, so Adam had been able to ask them right away.

"We'll be able to make fifty pieces, like I said yesterday," he said.

"I really appreciate it."

I wanted to discuss the design, so I had Coco join the meeting. Nico and Rico said they would clean up the workshop, so I left them to it. Things became livelier later, when the other craftsmen arrived. Since they were all used to working with their hands, I was confident that they'd make good products.

"We'll finish a prototype before moving on to full-scale production," said Adam. "Do you mind waiting a few more days?"

"No, of course not. I'm looking forward to seeing it."

I couldn't wait to see what kind of bonbonnière they would come up with. For now, all I could do was leave them to it.

The next order of business was making the sweet violet crystal candy to bring to the monster duke meeting. I discussed it with the household pastry chef and began experimenting. The result was exactly what I was hoping for: a violet candy that looked just like a jewel. It was made with powdered sweet violets and sweet violet extract, so there was a floral fragrance when you ate it. What a wonderful invention. I named these new candies "violet jewels." *A superb name, if I do say so myself.*

Since the souvenir-form violet jewels would come in a smaller quantity than the ones for sale, I wanted to make them special, even if the last thing we needed was more work to do.

Constance provided a great suggestion: "Almost all sweet violets are purple, but there are also blue, light-red, white, and yellow ones. How about mixing a few of those in with the violet jewels?"

"That's a brilliant idea!"

I adopted her idea immediately. We spent the next little while strolling around, looking for nonpurple violets in the places Gabriel and my mother-in-law had suggested. But as Constance had said, there were hardly any to be found.

Perhaps because I'd spent the whole day searching until I was exhausted, my mother-in-law started helping me the next day. She had just remembered how she used to make pressed flowers out of different-colored sweet violets as a child, so she took me to various places.

"For some reason, yellow violets bloom in sunny places," she said.

"Oh, they really do."

With her help, I was able to pick enough flowers in one day.

"Thank you for helping me, mother," I said.

"It was nothing. I enjoyed reminiscing about the old days. I often played here with Julietta, but I haven't been back in a long time. It feels sort of nostalgic."

Julietta was her younger sister who had moved to the royal capital to marry a noble named Count Molière, never once returning to her homeland. I remembered how she had helped me with my move to Triste.

"I'd almost forgotten that she was laughing when she got married," my mother-in-law said. "She even said she hated Triste and was thrilled to leave."

"That's..." A *misunderstanding*, I thought. Mrs. Molière had looked very wistful when she was talking about her hometown. If she hated it, she probably wouldn't have brought it up in the first place. "Before, when I spoke with Mrs. Molière, she said she loved Triste's clafoutis."

"Did she?"

"Yes. Even after so many years, she has a special fondness for clafoutis."

"I see."

Perhaps it was presumptuous to hope for my mother-in-law to reconcile with Mrs. Molière when they hadn't been in contact for many years. I was well aware that this wasn't an issue in which an outsider ought to intervene.

“Miss Francette, shall we return now?”

“Yes, let’s.”

I went home with my mother-in-law.

When we returned, I went straight to Gabriel’s room to report on the sweet violets. I knocked on the door, and he replied right away. The moment I reached for the doorknob, the door opened from the inside and Gabriel came out.

“Welcome back, Fran,” he said.

“Thank you.” It felt as if this were the first time Gabriel had welcomed my return, and it was somewhat embarrassing.

“Is something the matter?”

“I wanted to give you a small progress update. Are you busy?”

“Not in the slightest. Nothing is more important than you, Fran.”

I was fairly sure that there were a lot of things more important, but I quietly sat down on the settee as instructed. The table was messily covered in newspapers and letters, and among them was a letter with the siren duke’s name on it. The moment I laid eyes on it, my heart pounded.

Gabriel picked up the letter and put it in his pocket. It was as if he was hiding something that was not to be seen. What was written in the letter?

“Fran, what did you want to update me—”

Before he could finish his question, there was a knock on the door.

“A letter came by wyvern mail,” Constance said, holding out a silver tray with an envelope on it. “It’s from the siren duke.”

“What could she possibly want?” Gabriel mused, taking the letter and unsealing it. “What!?”

“Did something happen with the siren duke?” I asked.

“She’s coming to Triste tomorrow, apparently.”

I couldn’t bring myself to ask why, because I couldn’t think of any motive for a

visit on such short notice other than her wanting to see Gabriel.

Gabriel heaved a sigh, his frown fading from his face. I got the sense that he hadn't wished for me to know about his correspondence with the siren duke. My heart was filled with unease, but I knew there was nothing strange about him being close with a woman or two. His relationship with the siren duke was only worrying me because I was still being reserved—I hadn't taken that crucial first step forward. How could I understand him better? Wibble had told me that I needed to learn more about him.

Even though my thoughts were still jumbled, my impatience got the better of me, and I said, "Gabriel, there's something I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

"What do you think about me?"

"Huh?!"

"I agreed to marry you, so you don't dislike me, do you?"

His eyes opened as wide as they could go. From his expression, I knew I'd made a mistake. Our engagement had been a contract unrelated to love, yet I had foolishly tried to ascertain his feelings.

"Um, sorry," I said. "It's nothing!"

"Wait, but—"

"Let's talk another time."

"What about the progress update?"

"It's not urgent, so it can wait until tomorrow."

"Very well."

I was so embarrassed; I wanted to crawl in a hole and die. I pressed my fingertips to my burning cheeks to cool them down and took my leave.

"Good night, Fran."

"Yes, good night."

Once I was alone, I let out a long sigh. My question had been a failure, but

proactively asking him things was the only way I could learn more about him. *You're going in the right direction*, I encouraged myself.

In my room, while petting Alexandrine in my lap, I pondered how I could get closer to Gabriel. As I was thinking, Constance brought me tea.

"Thank you, Constance," I said.

"It's nothing."

As she turned to leave, I held her arm to stop her. "Constance, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Does Gabriel receive letters from the siren duke often?"

Constance looked slightly uncomfortable. Gabriel *was* her employer, after all, and I wasn't even his wife yet—I wondered if she couldn't answer my question. But she replied, "He seems to have received a number of them recently."

"I see..." So they *had* been engaging in close correspondence. "Um, Constance, do you know what kind of, um, relationship Gabriel has with the siren duke?"

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I don't know the details."

"Right, of course." Even if she did know, she wouldn't divulge her employer's information. I knew that, but I had asked anyway. It was wrong of me.

"But..."

"But?"

"I can say with certainty that he does not fancy the siren duke. Lord Gabriel loves you more than anyone else in the world, Lady Francette."

She said it with such confidence that I couldn't help but laugh. "Ha ha, that's funny. Thank you, Constance."

My conflicted feelings drifted away. Whenever something was troubling me, talking to someone helped me take my mind off of it. I thanked Constance again and let her go back to her duties.

The next morning, I went to the Lakeside Duck Bakery's workshop to make violet jewels. Since I was focusing on work, time flew by.

It was evening when I returned to the castle, and I couldn't delay my progress report any longer. I went to Gabriel's room and found his door slightly ajar. I could hear voices—there seemed to be someone else inside.

"Goodness, you're a stubborn one." It was the siren duke's voice, and it somehow sounded more coquettish than usual.

Was I overhearing a conversation I wasn't supposed to? I should've turned around and left right that moment, but my feet were frozen in place. I looked at the door, and through the small gap, I could see Gabriel and the siren duke. A young man and woman in a private room by themselves—normally, this situation would be unacceptable.

Gabriel was looking away as the siren duke entreated him.

"Is there nothing I can do to make you accept my feelings?" she asked.

"The situation is different from before," he replied.

The moment I heard that exchange, I bolted away. Perhaps I should have asked them what they were talking about, but my body was moving on its own. I ran all the way back to my room, where I broke down on the spot.

Eavesdropping was wrong, but in the end, I'd still heard a conversation that I shouldn't have. Judging from what they had said, the two of them must have been extremely close before. Gabriel seemed to have already ended the relationship, but it had sounded like the siren duke still had feelings for him. If there were unrequited feelings on the siren duke's part, I couldn't possibly interrogate Gabriel about it.

My heart ached. Was marrying the man you loved really supposed to be this painful? If this had been a political marriage, I probably wouldn't have cared if he had a mistress...

There was a soft knock on the door, and someone called to me from the hallway.

"Miss Francette, are you okay? One of the attendants saw you run back to your room."

It was my mother-in-law's voice. She must have come to check on me out of concern. I gently opened the door and let her in.

"I'm sorry for causing a fuss," I said.

"It's fine," she replied. "Did something happen?"

"No, nothing at all."

"Liar. You look like you're about to cry."

I hadn't thought my facial expression would give me away. I regretted inviting her in. I should have just said that I was fine.

"Did you have a fight with Gabriel?" she asked.

"No, I didn't."

"Was there some sort of dispute regarding him and the siren duke, then?"

"No."

"Oh, what a shame."

Apparently my mother-in-law had been looking forward to hearing about a catfight. I took back all of my remorse for making her worry.

"I'm not sure, then, but I assume the siren duke is meddling with Gabriel somehow, isn't she?" she asked.

"No, I don't know the details either."

"But you don't like it, right?"

I don't. Her words made me realize that, this whole time, I'd been jealous of Gabriel's relationship with the siren duke.

"Miss Francette, are you feeling unwell?"

"No, um, it's embarrassing to admit, but I've been concerned about his relationship with the siren duke for some time now. I was depressed and didn't know how to handle my murky feelings, but just now, I realized I was jealous...and it was a bit of a surprise."

"I see. I'm sorry about Gabriel."

"No, no. It's my fault for not being tolerant." I felt a little better now that I knew what that inexplicable feeling was. My mother-in-law hearing me out helped too, of course. I worked up the courage to ask her, "Um, were Gabriel and the siren duke in love in the past?"

"That boy? And the siren duke?" My mother-in-law stared blankly at me for a second before breaking out into a grin. "That couldn't possibly be true! Until very recently, he was like scalding-hot oil, rejecting everyone he met. I was so afraid that no one would ever be able to approach him, but then he met you."

"R-Really?"

"Yes. As a child, he was quiet and obedient, but he changed during the two years he spent at the magic academy in the capital. I imagine they mocked him for being the slime duke's heir apparent. After returning to Triste, he spoke even less, keeping his conversations to the bare minimum."

Later, Gabriel's father had disappeared, leaving the boy to inherit the title. Gabriel had become so busy that he'd no longer had time to talk with his mother.

"I think it was difficult for him, inheriting the title at such a young age," she continued. "I wanted to help him, but he refused my assistance."

"He might've felt that he shouldn't cause trouble for you."

"Yes, perhaps. I think there was also stubbornness at play, though. He wanted to insist that he could handle things on his own. The rift between us grew over the years, and there was even a time when we went an entire month without speaking to each other. It was as if we lived separately despite being under the same roof. But that, too, changed when he got engaged to you, Miss Francette. He started talking to me again, warning me not to say anything mean to you, push Triste's customs onto you, or interfere with your life. He was acting like a bossy sister-in-law."

I had no idea that Gabriel had been doing that behind the scenes. Ever since I'd moved here, everyone had been kind to me, and I had never wanted for anything. Gabriel had put in the effort so that I, who had grown up in the

capital, would be able to live comfortably in Triste.

“Please don’t worry yourself over him,” my mother-in-law said. “I’m sure he only loves you. Have faith in him.”

“Yes, I will.” I felt bad for even entertaining the possibility of Gabriel being in love with the siren duke.

“The siren duke is a bit of a problem, though. She never once visited Triste before all of this.”

“Why is she suddenly interested in Gabriel, then?”

“Why indeed. Perhaps he seems attractive now that he belongs to someone else?”

I had once heard such a story at a social gathering. There’d been a young noble lady who wanted everything that belonged to her childhood friend. When told that she should simply buy the same things, she had turned a deaf ear. She had eventually stolen her friend’s fiancé, and in the end, they’d had a falling-out and their friendship was ruined.

“There are surprisingly many people who covet what others have,” my mother-in-law continued.

“The thought makes me shiver.”

The siren duke didn’t seem like that kind of person...but perhaps she had unavoidable circumstances. After all, Gabriel had tried to hide her letter from me as well.

“I can force the siren duke to leave, if you’d like,” my mother-in-law suggested. “What do you think?”

“No, there’s no need to go that far.” All I could do was trust in Gabriel. I resolved not to doubt his words. Beyond that, it was just a matter of making him love me so much that he wouldn’t care about the siren duke at all.

In the end, what we lacked was communication. I knew he was busy every day, but I wanted him to spare a bit of time for me. I also had another plan, which would require the cooperation of others.

“Mother, may I ask you a favor?”

“Oh? What is it?”

“I promised Gabriel I’d go to the capital with him for the upcoming monster duke meeting, but I feel kind of awkward. Would you mind coming with us as well?”

“You want me to go to the capital?”

“Yes.”

My mother-in-law’s love for her homeland was so strong that she used to declare that she would never step foot outside of Triste for as long as she lived. However, that was probably because of her younger sister, Mrs. Molière, who lived in the capital.

“Please, I beg you,” I pleaded, bowing deeply.

“Well, to be honest, I don’t want to go to the capital. But this is a request from my lovely Miss Francette, so...very well. I shall accompany you.”

“Thank you, mother!” I hugged her on impulse.

“Wait! You don’t have to be so excited.”

“I’m so happy!” *I hope there’ll be an opportunity for her to reconcile with Mrs. Molière somewhere along the way.*

Later, Constance informed me that the siren duke had left without staying the night. As I listened to her report, I penned a message card for Gabriel. It was an invitation to a tea party—even if he was busy, he’d surely be able to make time for a single cup of tea. I included a signature I’d normally never write: “With love, Francette.” It was incredibly embarrassing, but I figured that this was what it would take to close the distance between us.

Making up my mind, I entrusted the card to Constance. “Can you give this to Gabriel?”

“Understood.”

I nervously watched her go. *Would he just think the tea party is a bother?* I wondered. But not ten minutes later, I received a reply.

The card was beautiful and shined like a pearl. Gabriel had written just one line on it: “I’ll always be happy to join you.”

I was sincerely glad that I’d worked up the courage to invite him.



Our tea party was scheduled for another evening. For the sake of reducing the emotional *and* physical distance between us, I had a two-person settee and table prepared for us. Gabriel seemed a bit confused because we usually sat facing each other, but to my relief, he sat down without questioning it.

For the tea, I used medicinal herbs suitable for the night—a blend of relaxing lavender and sleep-improving chamomile. Afraid it might taste too strongly of plants, I added a dribble of honey as well.

“Thank you for coming to this tea party, Gabriel,” I said.

“It’s fine—I was very happy to be invited.”

I almost said, “I hope it’s not too much of an inconvenience for you,” but thankfully, I swallowed my words. I had made up my mind to take the first step forward today. If I had my usual reserved attitude, he’d never open up to me. I had to be honest and tell him everything I felt.

“I’m holding this tea party today because I want to know you better—as in, I want to know more specific things about you.” I mustered my courage and took his hand. “I want to be closer to you.” I’d rehearsed these lines countless times in my head, but now that I was saying them out loud, it was embarrassing. I could feel heat rising to my cheeks. “Um, Gabriel, I—”

“Fran, I do too.”

“Huh?!”

Gabriel wrapped his hands around mine with a faint smile. “I want to understand you more and be able to support you at all times.” He pressed his forehead to mine, and the unprecedented sense of intimacy made my heart race. “Also, regarding the question you asked me before, about what I think of you...”

“Y-You don’t have to answer that.”

"No, please let me say it." He embraced me and whispered in my ear, "You're the most important person to me in the world."

The unexpected sweet endearment rendered me speechless. *Apparently when you put your feelings into words, you get a lot of feelings back.* My whole body started to feel warm and fuzzy, even though I hadn't had a single sip of tea yet.

And so went my evening with Gabriel.





The bonbonnière prototype had been completed, so I went to the workshop with Constance. She usually wore men's clothing, but today, she'd donned a beautiful slate-blue dress.

"Constance, that dress looks lovely on you," I said. "The mellow color is very pretty."

"Thank you," she replied. "I'm fond of this dress—it reminds me of rooftops."

Now that she mentioned it, the color *was* the same as most of the roofs in Triste. "The 'slate' in 'slate blue' refers to the rock used to make roof tiles, huh?"

"I imagine so."

As we chatted, we arrived at the workshop. The kaolin slime was rolling around in front of it. It had looked like a rugged rock back when Gabriel had first tamed it, but now that some time had passed, it had rounded out. What an adorable shape. Its body must have gotten sanded down as it had gone back and forth between the workshop and the cave to bring back kaolin.

"Your body looks different now," I said to the slime. "Are you okay?"

"It's no problem at all! Actually, I feel great!"

That was good to hear. As usual, there was a mountain of kaolin piled up. The slime must've been faithfully carrying out Gabriel's orders.

"Is there anything you need?" I asked.

"Nope. It's fun here, and they give me water!"

"I see. That's good." The kaolin slime seemed to be living comfortably.

I went to the working area, and the craftsmen all came over to greet me.

"We've been waiting for you!" they exclaimed. "Come see our bonbonnière!" They led me inside, their eyes sparkling like those of eager young children.

The finished bonbonnière was sitting demurely on a table. It depicted Coco's sweet violet illustration vibrantly, and its graceful, egg-like form was stunning.

“Pick it up and take a closer look,” one of the craftsmen said.

I gently lifted it and found that it was smooth to the touch and unbelievably light. The lid opened with a beautiful *clink*, and the inside was smooth and glossy as well. It was a brilliant piece of work.

“What do you think?”

“It’s wonderfully made,” I said. “I’ve never seen such a beautiful candy dish before.”

The craftsmen seemed to blush at my feedback. Because of their hard work, the bonbonnière had turned out better than I ever could have hoped for. I couldn’t thank them enough.

“Are we good to begin production, then?”

“Yes, please do.”

Constance and I both bowed deeply.

Today, we had also been invited to observe the porcelain-making process. Adam personally showed us around. First, the kaolin was washed. There was a well-like device that drew water from underground, with two buckets attached to the rope. Stones were placed into the bucket on one side to lower them into the water, while the one on the other side brought them back up. The bottom of the well was enchanted with purification magic so that the water wouldn’t get dirty.

Constance turned her ever-serious gaze to the well. “I’d like to have that purification magic for my bathtub.”

“Wouldn’t you feel uncomfortable bathing in the same water for days?” I asked.

“It would be purified and thus clean.”

“I know, but it’d still feel weird.”

Constance didn’t seem bothered by the idea. She always noticed every little thing that came up in the castle, but she probably wasn’t as concerned about her own lifestyle.

Next, we were brought inside one of the windmills where kaolin was crushed. The loud grinding sounds echoed through the room.

Adam gave us a simple explanation of the steps taken here. “After the kaolin is crushed, it’s soaked with water in a process called elutriation. This removes materials that aren’t needed for making porcelain, like iron.”

Apparently the unnecessary materials would sink in the water, allowing them to be separated. It was an important step in making smooth porcelain. After being exposed to water, the remaining material became a velvety liquid. This was brought to the next windmill, where pressure was applied to remove the moisture.

“The solidified material is called porcelain clay,” Adam explained. “We bring this to the next windmill, where the air inside is removed. Only then is the clay finished.”

“The work is more intensive than I expected,” I remarked.

“Yes, I thought it was simply a matter of crushing the kaolin and adding water to make clay,” said Constance.

Adam proudly showed us the porcelain clay.

“Do you start shaping the bonbonnière from this?” I asked.

“No, it’s not ready yet,” he said. He brought the finished clay to the workshop and handed it to one of the craftsmen there. “If we use it as is, the hardness will be uneven, and we won’t be able to get it into a good bonbonnière shape. So we knead it first.”

The craftsman pushed and stretched the porcelain clay by hand before rolling it back up and repeating the motion several times. This step was called “rough wedging.”

“After the rough wedging is done, the clay is kneaded in a spiral, with the end result looking like a flower,” Adam explained. “This step is called ‘spiral wedging,’ and it works out the small air bubbles in the clay.”

The craftsman flicked his wrists, rotating the clay and folding it in on itself. The folds resembled thin flower petals.

“Now we can finally start shaping the bonbonnière.”

The kneaded clay was placed on a potter’s wheel and shaped with a combination of fingertips and tools. The egg-like base shape was formed in no time in all. It was like magic. Once the shape was cleaned up, a wirelike string was used to cut it into two parts: the lid and the bowl.

“We let this dry for a day before starting the carving work.”

Adam brought an already-dried piece over to show us how it was done. He skillfully scraped the clay with a modeling tool and used a pottery knife to finalize the shape.

“This gets left to dry indoors for one day, then outdoors for about four days before we do the first firing, which is called bisque firing. If we heat it up too quickly, it’ll crack, so the first hour or so is done at low heat. After that, we switch to a high temperature.”

After the bonbonnière was fired, it was time to paint it. Surprisingly, this was done without sketching the design first. The craftsmen painted the sweet violets beautifully.

“After it’s been bisque fired and painted, we dip it in glaze. That’s what gives it its pearly shine. The glaze is made by mixing powdered minerals, and it forms a beautiful film around the porcelain. Once that’s done, we do the second firing, which is called glaze firing. This takes seven to eight hours, with a high-temperature phase at the end. After it cools down, we check to make sure that the porcelain’s color has come out beautifully.”

It was a difficult process with many steps. “It’s more work than I thought it would be,” I remarked.

“Right? That’s why we think of the finished pieces as our children.”

No wonder porcelain was still so expensive. Knowing how it was made would probably change the way I looked at it in the future.

“Will you really be able to make the number of bonbonnières I requested in half a month?” I asked.

“No problem at all. We could even make twice as many.”

“A hundred of them?!”

“Yeah. The kaolin slime’s helping us out a lot.”

Apparently, the slime had too much free time, so it would carry clay around and clean up the workshop in addition to its regular duties. It also enjoyed keeping the craftsmen company during their breaks, chatting and singing with them.

“And it eats the leftover clay for us, which is a huge help. Unlike other ceramics, leftover porcelain clay can’t be reused once it’s processed, so we have to dispose of it. To think that ten years ago, I was terrified of this thing when it attacked me. The world works in strange ways, eh?”

I explained to him that monsters needed mana in order to live, so when they ran low, they attacked people out of starvation. Tamed monsters had a stable supply of mana, so they wouldn’t do that.

“So the slime was just desperate to stay alive,” he said with a distant look in his eyes. I was relieved that he was no longer afraid of it.

After the tour, I sat down with the craftsmen to partake in the cheese tarts I’d brought them as refreshments. The kaolin slime was given jam dissolved in water. It looked adorable as it gulped it down with joy. I was glad that the craftsmen were doting on it. Still, I hadn’t expected everything to go so smoothly. I probably had the skilled craftsmen to thank for that.

“Thank you all so much,” I said. “I know it’s going to be a lot of work, but I’m counting on you for the bonbonnières.” Constance bowed with me. “If only Gabriel could’ve been here too...”

Gabriel was currently working at an accelerated pace to free up time for the upcoming monster duke meeting. This was the busiest time of year for him.

“The lord sends us meals and fruit every day,” said Adam. “He’s doing more than enough for us.”

I’d already heard about the gifts, but it was good to know that the craftsmen liked them. I’d have to tell Gabriel when I got home.

As I was about to leave, the craftsmen presented me with a wooden box.

Inside was the prototype bonbonnière.

“We’d like you to have this,” they said.

“Is that really all right?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Thank you. I’ll take good care of it.”

I went home with Constance and the finished bonbonnière.

The day had flown by. It was already well into the evening when we returned.

At home, Rico came to greet me. She whispered in my ear, “Lord Gabriel has been worrying about when you would come home, Lady Francette.”

I had stopped by the Lakeside Duck Bakery as well, so it was quite late now.

“Is he in his office?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I’ll go straight there, then.”

Since Gabriel had been so busy as of late, we hadn’t been able to talk at length for a while. Perhaps that was why I felt strangely nervous as I headed to his office. I decided that I would only report what was necessary and then leave to avoid getting in the way of his work. I did feel bad for making him worry, though. But at the same time, I was thrilled that part of him was still thinking about me even when he had no time to spare.

I knocked on the door. “Gabriel, do you have a minute?”

“Fran?!” The door swung open, and he emerged from within. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you. I got back a bit late because I stopped by the Lakeside Duck Bakery.”

“I see.”

He smiled faintly and invited me into his office. First, I showed him the newly completed bonbonnière.

“This is much more magnificent than what I was expecting,” he remarked.

“Isn’t it? I was surprised with the quality they were able to achieve. I can’t wait to fill these with violet jewels and bring them to the capital as souvenirs.”

“I’m looking forward to it too.”

I then reported on how the kaolin slime was doing, how the craftsmen had appreciated Gabriel’s gifts, and how they would be able to produce more bonbonnières than anticipated.

“It’s great that everything is going well,” he said.

The current plan was to have Gabriel bring thirty bonbonnières to distribute at the meeting. The remainder would be consigned to the usual pastry store and sold there.

“Regarding the consignment,” Gabriel said, “it’s possible that the influx of customers from the newspaper article will cause problems for the store and the people in the area.”

“I’m already discussing it with them, so it’s fine. The craftsmen are going to make double the number of bonbonnières, and I plan to stock more of the other sweets as well. We’re also going to distribute Lakeside Duck Bakery’s sweets to the neighbors.”

“You’ve got it all planned out, then.”

“Yes, of course.”

The pastry store Solene worked at was currently the only place that sold Lakeside Duck Bakery’s products. Because of that, they had many customers every day, who also bought pastries other than ours. They were grateful for the extra sales.

“Um, may I ask you a question?” Gabriel asked, unusually nervous.

“What is it?”

“Are you, um, considering opening a Lakeside Duck Bakery store in the capital?”

Here I was, anxiously wondering what kind of question could be so difficult to

pose, and it turned out to be completely ordinary. “I’ve never once considered it. If I did that, people would stop coming to Triste to buy sweets, wouldn’t they?” I was only selling our sweets in the capital to get people talking about them. I wasn’t expecting the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s operations to bring in a fortune. “I’m hoping that Triste will continue benefiting from people coming here to buy sweets that are sold out in the capital.”

Tears welled up in Gabriel’s eyes as he listened to me speak.

“Why the sudden question, though?” I asked.

“Erm, I was just wondering if you wanted to expand the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s influence in the capital.”

“I see. Don’t worry. I’m not trying to leave Triste to do something.”

“Thank you. That makes me very happy.”

Apparently he’d thought that I had been working so hard lately because I wanted to expand my business, so he was relieved now that he knew his fears were unfounded.

“You’re just like your mother, worrying about me leaving Triste,” I said.

“For the first time in my life, I understand how she feels.”

We both laughed. Our relationship had been strained ever since the siren duke’s first visit—and it had been entirely my fault—but thankfully, things had returned to normal after the tea party.



Half a month later, the bonbonnière order was ready. We hurriedly brought them to the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s workshop, where we carefully filled them with violet jewels. The ones to be brought to the monster duke meeting were placed in individual wooden boxes to prevent breakage, while the ones to be delivered to the pastry store were wrapped in cloth and would be transported with great care.

Each day was a whirlwind of activity, and soon, it was time to leave for the capital. Only Rico and Coco would be accompanying me as my attendants. I had asked Nico to stay home and take care of Alexandrine.

“Lady Francette, please leave Lady Alexandrine to me,” she said.

“Yes, I’m counting on you.”

For some reason, Alexandrine was quacking loudly. I couldn’t help but think she was telling me to leave *Nico* to *her*.

I asked Constance to handle the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s affairs while I was gone. “I’m counting on you too, Constance.”

“Understood.”

Our cool and collected steward was very popular with the ladies working at Lakeside Duck Bakery. Everyone’s motivation would surely skyrocket while she was there.

Wibble was with me, having transformed into a bracelet. It wasn’t unusual for tamed monsters to roam the capital, but it had changed its appearance to avoid causing any commotion.

“The capital is dry! Wibble gets all flaky.”

“Let’s be sure to get you water often.”

“Yeah!”

The capital was much drier than the humid region of Triste. I’d have to remember to keep Wibble hydrated.

The next person to come was Gabriel, who was clad in a rose-gray frock coat. It had been tailored for him in anticipation of the monster duke meeting, and it suited him well.

“Gabriel, you look great in that coat,” I said.

“Thank you. I was right to ask you.” He looked away and pushed the bridge of his glasses up, perhaps flustered by the compliment.

He had asked me to choose what he should wear. It had been a first for us, which had made me very happy.

“Your dress is beautiful too, Fran,” he added.

I had chosen this forest-green dress with Triste’s early summer forests in mind. I appreciated the praise, but there was one thing I took issue with.

Normally I would've let it slide, but today, I decided to try pointing it out. "Is it only the dress that's beautiful?" I asked.

"You are too." Gabriel's face quickly turned red as the embarrassing nature of his comment set in. Thanks to my bold question, I had been able to draw out some very pleasing words.

My mother-in-law was the last to arrive. Apparently, she hadn't been to the capital since her social debut at the age of fifteen. Up until yesterday, she had been insisting that she wasn't excited to go—that she was only doing it for my sake—but now, she was dressed to the nines in a slim, glossy blue dress.

"You look wonderful, mother," I said. "That dress is gorgeous."

She chuckled. "It has to be, if we're going to the capital." She smiled cheerfully, seeming more pleased with the compliment than she let on. Seeing her like this made me glad that I'd invited her.

"Gabriel, mother is here, so we should depart soon," I said.

"Yes, you're right."

With teleportation magic, going to the capital would only take a second. It was my mother-in-law's first time teleporting, and her face was pale.

"The thought of going to the capital using magic is terrifying," she complained.

"It'll be okay, mother," I said. "We'll be there in the blink of an eye."

"I can't help but worry." She hugged me, her body trembling slightly. I gently patted her on the back to reassure her that it would be fine.



“Well then, off we go,” Gabriel said, casting the teleportation spell. A magic circle rose up from the ground.

As our bodies gently floated in the air, my mother-in-law screamed, “Ahhh! W-We’re going to fall!”

“There’s nothing to worry about, mother,” I said. “Please try to relax.”

As I was soothing my frightened mother-in-law, we arrived at the capital. Her face was still pale, but she seemed surprised by the scenery.

“Y-You really can go to the capital with magic,” she remarked.

“Did you doubt me, mother?” Gabriel asked.

“Of course. It used to take several days to reach the capital from Triste!”

For now, let’s go somewhere she can calm down. I invited my mother-in-law to a nearby coffee shop with private rooms. Coffee shops that served nobles were as quiet as one’s own home, so she would be able to relax there.

My mother-in-law was pleased with the room that the waiter showed us to. “I can count on you to know the best places in the capital, Miss Francette.”

“I used to come here when I wanted to spend time idly.”

That had only been during my days as a wealthy duke’s daughter, though. After my family’s downfall, I couldn’t possibly have come here—not when the price of a single cup of tea was enough to feed me for a few days.

“The capital is as full of people as ever, I see,” said my mother-in-law. “I feel dizzy just looking at the crowds.”

“I know how you feel.” The population density was extremely high compared to Triste, and if you looked up at the sky, you’d see signs for stores and inns. It was easy to drown in the waves of information. “It’s overwhelming for me too, and I grew up here.”

“That must’ve been why you liked quiet coffee shops like this one.”

“Yes, it was.”

I had been struggling with my noblewoman lessons and my stark inferiority to my sister, and our home tutor would hurt me with the words “Why can’t you do

this?" Even when I had attended tea parties, I hadn't cared to discuss the latest trends in dresses and jewelry. I had been more interested in learning the names of birds perched on tree branches. Looking back, I hadn't even remotely adapted to noble society.

"I felt suffocated living as a noble lady, but I knew I couldn't escape from it, so I had no choice but to try my best," I said. "That environment must've worn me out."

What had soothed me back then was drinking a cup of tea on my own. Without that, I might've reached my limit much earlier.

I noticed that Gabriel and my mother-in-law had sad expressions on their faces as they listened to my story. I hurriedly smoothed things over.

"But now I can do what I love every day, and Gabriel will tell me the names of all of the birds I don't know," I added. "So, um, I'm very happy."

"Miss Francette, we're the ones who are happy that you came. Thank you so much," my mother-in-law said, smiling. She had completely regained her energy.



My mother-in-law decided to rest at the inn. Her eyes widened when we brought her there.

"I've never seen an inn with ten stories," she said. Apparently it hadn't existed yet back when she had come to the capital for her social debut. "It must be tiring to reach the upper levels, though."

"Mother, high-rise buildings like this have elevators powered by magicite," Gabriel explained.

"Does that mean you can go to the tenth floor without climbing the stairs?"

"Yes, it does."

"Is it like teleportation magic?"

"No. Does it make sense if I say it's similar to the mechanism for drawing water from a well with a bucket?"

“Sorry, I’ve never drawn water from a well before.”

My mother-in-law had lived an honest-to-goodness sheltered life. She had grown up surrounded by servants from the moment she was born, so the workings of a well were probably foreign to her.

“The inn staff should be able to explain it to you,” Gabriel said.

“I’ll try asking them, then.”

After seeing my mother-in-law off, Gabriel and I carried out our planned schedule. First, we went to the pastry store to inspect the bonbonnières that had been delivered a few days ago.

“We packed each box carefully, but I hope none of the bonbonnières or violet jewels are broken,” I said.

“Indeed.”

The craftsmen had poured their hearts into making those bonbonnières. I didn’t want a single one of them to go to waste.

We arrived at the store’s back entrance at the appointed time and were greeted by Solene, the employee with whom I had been friends since before moving to Triste.

“Oh, Francette! Welcome!”

“Hello, Solene. It’s been a while.”

“It really has. Oh, it’s nice to meet you, Mr. Husband!”

“We’re not married yet,” I insisted. “We’re engaged.”

“Really? Sorry. It’s just that you already seem like husband and wife.”

Because of my father’s arrest, our marriage had been postponed and our engagement period extended. It was so embarrassing to be told that we looked like a married couple.

“Gabriel, this is Solene,” I said. “She works here, and we’ve been friends for a long time.”

Solene stared at Gabriel. “I’ve seen you somewhere before...”

“Oh, come to think of it, this isn’t your first time meeting.”

“Huh? Really?”

“He was my regular customer.”

Solene pointed at Gabriel and shouted, “Ohhhhh!”

Gabriel used to buy up all of the sweets I had consigned to this store. Because of his incessant conspicuous behavior, Solene had taken note of him and called him my “regular customer.”

“Wow, what a surprise,” she said.

Gabriel was looking off in the distance. He probably didn’t want us to keep talking about it. I decided to change the subject.

“Hey, Solene, have the bonbonnières arrived?”

“Of course. They’re in the food storehouse. I’ll help you check them.”

“Sorry, we ended up sending more than planned.”

“It’s fine. The more there are, the more customers we’ll get, and the more our other sweets will sell. Thanks to the Lakeside Duck Bakery, our shelves are clean, and that’s a good thing.”

“But it’s been busy, hasn’t it?”

“It’s much better than having nothing to do.”

I was touched by her kindness. Even when I had been living in the old part of town, Solene had looked after me, reminding me to eat lots of nutritious food and sometimes sharing her bread with me. She was my friend, but she was also like a second older sister to me.

“Let me help you with these,” she said.

“Thank you, Solene.” Before getting started, I gave her the bonbonnières we’d set aside for the pastry store employees. “These are only prototypes, but feel free to share them with all of the staff.”

“Wow, thanks! It’s an honor to receive Lakeside Duck Bakery’s new product before it goes on sale.” The moment she opened the wooden box, she was taken aback. “Are these really sweets?”

“Yes, they are.”

“You could totally store jewels in these!”

“Aren’t they wonderful?”

“Yes, very much so!”

It was said that the noble who had produced bonbonnières in Triste had given them to his guests as souvenirs. The craftsmen who had inherited the manufacturing technique had revived them as party favors for wedding guests.

“After I’ve eaten the sweets, I might use it to store my earrings,” Solene said.

“I’d love it if you did.”

A bonbonnière would stay with its recipient, accompanied by a feeling of gratitude to the sender. It was created with the hope that this connection between people would last forever.

“And the sweets inside are— Huh? Aren’t these actual jewels?!” Solene exclaimed.

“They’re crystal candies made with sweet-violet syrup,” I explained.

“Oh my gosh! It’s beautiful on the outside *and* the inside!”

She was more excited than I’d expected. I couldn’t wait to see the customers’ reactions.

“Even before putting them on sale, I already know these sweets are going to be extremely popular,” Solene said.

“I hope so...”

“My prediction says that they’ll definitely sell.”

We inspected the bonbonnières as we chatted. Thanks to the careful packing, we didn’t find a single scratch. The violet jewels inside were also safe and sound.

“I still can’t believe you’re marrying your customer,” Solene said. Suddenly, there was a loud clatter from Gabriel’s direction. “Hey, Mr. Regular, you didn’t drop a bonbonnière, did you?”

“I merely dropped the box’s lid,” Gabriel said. “It’s fine.”

“Please be more careful,” Solene warned, making Gabriel look down in remorse. “Francette, when did you realize he was your customer?”

“I had no idea until recently, when he let it slip.”

“Hmm, I see.” Solene grinned at Gabriel, amused by his reaction. “I used to wonder if he had a crush on you.”

“Why?”

“Because he only ever bought *your* sweets, and he seemed to be worried about how you were doing. But even when I told him the days and times of your deliveries, he never appeared. So I decided that he was just a devoted follower. When you started the Lakeside Duck Bakery, I thought he’d be sad that your sweets were sold out every day, but actually, he completely stopped coming. It made me think, wow, he’s a hard-core fan. I never would’ve thought it was because he was engaged to you.”

“Solene, I think you’ve said enough.” It was hard to tell because of how dim it was in the storehouse, but Gabriel’s face was bright red. He was probably incredibly embarrassed.

We finished inspecting the products. All of them were fine and intact.

“Okay, just leave the sales to us on release day!” Solene said.

“I’m counting on you,” I replied.

The pastry store was also going to put up Coco’s new illustration of Triste. I entrusted them with my hope that many people would learn about Triste through the sweets and artwork.

“Where are you headed after this?” Solene asked.

“I’m going to see my father.”

“Oh, right, he’s in the capital, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

When my sister Adele’s engagement had been broken off, all of our family’s assets had been seized. But after it had been revealed that the whole thing had

been part of a scheme, everything had been returned to us. However, since my father had committed the horrible act of eloping with someone else's wife, my mother had scolded him and told him that he needed to reflect on his actions. As a result, a branch family was now managing the estate and fortune.

After serving his six-month prison sentence, my father continued to live in the one-story house I had shared with him in the old part of town. That was the punishment my mother had set for him.

I said goodbye to Solene and headed for my old house.

"I say we shared it, but he hardly ever came home," I complained. "Every day, he'd go to a different mistress's house."

According to his mistresses, my father had a mysterious charm that they were hopelessly drawn to. As his daughter, I could only say that he was a slovenly middle-aged man incapable of doing anything himself.

"He doesn't even know how to boil water for tea," I lamented.

"Is he able to survive on his own like that?" Gabriel asked.

"My mother gave him an attendant. Well, he's more like a spy in the guise of an attendant." If my father broke the rules, the neighboring country would be informed immediately, and my mother would punish him. "Apparently, if my father so much as brings a woman into the house, he'll be hanged upside down from a clock tower."

"That's quite drastic."

"It is. But my father always would've been a useless member of society if it weren't for my mother's strict control. In fact, when they first got married, he had enough mistresses to form two cricket teams, which caused my mother a lot of worry. She was always saying, 'Thank the heavens this was a political marriage,' because if she'd truly loved my father, her married life would've been too painful for her to bear."

"I'm not sure if it's appropriate to say this, but I'm surprised they were able to maintain a relationship as husband and wife."

"There never was a relationship. My mother always treated my father as a

stranger she couldn't understand."

"I-I see. There are a lot of different kinds of couples in the world."

"Indeed."

My mother-in-law had loved my father-in-law, so it must've been hard for her when he left. On the other hand, my mother had never cared in the slightest where my father went or how unfaithful he was. I wasn't sure which kind of marriage was better for a noblewoman.

"Fran, is that the house?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes...probably." There was a rose-covered arch that hadn't been there before, so I could no longer be confident that it was my father's house. I peeked into the garden and saw a middle-aged man with a straw hat crouching down and tending to the plants and flowers.

The man noticed my presence. "Oh? What a surprise. If it isn't Francette!"

"I didn't realize it was you, father."

"Oh, and Gabriel's with you too!"

"Hello, sir," Gabriel replied. "It's been a while."

I stared blankly at the unbelievable sight in front of me. My father, whose hobby was womanizing and favorite pastime was drinking, now had his face and clothes covered in dirt.

"Wh-What were you doing?" I asked.

"As you can see, gardening. It's pretty fun. I got into it recently."

The field I had tended to with Alexandrine had become a flower bed with lavender, clematis, and lilacs.

"Did you grow all of these?" I asked.

"Yeah, but André helps too. He's a nice guy—teaches me a lot of stuff."

André was the attendant sent by my mother. My father seemed to know that he was a spy, but they got along nonetheless. Just as we were talking about him, a young man came out of the house.

“Who might these people be, Your Grace?” he asked.

“My daughter and her fiancé have come to visit,” said my father.

“I see. It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is André Dubois.” The attendant was tall and good-looking, with tanned skin. “Your father takes good care of me every day.”

“What’re you talking about, André? You’re the one taking care of me.”

Somehow, the situation was completely different from what I’d expected. My father and this young man were getting along swimmingly. I’d always thought of my father as a womanizer, but I’d have to make a correction today: my father was a “people-izer.”

“Please come in,” said André. “I’ll make tea. Your Grace, you should wash your hands first.”

“Got it.” As my father washed his hands at the well, he said, “André makes a delicious cup of tea.”

“You seem to be enjoying your lifestyle quite a bit,” I remarked.

“Oh...sorry.”

My words had come out more accusatory than intended. Then again, my father’s reputation had delayed my marriage, so I was probably entitled to a sour quip or two.

“I really do feel bad for causing my family trouble,” he said. “I’m willing to do anything to repent.”

It wasn’t as if I wanted anything from my father. My only wish was that he would live the rest of his life *without* causing trouble for anyone else.

“The tea is ready,” André announced, easing the awkward tension in the air.

We went inside and partook of the tea that my father had endorsed.

“Well, I’ll be,” André said. “I never would have guessed that you were the proprietress of Lakeside Duck Bakery. Everyone in the capital loves it.” He showed more interest in my story than my father did.

I hadn’t prepared a bonbonnière for my father, so I handed over an

assortment of sweets instead, which André accepted with glee.

“One wouldn’t normally come up with the idea of selling products to spread awareness of one’s territory,” he continued. “You are an incredible genius, Lady Francette.”

For some reason, Gabriel gave a firm nod, even though that wasn’t a point that called for his agreement.

“I always knew Francette had talent,” my father said.

“You’re not serious, are you?” I asked.

“I’m telling the truth. Ever since you were little, you were always making small discoveries, like when the butler hurt his back, Adele was pushing herself too hard, or a guest had a stomachache. You noticed things that no one else did, and I thought it would become a great asset.”

I’d always thought that my father only paid attention to my sister, but I was wrong. He *had* been watching me—he just never said anything about it.

“I’m proud of what you’ve accomplished,” he declared.

It was the first time he had ever praised me. Despite thinking he was a terrible father, I couldn’t help but feel happy.

When it was time to leave, my father shook Gabriel’s hand and said with a serious look in his eyes, “Gabriel, thank you for falling in love with Francette. I can feel at ease sending my daughter off with you.”

“It’s an honor to hear that,” said Gabriel.

“And thank you for saving Francette.”

“No, I’m the one who was saved. Her presence is a daily source of encouragement.”

The two men exchanged a firm handshake before we left.

As we walked through the old part of town, Gabriel said, “I’m glad I was able to talk with Duke Mercœur before the wedding. After all, the last time I saw him, the situation was rather...dangerous.”

After eloping with his mistress, my father had been working as a guard for a

brothel. Gabriel had knocked him out without knowing who he was.

“To be honest, I was thinking about what to say if he condemned me for what happened that day,” Gabriel continued.

“My father doesn’t dwell on the details, so it’s fine.”

“Yes, I feel much better now.”

Honestly, I still didn’t forgive my father for what he had done. But after talking to him today, my impression of him had changed a bit. I was glad I’d visited.

When we went back to the inn, we found a very unexpected individual waiting for us. This handsome man straight out of a fairy tale, with blond hair and blue eyes, was none other than Prince Axel. He and my mother-in-law had been awaiting our return together.

“Prince Axel is here,” my mother-in-law announced.

“H-Hello,” I said.

“It’s been a while, Your Highness,” said Gabriel.

My mother-in-law must’ve been enjoying his company. I could tell from her expression alone that she was in high spirits.

“I’m glad to see the two of you are in good health,” said Prince Axel.

“You seem to be doing well too,” I replied.

“It’s an honor to see you again,” said Gabriel.

We sat down with Prince Axel for tea. It was all so sudden that I couldn’t even process what the tea tasted like.

“What brings you here?” Gabriel asked, getting straight to the point.

“Do I need a reason to visit my friends?” Prince Axel asked, looking at me, Gabriel, and Wibble.

I’d had no idea that he considered us friends. Neither did Gabriel, judging by his widened eyes.

“I quite enjoyed fishing for frogs and partaking in sweets during my previous holiday in Triste,” Prince Axel continued. “If it’s not too much trouble, I’d like to visit again.”

“You are more than welcome,” my mother-in-law replied before Gabriel could. “Please treat the slime duke family’s residence as a vacation home where you can come and go as you like.”

Gabriel and I nodded in agreement.

“Thank you,” Prince Axel said with a rare smile.

My mother-in-law invited him to join us for dinner, much to Gabriel’s shock and mine. But Prince Axel was very busy, so he said, “I’ll look forward to the next opportunity,” and left.

“What a shame,” said my mother-in-law.

I, on the other hand, was relieved. I had already planned something for this evening—a reunion between my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière. The sisters had been estranged for many years, and today, Gabriel and I were going to create an opportunity to fix that. We hadn’t told Mrs. Molière either—we had simply asked her if she’d like to join us for dinner while we were visiting the capital. I didn’t know if the surprise would be successful, but thanks to Prince Axel, my mother-in-law was in the best mood possible. I hoped the reconciliation would go smoothly.

When it was time for dinner, we went to the dining hall. This inn had private dining rooms, so we could enjoy our meal without worrying about prying eyes.

“It really has been a long time since I’ve come to a place like this,” my mother-in-law said. “I’m not fond of the capital, but it can be nice once in a while.” She had always vehemently disapproved of the capital, but now she was accepting it with relative ease. The effort I’d put into selecting an inn and coffee shop had paid off.

Not five minutes after we sat down, Mrs. Molière arrived.

“Gabby, Miss Francette, long time no—”

“Julietta?!” My mother-in-law quickly rose from her seat and stared at Mrs.

Molière in shock. They hadn't seen each other in decades—not since Mrs. Molière had married and moved to the capital—but my mother-in-law recognized her younger sister immediately.

"Wh-Why are you here, Maria?"

"That's my line!" Realizing what was going on, my mother-in-law glared at me and Gabriel.

I quickly averted my gaze. Gabriel, on the other hand, maintained eye contact and explained the situation.

"We thought it was about time you reconciled," he said.

"It's not like we're fighting," said Mrs. Molière.

"Not only have you not seen each other a single time since Aunt Julietta got married, you don't even keep in touch. What is that if not fighting?"

Both sisters were at a loss for a response.

I gestured for Mrs. Molière to sit down. She looked like she wanted to run away right that moment, but to my relief, she took her seat. The room fell silent, but Gabriel forced the conversation to continue.

"First of all, mother, why didn't you ever contact Aunt Julietta?"

"Why would I? Once she got married, we weren't related anymore."

"In that case, will I—your son—also become a stranger when I get married? No, right?"

"Well, no, but..." My mother-in-law bit down on her lip. She wore a pained expression, her brow tightly furrowed.

"Mother, you'll feel better if you make up instead of stubbornly refusing. That goes for you too, Aunt Julietta."

The sisters' relationship had probably become so strained that they didn't know how to fix it themselves.

I knew we were being meddlesome, but I added, "Mother, Mrs. Molière, I have a sister too, and I always felt very sad when we argued." Even when I had been at fault, my sister would always fold first. Thanks to that, our fights hadn't

lasted long. It would be so painful to be estranged from my gentle sister for the rest of my life. “You only have each other as sisters. No one in the world can replace that, so please don’t fight,” I pleaded.

My mother-in-law heaved a sigh. Then, in a very faint voice, she said, “Julietta, I’m sorry.”

“Huh?” Mrs. Molière exclaimed.

“I’ve always been jealous of you. You were the cheerful one and everyone loved you. You had everything I didn’t, you threw away your homeland to get married, and you became the happiest of all. I think I envied you so much that I wanted to hate you.”

“What...? You’re the one who had everything, Maria. You were smart, you met our parents’ expectations, and everyone relied on you. I was proud to have such a talented sister, but at the same time, I constantly felt miserable about not being capable of anything.”

In other words...my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière fell out because they were jealous of each other.

“Do you know how many times I wished I could be like you?” my mother-in-law asked. “Everyone said you were as lovely as an angel.”

“Well, I thought countless times about how happy I would’ve been if I had been born smart and beautiful like you.”

As they talked, they began to shed tears.

“I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember, Julietta!”

“I love you more, Maria!”

The emotions they had kept hidden for so many years burst forth as the “quarrel” escalated.

“I purposely didn’t contact you because I didn’t think you’d have time to pay attention to me after you got married!”

“I couldn’t bring myself to contact you because I thought you didn’t care about me anymore!”

Gabriel and I looked at each other and shrugged. Here I had been expecting a serious issue to work through, when really, the sisters had only fallen out of touch because of an extremely minor problem that had blown up to a ridiculous extent.

“Julietta, I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. I feel so guilty.”

In the end, my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière hugged and made up. Gabriel looked exasperated as he asked the waiter to begin the preparations for our meal. Meanwhile, I worried that my stomach might growl as I watched over the two sisters.

Dinner that evening was a merry time. My mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière’s relationship had been restored, and that was all I could ask for.

Chapter 4: The Noble Lady Francette's Side of the Monster Duke Meeting

At last, it was the first day of the monster duke meeting. Gabriel was inspecting the bonbonnières we'd brought from Triste with utmost seriousness while I assisted him.

"It's strange," he said. "This is the first time I've ever been looking forward to the monster duke meeting."

"Is it because of the bonbonnières?" I asked.

"That's part of it, but perhaps it's also because you're in the capital. I feel like a child, getting excited over something like that."

At times, I had wondered, *Is there a point in going with Gabriel if I won't be able to do anything?* But seeing him enjoying himself like this, I knew I had made the right decision.

"I might not return until late, so please go ahead and turn in for the night without me," he said.

"Understood."

The meeting was going to be followed by a banquet, and after that, the monster dukes were going to drink the night away. Apparently there had been times when the party had lasted until early morning.

"What are your plans for the day, Fran?"

"I'm going to help Solene at the pastry store. The bonbonnières are going on sale the day after tomorrow, so the store has to prepare a lot of sweets in advance." Perhaps I wouldn't be able to contribute much, but I did want to do something for the store that had helped me for so long.

"Shall we take the carriage together, then? I can have you dropped off at the store."

“That would be great. Thank you.”

As for my mother-in-law, she was going to visit the Molière residence and spend the night there. The sisters had a lot to talk about, so they were probably planning on staying up all night doing just that. I was so glad that they’d reconciled. I doubted any issues would arise there, but I was still a bit worried, so I asked Rico and Coco to accompany her.

“Fran, please bring Wibble with you,” said Gabriel.

“Is that okay with you?”

“Of course. If you want the other slimes too, I can summon them right now.”

“No, that won’t be necessary.”

Wibble transformed into a ribbon that tied itself around the waist of my simple dress. *“Going with Fra today!”*

“Yes; I’ll be counting on you.”

I thought that would be the end of the preparations, but Gabriel handed me something in a leather pouch. “Fran, please keep this with you just in case.”

“What is it?” The pouch contained several balls of what looked like rolled-up grass.

“These are smoke bombs made with the smoke mushrooms that are native to Triste. They are enchanted such that when thrown at the ground, the impact makes them emit smoke. Anyone who breathes in the smoke and has ill intentions towards the thrower will cry uncontrollably.”

“So if something happens, I can use them to keep the perpetrators at bay?”

“Correct.”

I gratefully accepted the pouch. There was no telling when I might find myself caught up in another incident.

Gabriel dropped me off at the pastry store. It would be a while before we saw each other again.

Solene was standing outside the store, waiting for my arrival. We both waved to Gabriel’s carriage as it left.

“Francette, are you sure about helping us today?” she asked.

“Yes. Gabriel will be at his meeting all day.”

“I totally thought you guys were here on your honeymoon.”

“Well, we aren’t married yet.”

“Oh, right.”

The pastry store was closed today, so the plan was to mass-produce sweets in the back kitchen.

“It’s going to be a lot of work, Francette,” said Solene.

“No worries. I’m ready.”

And so, I joined them in baking pastries. Although Wibble was capable of helping too, I didn’t want to scare the pastry chefs who weren’t aware of my slime companion, so I asked it to stay in its ribbon form.

I spent the morning washing bowls and spatulas after they were used, and in the afternoon, I did miscellaneous tasks like cracking eggs and measuring flour. The kitchen was enveloped in a sweet aroma; the air was so thick with it that I started to hallucinate that I’d become a pastry myself.

In the evening, I performed other tasks that weren’t related to the baking process, like packing cookies into jars after they cooled down, wrapping chocolates in silver paper, and arranging the products in the storefront.

When the bell in the clock tower tolled, signaling that night had come, I was told that the workday was over.

“You were a great help, Francette,” said Solene.

“I’m glad I could be of service.”

I had purely been helping out of gratitude, but I was handed an envelope containing the day’s wages nonetheless.

“This is from the owner,” she said.

“Are you sure? It’s so much.”

“Just take it. It’s recognition of the hard work you put in all day.”

“I suppose. Are you free after this, Solene?”

“Yeah. What about you?”

“I don’t have any plans. Would you like to have dinner together?”

“Sure!”

I asked her to take me to her favorite pub.

“Are you sure? It’s not the kind of place you’d bring a noble lady.”

“That’s not a problem at all. I may be a noble, but when I was living in the old part of town, there were times when I’d mull over whether to eat a moldy piece of bread or not.”

“Did you actually eat it?”

“No, I didn’t. It was too dangerous.”

Back then, everyone else had said that it would be safe to eat after I’d removed the moldy parts. But I’d once read a book on food hygiene that had disagreed. Once mold had taken root, invisible mold spores spread throughout the whole loaf, which could cause stomach problems. Some people had said that the bread would be fine after being baked again, but mold toxins were very hardy and could not be killed by heat.

“But even knowing that it’s dangerous, hunger makes you want to throw caution to the wind,” I said.

“I had no idea you were that strapped for money, Francette.”

“My father was unemployed and hardly ever came home, so I had to earn my own living.”

“I should’ve invited you for dinner more often. I always thought you were too thin, but I didn’t think you were struggling so much that you considered eating moldy bread.”

I had told that story as a way of insisting that I could eat anything, but I had inadvertently made her feel bad instead.

“It’s okay, Solene. I eat delicious meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day now. But more importantly, I’m hungry. Let’s go to the pub.”

“Right—let’s go.”

As I was following Solene, she suddenly stopped in her tracks.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, um, I’m just wondering if it’s all right to bring you around town when you don’t have an attendant with you today.”

“I didn’t come alone.” I called Wibble’s name, and the slime hopped into the palm of my hand, casting away its ribbon form.

Solene was taken aback. “A-A slime?!”

“Yes; Gabriel’s tamed it.”

“*I’m Wibble!*”

“I-I’m Solene.” She smiled awkwardly as she shook Wibble’s extended tentacle. “I’ve never shaken hands with a slime before.”

“Isn’t it cute?”

“It *is* cute, now that I look at it.”

Wibble waved its tentacles and jumped around in glee, happy to be complimented.

“Anyway, with Wibble here, I’ll be fine,” I said.

“I can take you to the pub without worries, then.”

Solene brought me to a red-brick restaurant covered in ivy. Inside, the air was filled with the soft fragrance of medicinal herbs. Most of the customers were women.

“This place serves food and drinks made with herbal remedies,” she explained. “I’ve been coming here for years. It’s one of my favorites.”

“I’ve never tried alcohol brewed with medicinal herbs.”

“I thought it tasted bad at first, but after drinking it for a while, I got hooked.”

“Ooh, I see.” I looked at the menu, which listed a variety of herbal alcoholic drinks.

“Sage is good for sore throats, rose geranium relieves fatigue, mint lowers

fevers, and lemongrass improves appetite. I pick based on how I feel. After all, when you're not feeling well, you should really be resting instead, but here, you can enjoy a drink guilt free. Feeling better the day after drinking here is really just an excuse—it's more that your worries and fears go away after having a good time drinking and eating delicious food."

"That's the best medicine."

"Yep. But you have to be careful not to drink too much, of course."

The menu also had a wide variety of dishes.

"Hey, Francette, do you have any conditions bothering you?"

"Hmm...swelling, I suppose." Perhaps because the capital differed in temperature and humidity from Triste, my face had been swollen ever since I'd woken up this morning. I wanted to do something about it before tomorrow's soiree.

"I hear the shellfish-and-coix-seed stir-fry is good for that. Coix seed gets rid of excess heat from the body, which reduces swelling. It also gives you beautiful skin!"

It seemed like coix seed was the solution to my soiree worries. I ordered the stir-fry without hesitation.

"What would you like to drink, Francette?"

"Something that goes down easily would be nice. Do you have any recommendations?"

"How about the chamomile beer? It smells nice, like apples. I recommend adding honey and lemon syrup."

"I'll go with that, then." I was used to drinking chamomile tea, so it would probably be fine. Chamomile was also said to improve the skin, so it was a suitable choice for my situation.

Solene ordered the daily soup and rose hip beer.

"Um, can I order something for Wibble too?" I asked. The slime was sitting quietly at the end of the table, its eyes sparkling.

“Can it drink alcohol?”

“No. Would it be possible to get honey water?”

“I’ll ask.”

Solene was a frequent customer, so the restaurant was more than willing to fulfill our request. When she said that the honey water was for a slime, they brought a pot full of it. Wibble dived inside and gulped it down with glee.

At this time of day, freshly baked bread was served. It was steaming hot when it arrived at our table.

“It looks delicious,” I said.

“It’s absolutely amazing with the herb butter,” Solene insisted.

I listened to her and spread the herb butter onto the bread. It melted in the heat, giving off a rich herbal fragrance. The bread had a crispy crust and a soft, chewy interior. It was very delicious.

The drinks arrived next. Mine had chamomile submerged at the bottom of the glass, making for a lovely sight. Solene’s came in a large glass called a beer stein. She could probably hold her liquor well.

The chamomile beer tasted very refreshing and nice. It seemed to have a stronger aroma than chamomile tea did. All of the food was delicious, and I found myself downing the alcohol with ease.

“I was so surprised when I found out you were engaged,” said Solene.

“Why?”

“Well, you were totally set on living in the old part of town. You even refused Prince Axel’s offer to take you in. When you were selling your sweets, you had this aura of ‘I’m going to survive on my own, no matter what.’ You know, there were a bunch of customers who saw you at the store and asked me to introduce them to you.”

“R-Really? I had no idea.”

“I told the persistent ones, ‘Prince Axel stepped forward to become her guardian, you know! That’s how noble of a lady she is!’”

“You used Prince Axel’s name for *that*?”

“What other choice did I have? I couldn’t tell someone who had her heart set on living alone that her life would be easier if she got married.”

“Solene...thank you.”

No one had interfered with me back then. They had all respected my decision and watched over me as I struggled to survive on my own. If I had accepted someone’s help, I probably wouldn’t have become Gabriel’s fiancée.

“Then again, in spite of my resolve, I ended up relying on Gabriel anyway,” I added.

“You didn’t have a choice. Not only did your father have an affair but he ran away, leaving his daughter behind. It’s ridiculous. You basically went through a disaster.” Solene covered her mouth with her hands. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to insult your dad.”

“It’s the truth, so it’s fine. Besides, I still haven’t forgiven him.”

“You said you were going to visit him, so I thought you’d made up.”

“You can’t let someone get away with a crime, even if it’s a family member.”

“Agreed.”

It was getting late, so I had to head back to the inn. The enjoyable dinner came to an end.

“I had fun today, Francette,” said Solene.

“Me too.”

“*Wibble* had fun too!”

I hugged the innocent and carefree slime.

“Francette, let’s have dinner again the next time you’re in the capital.”

“Yes, let’s.”

“Bring Mr. Regular with you next time. I wanna hear about how you two met.”

“He’s shy. I wonder if he’d tell you.”

“Leave it to me. I’m good at getting people to open up.”

I found myself looking forward to having drinks with Solene again.

It turned out that the restaurant also sold herbal syrups and teas.

“I buy peppermint tea to prevent hangovers,” said Solene. Peppermint was said to relieve nausea and upset stomachs.

I considered buying some for myself just in case, but when I tried the sample, I couldn’t quite enjoy the taste. The staff recommended a blend mixed with other tea leaves, so I chose that instead.

“I’ll get a few to bring back as souvenirs too,” I said. “We should call it a day now.”

“All right.”

Wibble raised its tentacle arm high in the air and shouted, *“Bill, please!”* I was going to pay with the wages I’d earned today, but the slime spat out a silver coin and paid the bill for us. *“It’s on Wibble!”*

“Wh-What a useful slime!” Solene exclaimed. “Francette, you’re lucky to have this little fellow!”

“I really am.”

“Actually, it’s on Gabriel!” Apparently, Gabriel had given Wibble money to cover our expenses.

“Francette, say thanks to the slime duke for me.”

“I will.”

I parted ways with Solene and returned to the inn. I didn’t see any light coming from Gabriel’s room. He wasn’t back yet, just as he’d predicted in the morning.

“Gabriel will probably come back in the middle of the night.”

“Seems so. Let’s turn in for the night.”

Since I’d drunk alcohol, I only took a quick bath before snuggling under the blanket. Wibble and I slept soundly that night.

The next day, I was worried about whether Gabriel had returned safely or not, so I went to his room and knocked on the door.

“Gabriel, are you back?” I asked. There was no response. I leaned my ear against the door but heard nothing. “Is he still drinking?”

“*Gabriel’s inside,*” Wibble said. It was able to sense his presence. “*Wanna unlock the door?*”

“That’s a good question...” It’d be fine if he was merely asleep, but what if he had collapsed inside? That would be a big problem. I had Wibble unlock the door for me, which it did in a flash, transforming into the shape of a key.

I opened the door and was startled to see Gabriel lying on the floor. “What happened?!” I placed my hand on his cheek and found it cold to the touch. “Gabriel! Are you okay, Gabriel?!”

I heard a groan and crouched down to peer into his face. He was looking at me with teary eyes.

“Gabriel, what’s wrong?”

“I’m fine... It’s just a hangover. It’ll go away by itself eventually.”

“Your body will rest better if you lie on the bed instead of the floor.”

“I know...but just...let me stay like this a bit longer...”

He wasn’t wearing his glasses. I feared he might’ve dropped them somewhere, but fortunately, he was holding them tightly in his hand. I gently pulled them from his grasp and placed them on the table. Gabriel without his glasses was a precious sight. I peered closely at his face, envying his long eyelashes.

“*Gabriel, you smell like alcohol.*”

“I drank a ridiculous amount,” he said. “I stumbled my way back to the inn in the early morning and fell unconscious before I reached the bed.”

“Do you want to drink water?” I asked.

“No. I feel like if I swallow anything, I’ll just throw it back up.” His face was deathly pale and his lips were purple. He looked like a dried-up slime.

“Does this happen every time the monster dukes drink together?”

“We were celebrating my engagement last night, so I ended up drinking much more than usual. They didn’t force me to—I was just happy about being congratulated and couldn’t stop. It’s my own fault.”

“I think you should take some medicine... Oh, that’s right. I bought some herbal tea that helps with hangovers yesterday. It should make you feel better.”

“Th-Thank you.” Having recovered enough strength to get up, he plunked himself down in the chair by the window. He was usually so graceful in his every movement, but perhaps his body wasn’t being cooperative today. Illuminated by the morning sun, his listless expression seemed to make his good looks stand out even more. I couldn’t help but liken him to a beautiful elf living deep in the forest.

“Fra, Wibble will boil water.”

“R-Right, thanks.”

The room had a magicite-powered kettle that could boil water in an instant. Wibble skillfully poured water into it and turned it on as if it had used one of these devices before.

After drinking the peppermint tea blend, Gabriel gave a relaxed sigh. It seemed to have relieved his nausea.

“You have another meeting tomorrow, don’t you?” I asked.

“That is correct. But we won’t be drinking, of course. As soon as the second day’s discussions are over, everyone is dismissed. More importantly, all of the monster dukes loved the bonbonnières.”

“Really?! I’m so glad.”

“The reporter was also interested in them and asked more questions than usual. The bonbonnières will be in tomorrow’s newspaper.”

“I can’t wait to read it.”

“The siren duke already expressed her desire to buy them. I told her that you’re only selling a limited quantity and won’t be taking orders for a while, and she seemed disappointed.”

“I do feel sorry about that.” In order to maintain a stable supply for the future, the bonbonnières would only be sold in Triste for the time being. “I suppose we’ll need the craftsmen to keep at it for a while.”

“Indeed.”

Gabriel’s complexion was much better now, perhaps because of the herbal tea. He surely must’ve been lacking in sleep, though.

“You shouldn’t go to sleep on an empty stomach,” I said. “Can you eat fruit?”

“I might be able to handle an orange slice.”

A single slice? He isn’t a noblewoman wearing a tight corset... Well, he does have a hangover, so I shouldn’t force him to eat more.

“I’ll peel one for you,” I said.

“I’m sorry for making you do everything... Thank you.”

I peeled the orange with a knife and removed the thin skin around a segment before bringing it to Gabriel’s mouth. The moment it touched his lips, I froze. I hadn’t intended to feed him by hand—I had done so unconsciously. Gabriel’s eyes widened in surprise. I couldn’t retreat at this point, so I pushed my shame aside and gave him a pleading look, hoping that he would get it over with quickly.

He ate the piece of orange and said, “It’s...sweet.”

“That’s good. Do you think you can eat more?”

“Yes.”

As I carefully peeled the skin around the next piece, I wondered if I was supposed to keep hand-feeding him. *What’s done is done*, I decided, bringing the second piece to his mouth. “Okay, Gabriel, open wide.”

Much to my relief, he ate it without hesitation this time. His appetite seemed to be better than he’d thought, and he ended up eating the entire orange.

“This is the first time someone has peeled the inner skin for me,” he remarked.

“Oh, is that so? My wet nurse always did it for me, so I’ve only ever eaten

oranges this way.”

“Mine had me eat them, skin and all—no argument.”

“Fruit skin *does* contain nutrients, so maybe that’s better for a growing child.”

I’d gotten to hear a story about Gabriel’s childhood when I least expected it. I wanted to talk more, but it was best to let him sleep. He still had to prepare for the soiree later. Fortunately, he was looking much better—the color had returned to his face.

I gently touched his cheek and found it warm. “Grea—” Our eyes met and I was immediately filled with shame. How could I have touched him without asking for permission first? “I-I’m sorry. I was worried because your face was cold when I entered the room earlier.”

“I don’t mind. In fact, please touch me all you like.”

“Huh?”

“Erm, I’m serious,” he said, his voice fading into a whisper.

“Phew. I was afraid you didn’t like being touched without permission.”

“I only allow it from you, Fran.”

Wibble proceeded to touch Gabriel all over, only for him to grab the slime by the tentacle and fling it across the room.

“Gabriel won’t let Wibble touch him!”

“You just enjoy seeing me annoyed, don’t you?”

“Yup!” Wibble replied with innocent eyes. Gabriel heaved a sigh.

“Sorry for staying so long,” I said. “You should rest until evening.”

“Yes, I’ll do just that.”

“I’ll ask the staff to bring you something light for lunch, okay?”

“Thank you.”

I left Gabriel and went back to my room.

“Oh, if it isn’t Miss Francette.”

“Did you just get back, mother?” I asked.

“Yes. I stayed up all night chatting with my sister, so I’m going to take a nap now.”

“Will you be okay for tonight?”

“Yes, I’ll be attending the soiree.”

I told Rico and Coco, who had been accompanying my mother-in-law, to get some rest as well. “You can do whatever you like until this evening.” I also gave them some spending money. They both seemed surprised, but this was a reward for their daily efforts. “Part of it is Nico’s share, so buy her a souvenir too, okay?”

“We will!” said Coco.

“Understood,” said Rico.

After seeing the girls off, I pondered what to do next. There was still a while to go before the evening preparations, so I decided to embroider Gabriel’s pocket square. *But what to add? I don’t have time for a complex design like a family crest, so perhaps the initials of his name.*

“Fra, whatcha doing?”

“I’m embroidering Gabriel’s initials.” Since the ideal pocket square was pure white and free of blemishes, I placed the embroidery where it wouldn’t be visible.

“Fra is good at stitching!”

“I am, aren’t I? Embroidery was the only thing my teacher said I was better at than my sister.”

Back when I’d first started living in the old part of town, I had embroidered things to sell, but the high-quality thread and handkerchiefs I’d brought from home had quickly run out. I had gone to a sewing store to buy more but left empty-handed after seeing the shockingly high prices.

“Embroidery is time-consuming, but unless you’re a professional, it doesn’t sell for much,” I said. Pastries could be made and sold more efficiently. “The value of embroidery made by an amateur lies in the feelings for the recipient

that go into it.”

“*Wibble thinks so too.*”

Stitch by stitch, I wove my feelings for Gabriel into the pocket square. I finished in time for the three o’clock tea break.

“It’s done!”

“Yay!”

As Wibble and I held hands and rejoiced, there was a quiet knock on the door.

“*Who’s there?!*” Wibble shouted before I could say anything.

“It’s me.”

“*Who’s ‘me’?!*”

“Wibble, stop fooling around and ask Fran if I may come in.”

I opened the door and found Gabriel standing there. “Oh, are you already feeling better?”

“Thanks to you, I’ve recovered my strength. Would you like to have tea together?”

“I’d love to,” I said, inviting him into the room. I’d just been about to take a break anyway.

“I had tea prepared,” he said, taking a tea set out of the basket he’d brought with him. “I also heard that cherry tarts are popular right now, so I bought some.”

“You went to that much trouble?”

“Yes. I know you can ask the inn to prepare them for you, but I wanted to go out and buy them for you.”

“You were sick, though... Thank you. I really appreciate it.” I would’ve preferred for him to continue resting, but I was very happy that he’d wanted to do something for me. I decided to accept his sentiments with gratitude.

Gabriel poured the tea himself and sliced the cherry tart for me, perhaps as thanks for the peppermint tea and orange I’d prepared for him earlier. “Please

enjoy,” he said.

“Thank you.”

I hadn’t had anything to drink all afternoon, since I’d been so focused on the embroidery. I took a sip of tea first to quench my thirst before eating the tart. The cherries had their pits removed and were deliciously sweet and sour. There were also sliced almonds laid out along the bottom of the crust, which gave the tart a lovely aroma.

“This is delicious, Gabriel,” I said.

“That’s good to hear.”

Thanks to him, I enjoyed a wonderful afternoon break.

“It’s just about time to prepare for the soiree,” he said.

I stood up to see him off, only for Wibble to tug my sleeve. “Oh, right!” I exclaimed, suddenly remembering. “Gabriel, I embroidered your initials into a pocket square. Would you mind using it tonight?”

“You did that for me?”

“Yes, I did.” I handed him the piece of cloth as it was, without any wrapping or anything.

“I didn’t expect you to prepare something like this for me... I’m very happy.” He took the pocket square and traced the initials with his finger.

“Um, if you touch it or look too closely, you’ll probably notice the rough edges.”

“There’s nothing of the sort. The embroidery is perfect. Thank you very much.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I’ll see you later, then.”

“Yes, later.”

Just as Gabriel left the room, Rico and Coco arrived to take his place.

“Were you two able to relax?” I asked.

"Thanks to you, we had a wonderful day!" Coco exclaimed.

"You have our sincerest gratitude, Lady Francette," said Rico.

From the sound of it, they'd enjoyed their first sightseeing experience in the capital. They excitedly told me about everything they'd purchased and eaten.

"We'll have to plan a more leisurely trip next time and bring Constance and Nico too," I said. Perhaps it would be a good idea to have the honeymoon in the capital so that everyone could enjoy themselves.

"We were thinking we'd start preparing for the soiree," said Coco.

"Would that be all right with you?" Rico asked.

"Yes, please get started," I replied.

I hadn't attended a soiree in years—not since the one where Prince Mael had revoked his engagement to my older sister, Adele. The news had since reported that the incidents surrounding the crown prince's marriage had been part of a staged plot. From what I had heard, Prince Mael had been disinherited and was now working as a border guard. The king's second son, Prince Axel, was now first in the line of succession. It was supposedly the first time that the heir apparent was not the crown prince.

Apparently, Prince Axel wasn't called the crown prince because the title was reserved for the king's firstborn son. That was what made it so special, yet Prince Mael, blinded by desire, had ruined it for himself, affecting my sister's future in the process. Today, my sister was acting wonderfully as crown princess of the neighboring country—if it weren't for that, she would probably still hate her ex-fiancé with a passion.

In the past, there had been some concerns about Prince Mael's accession to the throne, but now that Prince Axel had taken his place, everyone believed the kingdom would surely be in good hands.

I'd heard that high society had become peaceful thanks to that, but I was still terribly nervous. While the accusations that had led to my sister's canceled engagement had been declared false, my father had been arrested for running away with a married woman. He was living a quiet life now after serving his prison sentence, but he was still the target of harassment on occasion.

"My father said that someone threw garbage in his yard the other day," I said.

"There are people out there who do terrible things, huh?" said Coco.

"Indeed."

My father's crime hadn't yet faded from people's memories. It would probably still take some time. I had asked Gabriel if it would be better for me not to attend the soiree, but he had told me not to worry about it. Frankly, I had nothing *but* worries, but if I let that show, it would give others an opportunity to strike at me. I needed to remain dignified.

My dress for the evening was powder blue and custom-made. My mother-in-law and I had selected the material together. The neckline was wide and low, but the layered lace around it made it less noticeable. The dress was boned in the front and back, giving it a beautiful silhouette, and it had a gathered skirt that fluttered prettily when I moved.

The sisters braided my hair, wrapped it around my head like a crown, and inserted a silver lily-of-the-valley hairpin. The diamond earrings and necklace I wore had been part of my seized possessions that had been returned to me.

"Lady Francette, what do you think?" Rico and Coco asked, bringing me the full-length mirror.

I almost didn't recognize my reflection—it looked like a different person. "It's amazing... Thank you."

The sisters seemed relieved that there weren't any issues. Before I knew it, it was time for the soiree, and Gabriel came to pick me up.

"Fran, you look beautiful today," he said.

"Thank you."

Gabriel looked good in his tailcoat too. The pocket square in his chest pocket was the one I had given him. He cheerfully pressed a hand to his chest and expressed his gratitude.

"Mother is already waiting for us in the carriage," he said.

"Let's hurry and join her, then."

“Yes.”

He held out his hand and I gently laid my fingertips on his. We got into the carriage. It was time to face my first soiree in quite a long while.

Tonight’s soiree was hosted by the king. Though it was mainly intended as a social gathering, many young noble ladies newly debuted into society used the event as a means to glean marriage prospects. I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of attendees.

As my mother-in-law intended on spending the party with Mrs. Molière, she vanished as soon as she got out of the carriage. Gabriel and I entered the venue together.

It would’ve been nice to keep a low profile, but typically, the name of each guest was announced as they arrived, which would inevitably inform everyone of my presence. Tonight was no exception.

“Please welcome Grand Slime Duke Gabriel de Griet and Lady Francette.”

Everyone’s eyes fell on us at once. As if I weren’t already walking on enough of a bed of nails, they were all whispering as they stared me down. It was as clear as day that the subjects of conversation were my sister’s broken engagement and my father’s crimes. At this rate, Gabriel’s name would get dragged into their gossip too.

“Gabriel, I’d like to greet some people I know,” I said. “Can we part ways for a little while?”

When he didn’t respond, I looked up and saw that his gaze was focused elsewhere.

“Gabriel? Did you hear what I said?” I asked.

“Yes, I heard you. You want to greet your acquaintances. I think it’d be difficult to find anyone in this large crowd, so it’d be best for you to stay by my side for the night. You can greet them another time.”

“It’ll be okay. I’m good at finding people.”

“Fran, please stay with me.” His expression was unusually firm. It was the first time he’d ever insisted that I listen to him. Perhaps he thought I would get lost

on my own?

“If you’re worried, we can decide on a rendezvous point for when it’s time to go—”

Midway into my suggestion, a group of noblewomen appeared in front of us as if to block our path. I recognized them as my sister’s past rivals. They looked at me arrogantly and began to giggle.

“The older sister accepted her banishment and left right away, but the younger one stayed back, I see,” one of them said.

“How bold,” said another. “I wonder whom you take after... Is it your criminal father?”

“To think you’d be so shameless as to attend a soiree,” said a third.

I felt blood rush to my face. Everyone really *was* thinking what I’d imagined. I wanted to run away, but my arm was anchored to Gabriel’s, so I couldn’t move.

“Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?” one of the noblewomen asked.

“Well, if that’s what you want, I think I *will* say something,” Gabriel replied in my place. What was he going to say? I glanced at him nervously. “Isn’t it more shameless of *you* to speak to us when we did not speak to you?”

The noblewomen froze. In our country, noble etiquette dictated that one was not allowed to initiate a conversation with someone of higher rank than them. Our ranks were comparatively high. I was the daughter of Duke Mercœur, and Gabriel’s position as the slime duke meant he was second only to royalty. The only people whose status allowed them to speak to us first were the royal family and Gabriel’s fellow monster dukes.

By speaking poorly of me to my face, the noblewomen had done the equivalent of proclaiming their own lack of manners. That one accusation from Gabriel was enough to make them flush and flee the scene.

“Fran, let’s go somewhere we can relax,” Gabriel said.

“O-Okay.”



Gabriel led me to a balcony where there were guards posted at the doors so that no one would be able to disturb us. Inside the hall it had been hot and humid, but outside, there was a soft, pleasant breeze. Staying out here was a hundred times better than being exposed to the malicious gossip within.

“I’m sorry, Gabriel,” I said. “You got involved in that drama because of me.”

“Why are you apologizing? The fault lies with the ones who treat others with contempt.”

“Still, if I hadn’t been here, you wouldn’t have been forced to step in.” In the end, Gabriel had protected me, even though that was what I had been trying to avoid in the first place.

“Earlier, when you said you were going to greet your acquaintances, that was because you didn’t want to get me involved, wasn’t it?”

“So you knew.”

“Of course. You have a tendency to try to solve everything by yourself, Fran.”

He’d realized my intent all along. “It looks like it’s still too early for me to be attending soirees,” I mused.

“That’s not true. There’s no reason you shouldn’t be allowed to be here. It would be stranger if you *couldn’t* attend functions out of concern for those who harbor ill will against you.”

“You have a point...” Back when my sister’s engagement had been revoked, everyone had instantly changed the way they looked at me. That sudden transformation still scared me to this day. “But that wasn’t the only reason. I didn’t want them to think poorly of you either.”

“I don’t care what others think of me, so it’s perfectly fine.”

“Gabriel...thank you.” His words touched my heart. All this time, I had been agonizing over something so silly.

“People’s emotions change easily. If you constantly fret over them, you’ll only tire yourself out.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind going forward.” Perhaps there was no one in the

world who could be unanimously liked. It was just something that everyone had to come to terms with at some point in their life.

“No matter what happens, I will always be your number one ally, Fran.”

“That makes me so happy to hear. I’ll be relying on you, then.” *I should learn from his example and not let my heart waver.* “I really love how strong and resolute you are.” Whenever I found myself in danger, Gabriel always rushed to save me. He was my gallant hero.

I smiled at him, and he looked away, pushing the bridge of his glasses up. *Maybe it's about time to let him know that he can't hide his embarrassment that way because his ears turn red too.*

Gabriel cleared his throat and regarded me with a serious expression. “Fran, I love how noble, optimistic, and cheerful you are.”

His words warmed my wounded heart. “Thank you, Gabriel. That makes me really happy.”

“I feel the same way,” Gabriel said.

I'm so glad I met him.

After relaxing on the balcony for a while, we returned to the main floor. Everyone was chatting among themselves, paying us no mind.

“Isn’t there anyone you want to talk to, Gabriel?” I asked.

“No, not in particular...is what I’d like to say, but I was told to introduce you to the other monster dukes.”

“Will we be able to find them?”

“We’ll try our best.”

The first monster duke Gabriel spotted was the treant duke, a cardinal of the Holy Church dressed in bright-red vestments.

“This is my first time seeing a clergyman at a soiree,” I remarked.

“Apparently it’s the perfect place for collecting donations.” For the treant duke, who was known for his fixation with money, it seemed a rather logical

reason.

Said cardinal noticed us and approached with a smile. “If it isn’t the slime duke,” he said. “Long time no see since, well, yesterday—or this morning, I suppose. How did the hangover treat you?”

“I managed well enough.”

Much to my surprise, the treant duke also enjoyed drinking. I’d heard that the majority of clergymen abstained from alcohol, but apparently, he wasn’t one of them.

“Ah, is this your beautiful fiancée?” the treant duke asked.

“Yes, she is!” Gabriel’s eyes sparkled. “This is my perfect and beautiful fiancée, Francette.”

Gabriel’s introduction made me doubt my ears. What part of me was “perfect” or “beautiful”?

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said. “I am Francette de Blanchard, daughter of Duke Mercœur.”

“I hear that you’re the one in charge of the Lakeside Duck Bakery, which has been the talk of the town,” the treant duke said.

“Oh, yes.”

The treant duke slid close to me and whispered, “Be honest. You’re making quite the profit, aren’t you?”

What was he trying to get me to say? This certainly wasn’t the kind of conversation one would have in public.

“The truth of it is that one’s continued business success can be attributed to God’s good graces. What do you say to donating a portion of your profits to the Holy Church?”

“Would you please refrain from badgering Fran for money?” Gabriel asked. “You’ve literally just made her acquaintance.”

“I was simply talking about God’s blessings.”

“Every word that left your mouth served a financial ulterior motive.”

Gabriel's harsh remarks left the treant duke looking dejected.

"You mustn't be fooled, Fran. He's trying to elicit sympathy so that you'll be guilted into donating. I fell for it once before. Your Grace, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes, I look forward to it. I pray you sell lots of bonbonnières."

Gabriel tugged on my arm, and we parted ways with the treant duke.

The next duke I met was an exceptionally beautiful youth. He was perhaps thirteen or fourteen years of age—somewhere in his early teens. His beautiful hair looked like it was spun from gold, his beautiful eyes were the color of coral, and his beautiful arms and legs were long and slender. He was the fenrir duke, and if his appearance was anything to judge by, he was most certainly dearly loved by God.

"Huh, so this is the slime duke's fiancée? I was curious because you said she was beautiful, but she's nothing special." His lovely smile didn't conceal the cheekiness of his remark.

"How rude! Fran is the most beautiful person in the world!"

"You're clearly blind."

"How rude!!!"

What could I possibly say? Apparently, in Gabriel's eyes, I was the most beautiful person in the world. I was filled with appreciation, but at the same time, I didn't want him preaching that gospel to others.

After parting ways with the fenrir duke, we greeted the harpy duke, an incredibly intimidating man with the air of a criminal underworld boss. "I am Marcel de Fesendier Harpy," he said.

In his capacity as the leader of the Inquisition, many evildoers had been sentenced to darkness by his hand. He was someone whom everyone should fear, but Gabriel interacted with him as he would any other person.

"I'll be sure to send you an engagement gift," the harpy duke said.

"Thank you," said Gabriel. "I appreciate it."

"What would you like? I'd even be willing to deliver the head of someone who irked you."

It was probably a joke, but coming from the harpy duke, it didn't sound like one. Gabriel laughed cheerfully, but I couldn't even bring myself to smile.

"The ogre duke is here this year," Gabriel told me. "It's the first time in twenty years."

"Why were they absent for such a long time?" I asked.

"The seat was vacant, apparently. The title only goes to whoever can move an enormous rock in the ogre duke's domain. No one had been able to do it since the previous ogre duke's passing. But someone finally accomplished the feat."

"It must take tremendous strength to claim that title."

"Yes, indeed. Ah, speak of the devil. That's the ogre duke."

I looked in the direction Gabriel was pointing. "The ogre duke is a lady?!"

At the sound of my remark, the incredibly beautiful and charming young woman turned around. She looked to be around fifteen or sixteen years old. Her shell-pink hair was arranged in a half-down style, the top pinned up with a shining pearl hair ornament. Her matching dress and shoes were decorated with the same opalescent beads. Gabriel explained that those pearls could only be found in a forest lake within the ogre duke's territory. Seeing her like this, I could only imagine her as a princess of pearls, but given Gabriel's introduction, she was, without a doubt, the ogre duke. It was difficult to believe that she had been the one to move a giant rock.

"Good day, Your Grace," said the ogre duke. "Is the lady at your side the fiancée I've been hearing so much about?"

"Yes, this is my fiancée, Francette."

"Hello, I'm Francette de Blanchard, daughter of Duke Mercœur."

"It's an honor to meet you," the ogre duke said, squeezing my hand. Her smile was so beautiful, I could've sworn I saw flower petals fluttering around her. She was dazzlingly pretty. "My name is Emilie de Ogre. I'd love to be friends with you, Miss Francette."

“With me?”

“Yes. I heard that you were the talented lady who founded Triste’s Lakeside Duck Bakery, which has soared in popularity in the capital. I attended this soiree because I really wanted to get to know you.”

No one had ever shown so much interest in me before, so I wasn’t sure how to react. People had only insisted on getting to know my sister. I couldn’t help but be flustered by this beautiful girl’s advances.

“Your Grace, you’re making her uncomfortable,” said Gabriel.

“Ah, I’m very sorry. I was so excited; I forgot my manners.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” I said. “I’m happy you feel that way.”

The ogre duke looked relieved. “My family told me to buy the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s sweets while I was in the capital,” she explained. “But then I heard that not only were they sold on an irregular basis but there were always long lines and many people were unable to purchase them. I was in the throes of despair until Lord Gabriel brought the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s newest product—the bonbonnières—to the meeting. The moment I saw them, I wanted to jump with joy. It was my first time seeing crystal candies shining like jewels nestled within such beautiful porcelain. I was convinced that you must be a genius, Lady Francette.”

It seemed like an extreme exaggeration, but it certainly felt nice to be praised. “Lady Emilie, please come visit us in Triste sometime. You’re always welcome.”

“I definitely will!”

We shook hands before parting ways.

“I can’t believe the ogre duke is such a sweet, fairylike girl,” I said.

“Indeed,” said Gabriel. “Everyone was startled when she appeared at the monster duke meeting.”

I also couldn’t believe that she had been so interested in me. “No one’s ever told me that they want to be my friend before.”

“Why wouldn’t she? You’re brimming with talent.”

Reflecting on the past me, who had tried to remain inconspicuous and eke out an existence, I realized that a dramatic change was coming over me.

“Everyone is discovering how incredible you are,” Gabriel continued. “In the past, that was something only I knew.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes. Please have confidence in yourself.” He gently placed his hand on my back. It was strange how such a small gesture was enough to reassure me.

Now that I’d introduced myself to the majority of monster dukes, our business at the soiree was almost settled. “Today, we greeted the treant duke, the fenrir duke, the harpy duke, and the ogre duke. That leaves—”

“The dragon duke,” Gabriel said, just as the door used by royalty opened.

Everyone’s attention was drawn at once to Prince Axel’s entrance. Since he was the most skilled swordsman of the royal family, he currently held the title of dragon duke.

“Prince Axel really is popular,” I remarked.

“Because in addition to his excellent swordsmanship, he has a strong sense of justice. He represents an absolute ideal that others cannot hope to reach.”

As we spoke, I noticed that, for some reason, Prince Axel was walking in our general direction.

“Gabriel, do you think he has business with someone over here?” I asked.

“Perhaps there’s a special guest.”

We stepped to the side to avoid blocking Prince Axel’s way, and I averted my gaze politely, waiting for him to pass by. His movements stopped inexplicably right in front of us.

“Hello, Gabriel and Lady Francette. It’s been a long time since I saw either of you at a soiree.”

I looked up in surprise. Prince Axel was talking to *us*. I’d been so sure that he was looking for someone who happened to be in our direction. And for some reason, he was addressing Gabriel without an honorific. Perhaps the two of

them had grown much closer while sharing drinks. The atmosphere between them felt softer than it had been the last time Prince Axel had come to Triste.

Again, I found myself at the center of attention. Someone looking in my direction was whispering under their breath. My heart was pounding, but I couldn't cave in to pressure. For Gabriel's sake, I had to stand tall.

That said, Gabriel was fidgeting nervously as well. Prince Axel laughed at his skittishness, much to the astonishment of those watching. The dragon duke's smile was a precious sight—even I felt as if I were seeing it for the first time.

"I feel at ease with you two here," said Prince Axel. "I hope you'll continue to attend future events."

We responded with smiles and grateful nods.

"You are my bosom friends, so your enemies are also my enemies. If there is anything bothering you, do not hesitate to come to me."

His intentions became clear to me. He was probably aware that people were speaking ill of me and Gabriel. Prince Axel had cast a shield of protection on us by publicly declaring that he wouldn't tolerate injustice towards Gabriel and me.

"Until next time," he said, gallantly taking his leave.

What a wonderful person, I thought, my heart filled with appreciation. I would surely sleep well tonight.

"Now we just need to find the siren duke," I said.

"That won't be necessary," Gabriel replied. "She came to Triste just the other day."

Does he think that her feelings for him would make for an awkward meeting?

"Oh, is that Francette I see over there?!" came a voice from behind me.

I turned around to see it was none other than the siren duke herself. Not even casting a single glance in Gabriel's direction, she walked right up to me.

"Great," she said. "I wanted to have a proper chat with you. Gabriel isn't around right now, is he?"

"I'm right here," Gabriel said in a low voice, pushing the bridge of his glasses up.

The siren duke seemed strangely startled. "You seriously have no presence!" She hadn't seen Gabriel even though he was standing right next to me.

"Well, I'm sorry about that! More importantly, what did you say to Fran just now?"

"I just wanted to have a woman-to-woman talk with her. Is there a problem with that?" The siren duke stuck out her chest.

Gabriel was clearly miffed. "What makes you believe I'd leave you and Fran alone together?"

"It's because I didn't think you would that I was waiting for you to be gone!"

Their back-and-forth raised questions in my head. This whole time, I'd thought that the siren duke harbored feelings for Gabriel, but now...

"It'll only be a second," she insisted. "Just let me borrow Francette."

"Fran is not just some object to borrow."

"I didn't mean it that way!"

What was going on? It sounded like they were fighting over me. What kind of situation was this? I couldn't make sense of it, especially considering Gabriel's previous interactions with the siren duke. Well, this was a good opportunity to clarify things.

As the monster dukes glared at each other, I took their hands in mine and said to the siren duke, "Um, Your Grace, would you like to talk in another room? With Gabriel too, of course." The two stared blankly at me, but this was probably the best chance I was ever going to get. "Please," I implored, lowering my head.

They both agreed, and we walked to a room that had been prepared for VIP guests. Gabriel and the siren duke trailed after me in silence, not uttering a single word.

The attendant at the VIP room asked if there was anything we wanted.

“Please bring us tea with lots of milk,” I said. A situation like this generally called for alcohol, but it was probably best to refrain for Gabriel’s sake.

“Understood.”

Ten minutes later, I was probing into Gabriel and the siren duke’s relationship over milk tea. “Um, there’s something I’ve been curious about regarding you two.”

Their expressions noticeably became tense. There really *was* something between them.

“It started when I saw you exchanging letters...” According to Constance, it was a recent development. They hadn’t exchanged letters in the past, but they had been doing so frequently as of late. “Gabriel seemed to be hiding them, which I found suspicious.”

I glanced up at them to check their expressions. The siren duke had her face turned away from me, while Gabriel looked pale.

“I was surprised,” I continued. “I didn’t know you had such an intimate relationship.”

The two of them were taken aback. They hurriedly stood up and surged towards me as a united front.

“What ‘intimate relationship’?” asked the siren duke.

“Fran, what do you mean by that?” asked Gabriel.

They were clearly flustered. I asked them the question that had been on my mind this whole time.

“Were you lovers in the past?” I ensured my gaze was level as I looked at them, no longer caring what the answer was.

The siren duke buried her face in her hands.

Gabriel was trembling all over. “E-Erm, Fran, what about our letters made you think that?!”

“I overheard one of your conversations,” I said.



It had been the day of the siren duke's abrupt visit.

"Is there nothing I can do to make you accept my feelings?"

"The situation is different from before."

"You sounded so wistful as you exchanged those heartrending words," I said.

"Wait," said Gabriel. "This is a misunderstanding."

"Y-Yes!" the siren duke exclaimed. "A misunderstanding!"

"What is there to misunderstand?" I asked.

"She was asking me to open a Lakeside Duck Bakery branch store in the capital," Gabriel explained.

"A Lakeside Duck Bakery branch store...in the capital?" I looked at the siren duke, who nodded firmly. What was going on here? I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Even before the Lakeside Duck Bakery got its name, she was already suggesting that you sell your sweets in the capital," Gabriel continued. "At the time, I didn't think too deeply about it and replied, 'If that's what Fran wants.' But after a few months, the Lakeside Duck Bakery had gained popularity in the capital. When she learned that the sweets were now hard to get a hold of because of the demand, she sent me another letter, suggesting to open a branch store as soon as possible. She even offered to finance it. But if we opened a branch store, you would have to go to the capital. I couldn't imagine spending my days without you, so I turned her down before even discussing it with you." His shoulders slumped.

It seemed as though what Gabriel had been hiding from me was the talk of opening a Lakeside Duck Bakery branch store in the capital.

The siren duke told her side of the story next. "I couldn't accept his refusal because his previous response had been positive. So I went to him directly and stressed the importance of opening a branch store, but this hardheaded man wouldn't budge. After that, I became more preoccupied with other matters, so I continued to press him via letters whenever I had time to spare."

"Then why did you ask, 'Is there nothing I can do to make you accept my

feelings?” I queried.

“That was in the middle of me complaining about his refusal. I just couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t do it.”

“Then, Gabriel, what did you mean by ‘The situation is different from before’?”

“I realized I didn’t want to be separated from you,” he said. “I was being selfish.”

In other words, I had completely misunderstood *everything*. I couldn’t help but hang my head, dejected. If only I’d brought it up earlier, I wouldn’t have had to worry about it. Gabriel and I really did need to talk more.

“I never imagined my conversation with Gabriel could be mistaken for infidelity,” said the siren duke.

“The thought alone gives me goose bumps,” Gabriel muttered.

The siren duke nodded firmly in agreement.

“Um, Your Grace, may I ask you one last question?” I asked.

“What is it?” the siren duke asked.

“Gabriel once referred to you by your first name alone. That was another reason I believed you two were close. If you don’t mind, could you tell me why?”

The siren duke cocked her head.

Gabriel replied in her stead, seeming to understand. “That goes back to my academy days.”

“The academy?” I asked.

“Yes. The siren duke was a professor there at the time.”

“So she was once your teacher?”

Gabriel nodded. “It was a long time ago. She was in charge of my class, and she was an unconventional teacher. She forced all of the students to call her Magritte. I was the only one who refused and called her Professor Siren. One day, she challenged me to a spell-memorization match and said that if I lost, I

had to call her by her first name,” he said. “I tried as hard as I could to memorize them, but in the end, I didn’t stand a chance. Since she was my homeroom teacher for the second year as well, I ended up having to call her Magritte for the rest of my time at the academy. I never fully grew out of the habit, so sometimes I still call her that accidentally.”

“I see...” That probably also explained why the siren duke called him Gabriel. He had been her student, after all. “This was my complete misunderstanding.”

“I wish you would’ve said something as soon as it started bothering you,” said the siren duke.

“It is not so simple to directly confront the people involved in such sensitive matters,” Gabriel replied.

“Hmm. How troublesome.”

I felt extremely relieved now that everything had been cleared up. Like the siren duke said, I should have asked about it right away.

“Anyway, Francette, are you interested in opening a Lakeside Duck Bakery branch store in the capital?” the siren duke asked.

I looked at Gabriel and nearly burst out laughing. He was staring at me with a face like an abandoned puppy in the pouring rain.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m not thinking about expanding to the capital right now.” I still wanted to attract more tourists to Triste, and the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s operations hadn’t stabilized yet. I couldn’t possibly consider opening another store in these circumstances.

“You said ‘right now.’ Can I assume an opportunity might arise in the future?”

“It’s certainly not impossible, but that’s all I can say for now.” Though my answer was as vague as it could be, the siren duke seemed satisfied. I continued, “Thank you for your devotion to the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s sweets, Your Grace.”

“Now then, that’s my line. Thanks to your sweets, I’ve been able to interact with many different people.”

What an idyllic future—the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s sweets bringing people

together. I'll work hard to live up to those expectations.

Later, we reconvened with my mother-in-law and returned to the inn. I filled her in on the details about the issue with Gabriel and the siren duke, since I had previously asked for her advice.

"I'm truly sorry that my foolish son caused you so much worry, Miss Francette."

"It's okay. It was my fault for not asking him about it." As Wibble had once pointed out, I knew too little about Gabriel. I should have just asked him about everything I didn't know. "I've been reflecting on my mistakes."

"There's no need for that. I'd say Gabriel is worse for turning down the offer without consulting you first. Whether the Lakeside Duck Bakery opens a branch store ought to be *your* decision."

Gabriel, who was sitting next to me, looked uncomfortable. My mother-in-law did have a valid point.

"Fran, I share the blame for what happened," he said. "I truly apologize." He bowed.

I shared my honest feelings. "Gabriel, I have no intention of leaving your side, so if something like this happens again in the future, please tell me as soon as you can."

"Yes, I will keep that in mind."

That night, feeling refreshed with all of my worries resolved, I slept well.

Chapter 5: The Noble Lady Francette Has an Unexpected Encounter?!

It was the fourth—and final—day of our stay in the capital. The trip had gone by in the blink of an eye. Gabriel was attending the second day of the monster duke meeting, while my mother-in-law was going shopping with Mrs. Molière. The sisters had invited me along, but I had declined, not wanting to get in the way of their family outing. Rico and Coco were accompanying my mother-in-law as attendants, leaving me and Wibble alone at the inn.

“There’s nothing for us to do, huh?” I asked.

“*Wanna go out, then?*”

“I like that idea.”

“*Where to?*”

“Should we go see how the bonbonnières are selling?”

The new product had been reported on in the morning paper, and I was feeling overly restless. I had intended on staying put because Solene had said that my help wouldn’t be needed, but surely a quick peek wouldn’t be a problem.

I took out a dress that I’d brought from home which resembled the style of a village girl. If I wore it, I wouldn’t stand out in the old part of town. After dipping my hat low over my face, I had Wibble transform into a bag.

“I don’t look like a noble, do I?” I asked.

“*Fra’s disguise is perfect!*”

I didn’t think it was *perfect*, but, well, whatever. I left a letter in Gabriel’s room just in case, explaining that I was going to check on the bonbonnière sales at the pastry store.

“All right, let’s head out, Wibble!”

“Gooo!”

I left the inn and walked down the street with a spring in my step.

“I wonder how many customers came to buy the bonbonnières?”

“A lot!”

“I hope so.” The bonbonnières took up a lot of storage space, so it would be troublesome for the store if they didn’t sell out. “If there are any left, should I buy a few myself?”

“Wibble wants one too!”

Our lighthearted conversation was interrupted when I realized that people were staring at me. Since Wibble was disguised as a bag, they probably thought I was talking to myself in two voices.

“S-Sorry, Wibble. It looks like people think I’m mumbling to myself, so I’m going to stop talking for a while.”

“That might be for the best.”

With Wibble’s understanding, I walked in silence towards the carriage stand. As usual, the central square was busy with people coming and going. A first-time visitor could easily get lost here. Just as I was about to quickly cross through, a familiar face passed by in front of me.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed.

There was no mistaking that adorable girl of about seven years old, with cream-yellow hair and sky-blue eyes. She was walking alone in the city, with no attendant or bodyguard in sight. Why was she wandering around such a busy place?

I couldn’t help but call out, “Excuse me, Princess Griselda!”

The girl turned around, startled. Then she broke into a run.

“W-Wait!” I shouted.

Her expression had clearly been one of “I’ve been found!” *She must’ve sneaked out of the castle*, I thought as I chased after her.

“Please wait! I-I’m not from the castle!” Perhaps she hadn’t recognized me

because of the hat over my face. I didn't think it'd help, but I took it off and named myself. "I'm the slime duke's fiancée, Francette de Blanchard!"

Princess Griselda froze in place and turned around again. She seemed to be thinking something over. She must've had a reason for being here. It'd be best if we could talk somewhere she could feel at ease.

"U-Um, would you care to join me for tea?" I asked. There happened to be a coffee shop right in front of us. It was one I had frequented several times in the past with my sister, so I knew it would be fine. "This shop has delicious scones," I explained, slowly approaching Princess Griselda and holding out my hand. She placed her small fingertips on mine.

And so, I had tea with Princess Griselda. I had many questions on my mind—why had she been alone in the central district? Why didn't she have an attendant or bodyguard with her? She seemed to be under some kind of stress, though, so I wanted her to calm down with some tea and sweets first.

The tea was served with a generous helping of honey, and the scones with cherry jam and clotted cream were exquisite. Princess Griselda must've been hungry—she finished two scones on her own. Her complexion seemed to improve too. She was probably calm enough to explain now. Before I could ask about her situation, she broke the silence between us first.

"Um, Francette, I'm sorry. And thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I came here because I wanted to buy something."

"By yourself?"

She nodded. "Today is my mother's birthday, and I wanted to buy a present for her. I already had something bought with the money I was given, but that was prepared by my attendant. I want to give her something I chose by myself, so I sneaked out of the castle. My room has a secret passage that leads outside, so I used that to get to the central district."

"Won't your attendant panic when she realizes you're missing? There might be a big commotion at the castle right about now."

"It's okay. I told her I'd be sleeping because I didn't feel well. The doctor even examined me and said to rest for the whole day." In that case, her attendant likely wouldn't go to her room outside of mealtimes. "I said I didn't need lunch and put a stuffed animal under my blanket, so she probably won't notice I'm gone."

Would that really be enough to deceive her attendant? I couldn't help but feel skeptical.

"I know it's dangerous to go out by myself, but I want to make my mother happy!" Princess Griselda pleaded, her eyes full of tears. It had probably taken her a lot of courage to sneak outside, and right as she had been in the middle of her mission to surprise her mother, I had discovered her. "I won't tell anyone that I ran into you, so please turn a blind eye!"

I definitely couldn't do that. The thought of something happening to her made me shudder.

My silence brought a miserable expression onto Princess Griselda's face, as if she had fallen into the depths of despair. Large teardrops streamed down her cheeks. "Even if you bring me back, I'll escape again," she said.

If her resolve was that unshakable, then there was only one thing I could do. "Please allow me to help you," I said.

"H-Help me?"

"Yes. May I accompany you on your shopping errand?"

"You would do that for me?"

"Of course."

The wiser choice would've been to take her back to the castle. But Princess Griselda didn't have a reckless personality—this would probably be her first and last great adventure. I didn't want her bravery to go to waste, and if something were to happen, I had faith that Wibble would save her. That was why I had offered to accompany her.

"So, is there a present you have in mind?" I asked.

"A bonbonnière!"

“Huh?”

“I want to give my mother a bonbonnière from the Lakeside Duck Bakery. That’s what I was going to buy.”

Her choice of gift stunned me. “Would you like the spare one I have in my inn room, then?”

“No, I want to buy it at the store.”

I supposed she wanted to buy it and give it to the queen with her own hands. “Let’s go right now, then.”

Princess Griselda’s face immediately brightened at my suggestion. “Oh, but I didn’t see the store anywhere around here.”

“It isn’t in the central district—it’s in the old part of town.”

“Oh! Is that so? No wonder I couldn’t find it. My attendant once told me that the old part of town is very far away.” At Princess Griselda’s speed, it would probably take an hour to walk there.

“We can get there in about thirty minutes if we take an omnibus.”

“Um...what’s an omnibus?”

“It’s a horse-drawn carriage that goes all around the city. You share it with other passengers.”

“I didn’t know there were carriages like that! You’re so knowledgeable, Francette.”

“I’m honored to hear you say that.”

“How do you know so many things?”

“N-No reason in particular.” I couldn’t say that I used to take the omnibus after my family’s downfall. “Shall we get going?” There was still an hour before the pastry store opened, but it would be best to hurry just in case. “Oh, but first, you’ll need a disguise.”

“A disguise?”

“Yes. You’ll stand out too much in the old part of town if you look like that.” Frankly, her luxurious satin dress decorated with jewels stood out even within

the central district. Her shining golden hair and gemlike eyes also radiated an aura of eminence. I was surprised that she hadn't been kidnapped immediately after sneaking out of the castle.

Princess Griselda seemed excited at the prospect of donning a disguise. It was secretly nerve-racking for me, but I had no choice but to help grant her wish.

"Francette, please call me Selda. And no polite language until we're back at the castle."

"Under— I mean, okay, Selda."

Princess Griselda nodded cheerfully.

Before we set out, I entrusted Wibble to her. "Selda, can you hold Wibble for me?"

"Oh! It's Wibble the spirit slime!"

"*Hi again!*"

The two of them had met before, quite a long time ago. I decided to pair them up in case anything happened, and it turned out that the sight of Princess Griselda hugging Wibble was the most adorable thing in the world.

"Now, let's go," I said. I held out my hand, and after taking it, she squeezed it back. *I must not let go of this hand at any cost*, I vowed in my heart.

Our first destination was a store selling miscellaneous items. There, I bought a child's overcoat. It completely covered the princess's body, so as long as she kept the hood up, no one would be able to tell that she was royalty. I also bought a rabbit mask to hide her face.

"This is so cute!" she exclaimed.

"I'm glad you like it. Can you wear it until we head back home?"

"Okay, I will."

At the register, the elderly shopkeeper smiled at Princess Griselda and said, "Good for you, little lady. Your maid is buying so much for you."

The princess and I both smiled awkwardly, not sure how to respond. Apparently, to an outsider, I looked like Princess Griselda's maid. Perhaps it was

exacerbated by the fact that I was wearing a commoner's dress.

After getting the princess disguised, we headed for the carriage stand.

"Francette, is that where we board the omnibus?"

"Yes, that's right."

There was already a line forming, so we went to the end. The carriage arrived not long after.

"This is an omnibus?!" Princess Griselda exclaimed. "It's enormous!"

It was a double-decker omnibus that could fit twenty passengers.

"The upper level is open-air, so you can feel the wind as the carriage moves."

"I want to sit there, then!"

The princess was quite brave. Even I had never sat on the upper level before. I was a bit scared, but for her sake, I gathered my courage and climbed up.

"Wow! We're so high up," said Princess Griselda.

"Y-Yes, we are." It was higher than I'd expected, but the princess was enjoying herself, and that was all that mattered.

The carriage lurched as it set off.

"Ahh!" I shouted.

"It's okay, Francette." Princess Griselda hugged me and gently patted my back. Reassuring her was supposed to be my job, yet she was doing it for me instead. What a kind girl.

"I didn't expect it to shake this much," I said.

"Me neither, but it's fun."

Since we were so high up, we passed right next to the tree branches, sometimes brushing against the twigs. Leaves fluttered onto the seats.

Princess Griselda picked one up as if it were a precious jewel. "Francette, is it okay if I take this home with me?"

"Yes, of course."

She carefully stowed it away in the pouch we'd bought at the general store. The sight was nothing short of adorable.

"Francette, on rainy days, does the upper level get all wet?"

"When it rains, the staff put up a canopy."

"I see. That sounds like fun too."

I'd ridden the omnibus in the rain before, so I knew that the waterproofing wasn't perfect. The conversation brought back memories of the upper level flooding into the lower one and getting me wet. *Thank goodness it isn't raining today.*

About five minutes later, we arrived at the old part of town. Noticing Princess Griselda trying to pay the conductor with a gold coin, I hurriedly stopped her and covered both our fares.

When we got off the carriage, she asked me with a confused expression, "Francette, why didn't you let me pay?"

"High-value currency like gold coins can't be used in the old part of town," I explained. The precise reasoning was that the people doing business wouldn't be able to provide enough change.

"I had no idea. I only brought gold coins with me today."

"I'll lend you some money, then. Make sure to pay me back the next time we meet, okay?"

"Okay."

I didn't need to be repaid, but I figured Princess Griselda wouldn't accept the money otherwise. "Now then, shall we go?"

"Yes."

The pastry store was about a ten-minute walk from the carriage stand. Unfortunately, the old part of town wasn't the safest of places, so we would need to make our way there quickly before we attracted unwanted attention.

"Selda, let's hurry," I said.

"Is the store opening soon?"

“Yes, very soon.”

Princess Griselda did her best to keep up with me, carrying Wibble in one hand. *Almost there*—or so I thought before something unexpected happened. A garbage can came flying out of an alley.

“Eek!” I screamed. Princess Griselda and I both froze.

A man came out, walking languidly. He grinned at us and said, “Sorry ‘bout that. I kicked it without thinking.”

“I-It’s fine,” I said, hiding Princess Griselda behind me as I faced him.

“Wanna come to my place so I can check that you aren’t hurt anywhere?”

“No, that won’t be necessary.”

“No need to be so reserved.”

As soon as the man reached for me, I dug into my pocket and threw out something. The next moment, a cloud of smoke erupted, wafting through the air.

“Urk! Wh-What the hell is this?!”

It was one of Gabriel’s specially made smoke bombs, enchanted to make anyone with ill intentions cry uncontrollably. The item I’d been given for self-defense was doing its job.

“Wh-What is this stuff?! *Cough, cough!* Ugh, dammit!”

While the man was coughing, I broke into a run, pulling Princess Griselda by the hand. We were able to lose him in the thick of the smoke.

We arrived at the pastry store to find a substantial line. With this many people around, we wouldn’t have to worry about the man finding us. We joined the line at the back and took a moment to catch our breath.

“Selda, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. What about you, Francette?”

“I’m all right too, somehow.” I hadn’t thought we’d *actually* run into a scoundrel. I had Gabriel’s smoke bomb to thank for getting us out of that situation safely. “Selda, were you scared?”

"No, not at all! Father's royal knights are bigger and scarier than that man was."

"I-I see." I had been afraid of the girl getting traumatized, but luckily, it didn't seem like that would be an issue. I also couldn't help but wonder what kind of knights these were, who were scarier than the miscreants in the slums.

I counted roughly a hundred people in line. There was a limit of one bonbonnière per family, so we were somewhere around the cutoff.

"This is amazing, Francette. The Lakeside Duck Bakery is so popular."

"I imagine the newspaper promotion helped."

"Yes! That article was why I wanted to buy a bonbonnière. Mother loves the Lakeside Duck Bakery sweets that Magritte brings."

"I'm very happy to hear that."

I could guarantee Princess Griselda a bonbonnière if I went through the back door and asked Solene. But the girl wanted to buy it under the same conditions as everyone else, and I didn't want her sentiments to go to waste. I decided not to intervene and to continue accompanying her on her big adventure.

After a while, the store opened. The line slowly moved forward.

"Francette, I've never been in a line where I can't see the front," Princess Griselda said.

"Me neither."

My original intention had been just to see how the bonbonnière sales were going, but by a miraculous twist of fate, I was now standing in line for them. Most of the people around me had brought the morning paper with them, and I was able to see them marvel at the picture of the bonbonnière in the article.

The women in front of us began to whisper.

"The porcelain is very beautiful, but this is just concept art, isn't it?"

"Yes. The real product can't possibly be as beautiful as the illustration."

"What a great deal, though. You can buy sweets and get porcelain at the same time."

The newspaper article featured Coco's design art. These women would surely be surprised when they found out that the real bonbonnières were just as beautiful.

The line continued to move forward very, very slowly.

"Selda, if you're tired, Wibble can turn into a chair!"

"I'm fine for now," the princess said.

However, I worried whether her stamina would last until the end. We still had a long way to go, so I suggested accepting Wibble's offer.

"Okay," she said. "Wibble, please turn into a chair."

"Leave it to me!"

Wibble transformed into a squishy armchair. The moment Princess Griselda sat down, she looked relieved. She must've been tired, even if she hadn't wanted to admit it out loud.

The Wibble-chair shifted forward with the line, and Princess Griselda giggled in amusement because she hadn't been expecting it to move. I'd been able to see many different expressions on her face over the course of the day. I definitely wasn't supposed to be taking her around town like this, though. I was fully prepared to face punishment. Perhaps her absence would be noticed soon. All I could do was pray that we wouldn't be found before she bought the bonbonnière.



As we waited, the successful purchasers passed by, singing the bonbonnière's praises.

"This is an amazing product."

"I can't believe this is a candy dish."

A variety of emotions washed over me, ranging from happiness to embarrassment. The craftsmen had worked very hard on this product, and I was sincerely glad that the people in the capital recognized their talents.

"Francette, everyone's praising your bonbonnières," said Princess Griselda.

"Yes, it's an honor." I wouldn't have been able to hear this feedback if I'd only watched from afar. "I was able to hear everyone's thoughts since we came to buy a bonbonnière."

The princess beamed at me. After an hour and a half of waiting, it was finally our turn.

"Um, do you still have bonbonnières?" Princess Griselda asked Solene nervously.

"Uh, let me see..." Solene turned around and rummaged through the boxes in the storeroom.

The women ahead of us in line had been able to buy them. Was there still one in stock for Princess Griselda? I watched anxiously.

"W-We do!" Solene exclaimed. "This is the very last one."

The moment Princess Griselda heard that, she clutched her chest and burst into tears. She must've become emotional at the prospect of achieving her goal. While she was wiping away her tears, I went to pay for the bonbonnière.

"Wait, Francette?! Why are you here? Who is this girl?" Solene asked.

"I'll explain later," I said. "Let me pay for this."

"A-All right."

To keep the transactions timely while accounting for the long line, no packaging service was provided. Solene handed the bonbonnière over as is, and Princess Griselda accepted it carefully, cradling it like a baby.

“May you be blessed with happiness!” Solene said cheerily. It wasn’t her usual send-off—perhaps because she’d heard about the custom of giving bonbonnières out at weddings as a way of sharing one’s happiness with the guests.

When we went back outside, Princess Griselda turned to me with an excited look on her face. “Francette, I bought the bonbonnière!”

“Congratulations. I’m kind of happy too.”

“Thank you!”

There had been so many people in line that I had half given up on being able to buy it. We’d been fortunate that there’d been one left in stock, and now it was in Princess Griselda’s hands.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Francette!”

“That’s not true. We never would’ve come this far without your efforts.”

“Thank you so much.” Princess Griselda hugged the bonbonnière lovingly and nuzzled it against her cheek. Wibble applauded her.

“Now then, shall we get you home?”

“Yes, let’s go.”

I extended my hand, and Princess Griselda grabbed it, holding on to it firmly. All I had to do now was get her safely to the castle, and my mission would be accomplished. She was probably exhausted by this point. I would’ve loved to carry her on my back, but I didn’t have the strength to hold up a seven-year-old for that long. *I’m sorry for being so weak*, I apologized in my heart as we hurried through the old part of town.

Just as we were about to reach the carriage stand, disaster struck again.

“Yo, remember me?” The man from earlier appeared once more, blocking our way.

But I have to get Princess Griselda back to the castle as soon as possible... I gritted my teeth. To make matters worse, the man didn’t seem to be alone this time. Three other men came to surround us.

“Huh, I thought you were kind of plain, but you’re actually really pretty!”

I had heard those words a hundred times while accompanying my sister. They hardly came as a shock to me.

One of the men crouched down and asked Princess Griselda, “Little girl, can we borrow your mom?”

Apparently they thought we were mother and daughter. Even if I’d gotten married at fifteen, there was no way I could have a seven-year-old daughter. But that wasn’t important right now. What mattered was that I didn’t want them to get Princess Griselda involved.

As I moved to hide her behind me, she did something completely unexpected: she slapped the man’s cheek with all her might.

“Guh!”

The attack seemed to do quite a bit of damage, perhaps because he hadn’t seen it coming. Panicking, I pulled Princess Griselda to me and hugged her tightly.

“Th-That hurt, dammit!”

“Uh-oh, now you’ve done it.”

“You broke his cheekbone.”

“How’re you gonna take responsibility for that?”

What were these men talking about? A frail little girl couldn’t possibly break someone’s bones. In fact, I was more worried about the princess’s hand.

“Let’s make ‘em pay for damages.”

“One gold coin.”

“Nah, make it a hundred gold coins.”

One of the men pointed at the bonbonnière in Princess Griselda’s hands. “Hang on, that kid’s holding the thing from the newspaper.”

“If it was in the news, does that mean it’s valuable?”

“Hand it over, then.”

“It’s a peaceful solution for everyone.”

“C’mon, give it.”

The man’s outstretched hand was brutally slammed away by a Wibble-turned-hammer.

“Gyaaaah!”

“Wha?! Where’d that hammer come from?!”

“Dammit, another weapon?!”

“You’re not getting away with this!”

I tried to throw another smoke bomb, but the first man grabbed my arm.

“I’m not falling for that again!”

His hand also fell victim to the brutal judgment of the Wibble-hammer.

“Gwuuuh!”

My own hand now free, I flung the smoke bomb at the ground before the man’s feet. It was supposed to activate on impact, but it seemed that there wasn’t enough force. However, the action did succeed in making the man wary.

“That’s the thing that releases smoke that makes your eyes hurt!”

Seeing an opening in his hesitation, I pulled Princess Griselda by the hand and began to sprint for the recently arrived omnibus. Unfortunately, as we took off, the carriage began to leave.

“No!” I lamented. There was no choice but to keep running.

A beat later, the men were on our tail. “Get back here!”

Princess Griselda’s hand dragged mine back as she lagged behind me. I could tell she was already at her limit. *Maybe I should have Wibble swallow us both up and esca—*

“Got you!” came a voice from right behind us. One of the men had grabbed Princess Griselda’s arm...in theory. In reality, the arm he had taken hold of was Wibble in disguise.

“Punishmeeent!” Wibble punched the man in the face.

Squatting down on the spot, unable to muster the energy to move farther, Princess Griselda huffed out, “Fran...cette...I can’t...go on...”

“Yes, you can!” I crouched in front of her and told her to get on my back.

“No...I can’t...do that. Francette...run away...by yourself...”

“Selda!”

I needed to at least hide her somewhere. Just as I was about to pull her into my arms, a wooden stick appeared in front of my eyes. The man had approached us at some point and was now looming over us menacingly. I hugged Princess Griselda protectively and closed my eyes as she cried in my arms.

If only I’d taken her back to the castle from the very beginning, she never would’ve had to go through something so traumatizing. I was overcome with regret.

“Dieee!”

I gritted my teeth and braced for impact, but the pain never came. Instead, I heard the *clang* of the stick hitting something hard.

“Huh?!” Slowly opening my eyes, I saw the kaolin slime before me. “You’re...”

“Fran!”

I turned around to see Gabriel. “Gabriel? Why are you here?”

“There was a big commotion because the princess went missing, so I was looking for her. I searched around the central district before going back to the inn to ask for your help, and that was when I found your letter. As soon as I read it, I wondered if Princess Griselda had gone to buy a bonbonnière. I didn’t expect to find you two together, though.”

My letter had led to the princess’s early discovery.

“Fran, is Princess Griselda unharmed?”

“Yes, of course.”

Gabriel looked at the girl clinging to me and his expression softened in relief. Princess Griselda was safe.

“Why you...!”

“Wah!”

The man kicked the kaolin slime away and tried to approach us.

“*Not so fast!*” Wibble turned into a giant butterfly net and restrained him. The more the man struggled, the more it tangled around his body.

“Dammit! What the hell is this?!”

“*A bug-catching net. You’re a pest, so I caught you!*”

I couldn’t help but laugh at Wibble’s harsh words. Even Princess Griselda, who had been crying, smiled.

“I see the princess!” That was the siren duke’s voice.

A group of knights rushed towards us and restrained the men. A woman, presumably Princess Griselda’s attendant, also ran up to us and hugged the girl’s small frame.

“Thank goodness you’re safe, Griselda!” the siren duke exclaimed.

“I’m sorry for sneaking out, Magritte,” said Princess Griselda. “It’s all my fault.”

“I know you’re sorry; don’t worry. I’ll let His and Her Majesty do the lecturing.”

Her words made my blood run cold.

“Fran, are you all right?” Gabriel asked.

“I-I might not be. I was the one who brought Princess Griselda all the way here.”

“You did?”

“Yes, so don’t be upset with her.”

Princess Griselda tried to explain, but her attendant began to guide her away. “Francette, thank you for everything!” She held up the bonbonnière as she waved goodbye.

The siren duke walked up to me with a smile. I couldn’t help but tense up.

“You did well, Francette,” she said.

“I-I did?”

“You kept Princess Griselda safe, didn’t you?”

“Y-Yes, but...” I hadn’t been able to stop her. If I had brought her back to the castle as soon as I’d found her, things never would have escalated to this point. “My poor judgment put her into a terrible situation.”

“No, that’s not true.”

“But if I’d brought her back to the castle...”

“You couldn’t have. That would’ve been asking for the impossible.”

Why was it impossible? I tilted my head in confusion.

“Once she’s got her mind set on something, she won’t listen to anyone’s objections. So even if you’d stopped her, she would’ve found a way here somehow. I shudder to think of what would’ve happened if she’d come here alone.”

Did that mean I hadn’t made the wrong decision to accompany her here instead of taking her back to the castle?

“Don’t worry, Francette. No one will blame you for what you did.”

When I heard those words, I nearly collapsed on the spot. Gabriel caught me before my knees hit the ground. He scooped me up and proceeded to carry me in his arms, bridal-style.

“Eep! G-Gabriel, you don’t need to carry me.”

“What are you talking about? You’re clearly unsteady.”

I couldn’t deny that—not when all of the strength had left my body. I couldn’t even stand properly.

Wibble came back from restraining the man and hopped onto Gabriel’s shoulder.

“Fra, do you want Wibble to be your bed?”

Anyone could tell that lying down in a public place with pedestrian traffic

would attract attention and be horribly embarrassing. I had no choice but to accept Gabriel's kindness.

"Fran, let's head back."

"Yes, let's."

After getting caught up in an unexpected commotion, I returned to the inn in Gabriel's arms.





We were supposed to return to Triste that day, but I ended up being bedridden for the next three days. I had collapsed after fulfilling my important mission of protecting Princess Griselda, and according to the doctor, it was a cold caused by extreme exhaustion. My mother-in-law said that the fatigue from the incident might've been compounded by my working too hard on producing bonbonnières.

I received a thank-you letter from the queen. She wrote that she was very pleased with the bonbonnière she had received from Princess Griselda, thanked me for protecting her daughter, and praised my courage. It was a courteously written letter, and much to my relief, there was no mention of blame. The newspaper featured a picture of the queen smiling and holding a bonbonnière on its front page, bringing the Lakeside Duck Bakery to its greatest level of fame yet.

Gabriel, however, was struggling due to the many people trying to visit him.

“We need to go back to Triste as soon as possible, then,” I said.

“This is the first time in my life that I’ve wanted to return to that land sooner,” he muttered.

“Let’s go home.”

We left the inn that had housed us during our stay in the capital. Thanks to Gabriel’s teleportation magic, the return trip only took a second. After being gone for so many days, as soon as I breathed in the air at the slime duke residence, I felt at ease.

“Nothing beats home,” I said. Even though I’d only been here for a little over a year, I felt as safe here as I had when I’d lived with my family.

I noticed Gabriel and my mother-in-law smiling at me.

“Um, did something happen?” I asked.

“No, I’m just very happy to hear you call this place home,” said Gabriel.

“You think of this place as your home, don’t you?” asked my mother-in-law.

"Yes, I do," I replied.

Gabriel hugged me, while my mother-in-law jumped for joy.

Without me noticing, Triste had become my homeland. I wanted to cherish the people I'd met and the things I'd found here. I truly believed that.

Nestled in the warmth of Gabriel's embrace, I realized how incredibly happy I was.

Extra: Francette's Diary

Month A, Day X

Wibble suddenly said it was going to make a contract with me. Wibble and Gabriel canceled their contract after getting in a fight, so this would indeed be possible.

However, Gabriel was greatly opposed. He got into a fistfight with Wibble over it. Somewhere in the middle of that, he started saying that he wanted to make a contract with me as well. It made no sense.

The fight ended in a draw. Gabriel and Wibble, battered and bruised, both bowed to me and said, "Please make a contract with me."

I felt bad, but I declined them both.

Month A, Day Y

Prince Axel came to visit. He seemed relaxed, as if he were dropping by his family's house. He brought a spirit stone as a gift.

Spirit stones are rare and valuable items loved by spirits and used to summon them. Just when I was wondering why he'd brought it, he explained that it was for Wibble. Apparently Wibble has evolved from a monster into a spirit. That's our Wibble—it really is a special, blessed slime.

Wibble shyly accepted the spirit stone from Prince Axel. Needless to say, it was a wholesome and heartwarming moment.

Month B, Day Z

My mother-in-law sent Mrs. Molière a letter inviting her to visit Triste. She'd surely be surprised to see how much the region had changed. A few days later, my mother-in-law received a reply—Mrs. Molière had accepted the invitation.

My mother-in-law was restless on the day of Mrs. Molière's visit. When a

maid informed her of her sister's arrival, she did something unexpected: she ran at full speed to greet her.

And so, the two reunited at the front door. It hasn't been long since their reconciliation in the capital, but for these separated sisters, a reunion in their homeland must've been special.

Seeing my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière crying brought tears to my eyes too. I'm so happy for them.

Month Y, Day A

Gabriel asked me out on a date—to a forest with wild berries. He teleported us there, and it turned out to be unbelievably foggy.

Gabriel held his head in his hands and lamented, "Today of all days!"

Both of us are busy nowadays, so we haven't been able to spend much time together. Taking a walk in a foggy area was dangerous, though. We had no choice but to give up.

After that, we went back home and had a tea party. That was a precious moment in its own way.

Month Y, Day X

Gabriel showed me his new invention. It's called...a fog remover. He said he made it during his work breaks because he was frustrated about the fog ruining our last date.

"Now we won't have to worry about sudden fog," he said happily.

"What a waste of talent," my mother-in-law muttered. I held back the urge to nod and agree.

Month Y, Day Z

Nico finally ran out of candidates for her great matchmaking mission. She said that every time Alexandrine met a male duck, she'd boldly challenge him to a fight. Why was this happening?

Alexandrine proudly puffed out her chest when Nico explained that she was the strongest duck in Triste. Well, if Alexandrine's happy this way, far be it from me to complain.

Month N, Day N

Coco held her first solo exhibition. Amazingly, many nobles from the capital came to see it, and she sold almost all of her paintings. I'm so proud of myself for discovering her talent and encouraging her to pursue it.

Coco was lacking confidence for so long, but now she's become much more self-assured. I want more and more people to see her art.

Month N, Day B

As for me, my life is the same as usual. I have Gabriel, Wibble, my mother-in-law, and Alexandrine, and I cherish the time I spend with my beloved family.

I want to treasure each and every day.

Extra: Gabriel's Irritation

My fiancée, Francette de Blanchard, is the most beautiful lady in the world.

Normally, she would be completely out of my league, but various things happened that led to our engagement. That is, she got caught up in a certain incident and became a fallen noble. Even in the face of these unfortunate circumstances, she continued to live a pure and righteous life, her beauty never faltering.

Normally, she never should've had to involve herself with me and my slimes. Someone like me wasn't worthy of being in her presence. I wanted to support her from the shadows, but in the end, we met, and even after coming to Triste, she continued to live with the same vigor.

One day, I received a letter from the siren duke, praising Francette's pastries and saying that they were special, which I completely agreed with. The siren duke suggested opening a store in the capital. Indeed, Triste didn't deserve Francette—she would be better off blossoming in the capital. I replied to the siren duke's offer with a simple "I'll look into it."

Over the next year, I spent my days happily with Francette. It was the happiest I'd ever been in my life. But one day, I received another letter from the siren duke. She wanted to know the status of her request to open a Lakeside Duck Bakery branch store in the capital.

Living together with Francette had been so fulfilling that I'd completely forgotten about my promise to the siren duke. A year ago, I had been open to the idea of establishing a store in the capital. But now, I couldn't imagine life without Francette. If she opened a branch store, she would have to go there frequently. The thought of her being away from home for a few days was utterly heart-wrenching. As such, I selfishly declined the siren duke's proposal without consulting with Francette.

At the time, it never occurred to me that my impulsive decision would cause Francette grief. Since I'd formally turned down the siren duke's offer in writing,

I assumed that she would give up. This assumption turned out to be wrong. The siren duke came to Triste and tried to negotiate with Francette directly, which I did everything I could to prevent. I also intercepted her attempts to reach Francette by mail.

The siren duke stubbornly continued to contact me. When she came to Triste again, I was indignant that she'd go to such lengths. She must've been frustrated, too, that I refused to give her permission to speak with Francette. We ended up arguing.

"The Lakeside Duck Bakery deserves better than to be restricted to Triste!"

"We have our own strategy. We don't need others meddling in our affairs."

"But you said you'd look into it! Is there nothing I can do to make you accept my feelings?"

"The situation is different from before." I had always been fond of Francette, but after a year, my feelings had deepened. I could no longer think of being separated from her. "I put her feelings first in everything I do," I lied. In reality, I was being selfish because I didn't want to be apart from her.

I received swift punishment for making this decision without Francette's input. Shockingly, she mistakenly thought that there was something more to my relationship with the siren duke. I was lost as to why she'd believe such a thing, but perhaps it was because my recent attempts to hide my correspondence with the siren duke had appeared suspicious. I confessed my guilt, and she forgave me. I also vowed that I would consult with her on everything going forward.

I was worried that Francette would be fed up with her life in Triste after this trip to the capital, but instead, she said that Triste was her home. The slow life in Triste seemed to suit her better than the glamor of the capital. Needless to say, I was very grateful to her.

Bonus Short Story

Gabriel's Spring Monologue

Today, it was foggy and overcast in my territory as usual. But for once, I wasn't in a terrible mood. This was because I was having tea with my fiancée, Fran. She had praised Triste's tea, saying that it was "very delicious," and I had nearly cried from gratitude.

"Things have finally calmed down, huh?" she said.

"Yes, indeed."

The slime outbreak season had passed, and the monster duke meeting had ended without incident. I could now spend time with Fran in peace.

Fran, who had been elegantly drinking her tea, suddenly looked to the window. I assumed there was something outside, but when I turned, I saw nothing but the usual dull scenery. Fran had a cheerful expression on her face, though, as if she were perceiving something that I could not.

"Fran, is there something outside?" I asked.

"The birdsong is very pretty."

"Ah, that's the sound of sunny skylarks."

"Are they different from normal skylarks?"

"Yes. You can only hear them singing when the next day is going to be sunny."

"Ooh, I see. So it's going to be sunny tomorrow, right? Maybe I should plan a picnic."

"Let's do it!"

Fran's eyes widened at my outburst. She'd mentioned a picnic, but that didn't mean she wanted to have one with *me*. As soon as I realized that, I was filled with embarrassment. Just as I was about to look down in shame, she took my

hand, smiled happily, and nodded.

“Fran...you’ll go on a picnic with me?”

“Yes. I’ll make lunch, so look forward to it.”

“Th-Thank you.”

Much to my surprise, Fran was willing to have a picnic with me. Joy welled up within me. I’d never been as thankful for sunny skylarks as I was today.

“Hey, Gabriel, where do people in Triste go for picnics?” Fran asked.

“At this time of year, there’s a forest with beautiful light-red serviceberry flowers in full bloom.”

“Oh, I love serviceberries—the fruit, not the flower. I’ve never seen the flowers before, so I can’t wait.”

Fran listened to my words with sparkling eyes. There were surprisingly many things in Triste that could bring a smile to her face. For many years, I had been convinced that there was nothing of value in this land, but now I knew that I had simply been narrow-minded. Thanks to Fran, I was making new discoveries in the place I had lived in for so long.



I was so excited for the picnic that I couldn’t sleep well the night before. By the time dawn came, I felt more unconscious than asleep. It was finally the day of my picnic with Fran! I knew without a doubt that it was going to be a fun day, yet I awoke to an inconceivable sound.

Zssssshhhh...

I jumped up in a panic and flung the curtains all the way open. I couldn’t believe my eyes—it was raining cats and dogs. Was I dreaming? I pinched my cheek, and it hurt as expected.

“Wh-Why?! Why is it raining?!”

“Gabriel, the rainy season’s here.”

Wibble had appeared behind me at some point.

“The rainy season?!” That was Triste’s worst season of all, when it rained

every single day to the point of frustration. “Why is it the rainy season?!” Normally, it wouldn’t come for at *least* another ten days. *There has to be a mistake*—or so I thought, but as a spirit, Wibble had to be right. “Does that mean we can’t go on our picnic today?!”

“*Yep. Too bad.*”

I held my head in my hands and fell to my knees. Rainy season or not, this heavy rain was bound to ruin the juneberry flowers.

“*Why?! I was looking forward to it!*”

I was so shocked that I fell right back asleep...partially because I hadn’t slept enough.

“*Ugh...*”

I awoke to even louder rain. I’d never hated rain as much as I did today.

About two hours had passed while I slept. It was around time to get up. I got dressed, and just as I sighed, there was a knock at the door.

“*Yes?*”

“*It’s me, Gabriel.*”

Hearing Fran’s voice, I rushed to open the door. There she was, carrying a large basket.

Fran smiled and made an unexpected suggestion. “*Gabriel, let’s have a picnic!*”

“*Huh?! But it’s—*”

“*I heard from mother that there’s a sunroom. Let’s have our lunch there.*” The sunroom was an area of the residence that was similar to a greenhouse, with glass walls that allowed one to enjoy the outdoor scenery.

Fran took my hand and led me there. A picnic blanket, tea, and sweets had already been prepared.

“*Come, Gabriel,*” she said. “*Have a seat.*”

“*A-All right.*”

Fran sat down beside me and opened the basket to show me what was inside. "I made cucumber, egg, and ham sandwiches."

"They all look delicious." I hadn't been hungry before, but as soon as I laid eyes on Fran's sandwiches, I felt my appetite stir.

"Eat as many as you want, okay?"

"I will. Thank you."

I was moved by how delicious all of Fran's specially made sandwiches were. I also enjoyed our conversation very much, and despite the rain, we were able to spend quality time together.

"I'm sorry, Fran. Yesterday, I said it would be sunny, but now it's raining."

She shook her head. "I like the sound of rain. Quiet drizzling gets me in the mood for reading, and heavy rain like today makes me feel like I'm listening to a concert, which helps me get cleaning and cooking done."

Her optimism seemed to save my soul. "I wish you could've seen the juneberry flowers, though."

Fran looked up at the rain beating down on the sunroom and smiled. "Even if I can't see the flowers, I might be able to pick the junebERRIES themselves, right? In fact, I'd say I'm more interested in the food aspect," she declared.

"They'll probably ripen when the rainy season is over."

"I'm looking forward to it."

As I gazed at Fran's smile, for the first time in my life, I thought, *Rainy days aren't so bad.*



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Afterword

Hello, I'm Mashimesa Emoto.

Thank you so much for picking up *A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady: Volume 2*. I wasn't expecting to release a second volume, so I'm full of joy as I write this afterword. Once again, I worked on the book while mesmerized by Kasumi Nagi-sensei's beautiful cover and opening illustrations. I hope you enjoy reading it.

On a personal note, this second volume of *Slime Duke* is my one hundredth novel. I've also been involved with about forty other related books, like manga adaptations and whatnot. Looking back, I realize just how many works I've published.

My life as an author hasn't all been sunshine and rainbows, but whenever I struggled or felt down, it was my readers who saved me. I would motivate myself by remembering your reviews, your comments saying that you were looking forward to the next book, and your letters. I don't think I could've gone on as a writer alone—I would've lost heart. So I'm full of gratitude.

The only way I can give back to my readers is by doing my best as an author, so I hope I can continue to meet your expectations by writing enjoyable stories.

Thank you very, very much!

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A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady: Volume 2

by Mashimesa Emoto

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