









Table of Contents

- 1. Cover
- 2. Color Illustrations
- 3. Chapter 1: The Fallen Noble Francette Picks Up a Mysterious Slime
- 4. Chapter 2: The Fallen Noble Francette Moves to the Lakes
- 5. Side Story: The Slime Duke's Repayment
- 6. Chapter 3: The Fallen Noble Francette Reunites with the Dragon Duke
- 7. Chapter 4: The Fallen Noble Francette Finds Herself in an Unbelievable Predicament
- 8. Extra: Wibble's Precious Friends
- 9. Extra: Baking Cranberry Scones
- 10. Afterword
- 11. Bonus Short Stories
- 12. About J-Novel Club
- 13. Copyright

Chapter 1: The Fallen Noble Francette Picks Up a Mysterious Slime

Imagine having your engagement revoked and being banished from the country. It really happened—not to me, Francette, but to my older sister, Adele. The crown prince, Mael, had even denounced her in public.

My sister was a diligent girl who had endured her strenuous royal etiquette training without a word of complaint, yet she had been cast away simply for admonishing Prince Mael for his wild behavior and warning his mistress not to draw attention to herself.

The punishment hadn't ended there. Our ducal family had had all of its assets seized, bankrupting us overnight.

My mother, a princess of a neighboring country, had left home to join my banished sister. From what I'd heard, the two of them were now living happily over there. Two years after the incident, I had received a piece of good news: apparently, my sister had gotten engaged to *that* country's crown prince. *All's well that ends well...for her, at least.*

As for me, I was living a modest life of poverty in the old part of town, sharing a one-story house with my father, who had stayed in the country. Why didn't I go with my mother, you ask? Well, because I was fed up with high society. It wasn't that I was worried about my father. In fact, he continued to go out every night with his mistresses. Even if he'd lost his fortune, the ladies hadn't abandoned nobility's number one womanizer. With them taking care of him, I only had to worry about my own life.

A fallen noble like me wasn't going to come across any suitors, especially without any help from my laissez-faire father. It would've been a different story if I could use magic, though. I'd heard that the magician population was on the decline. Thus, there were many nobles who wanted to bring magician blood into their families. Unfortunately, we—the Blanchard family—were only distantly related to such blood.

If only I could use magic, I could make money off of "enchanted items"—
everyday goods infused with magic, I always lamented. Instead, I currently
made a living by consigning sweets to a pastry shop in the central district. I'd
once learned a few recipes from a pastry chef in order to do charity work—who
would've thought the skills I'd acquired to help others would end up being used
to help myself? You never know what will happen in life.

Some pitied me for working so hard, but I didn't care. I was working and getting paid. I held the fruits of my labor in my own hands. People who didn't work wouldn't know how wonderful that felt.

I was satisfied with my life. I wasn't well-off, but my days were peaceful and relaxing.

This morning, I woke up to the quacking of a duck as usual. I got out of bed and stretched. Peering out the window, I saw the cause of the commotion.

I took a deep breath and shouted, "Heeey! No fighting the newspaper deliveryman!"

The duck quieted down. She lived with me, but she didn't have a name, so I simply referred to her as "the duck." I had encountered her in a nearby park and protected her when she was being chased by knights for attacking people. She had probably been a noble's pet or a duck farm escapee, but I hadn't been able to find her owner, so I had ended up taking her in myself. The old onestory house my father owned had a pond where she could swim around and bathe, making it a suitable environment for raising her.

As was just demonstrated, the duck had a fierce temperament. She threatened—and sometimes even attacked—anyone who tried to set foot onto our property. A bit extreme, but considering that my father hardly ever came home, it was good to have a guard duck around.

For what it was worth, I did have a signboard at the entrance gate that said, "Beware of violent duck!" However, there were people who didn't think a duck would be able to hurt them, and it didn't stop them from taking that fatal step inside.

The duck brought me the newspaper she'd snatched from the deliveryman.

"Thanks," I said, extending my hand out the window.

She snuggled up to me. As far as I was concerned, she was just a cute, friendly duck.

"All right, time for another productive day!"

Before our family's ruin, my day had begun with a gentle rousing from a maid and a leisurely cup of tea. Now that our assets had been seized, we didn't have anywhere near enough spare money to hire a servant, so I had to take care of everything by myself. I had learned how to change clothes, cook, do laundry, and clean at the orphanage I volunteered at, so I was able to get by. I no longer owned a single frilly or lacy dress. Instead, I now wore an apron dress every day, just like the ones worn by maidservants. I was actually quite fond of it because it was easy to move around in.

I put on a shirt that I had washed and ironed yesterday. The fabric was rougher against my skin than the clothes I used to wear. That was the one thing I'd never gotten used to.

I went to the bathroom and looked at the clouded mirror, which never cleared up no matter how hard I scrubbed it. I sighed at the sight of my commonplace brown hair. My sister had beautiful raven hair which she had inherited from our mother. Unfortunately, I had inherited our father's plain color instead. However, I did take some pride in having our mother's wisteriacolored eyes.

But this isn't the time for ruminating.

After carefully combing my hair, I gathered it into a ponytail at the back of my head. I washed my face with rainwater from a barrel and brushed my teeth. In the past, this would've been the point where I'd have put on makeup. But now, not only did I not own any makeup, I wouldn't have time to apply it anyway.

"All right!" I pumped myself up and went outside.

In spring, the yard was a vivid green, shining in the sun. Wildflowers like thistles, daisies, and scarlet pimpernels were swaying in the breeze. Though it was spring, it was still chilly. I had to finish my errands quickly.

The duck came up to me, flapping her wings. She probably wanted food. I

usually fed her vegetable peels and unsold fish from the market. Sometimes the merchants would even give me ingredients for myself as well. The people at the market knew I was dirt poor, so they were all nice to me. It was thanks to them that I was able to live like this.

By the way, the duck also ate harmful insects. I was impressed when I saw her pecking at the grasshoppers and crickets that were eating the crops in my garden. But she also loved the vegetables themselves. After she'd run out of insects, she would sometimes take a bite of the vegetable leaves too, and I really wished she wouldn't.

While the duck was eating, I peeked into her straw nest.

"Oh, would you look at that!"

Since this ferocious duck was female, she laid eggs for me—not every day like a chicken would, but quite frequently. Her eggs were larger than chicken eggs, so making one into an omelette was enough for a full meal. I gratefully took the egg.

I harvested some potatoes and spinach from the garden. The spinach had some beak marks on it. I chose to think of it as us sharing our food.

Today's breakfast was an oven-baked potato, a spinach omelette, and herbal tea made with fresh chamomile from the garden. I dropped a generous chunk of butter onto the potato and added my homemade tomato sauce to the omelette.

I read the newspaper while I ate. The duck's eggs seemed a bit richer than chicken eggs. They made for a creamy omelette even without milk or butter mixed in. The potato, which I had grown with great care, was soft and delicious. The chamomile tea had an irresistible sweet aroma. It was like a refreshing embodiment of spring. I remembered when my father had once drunk it and muttered, "It's just grass," which really irritated me. Speaking of whom, I had received yet another card from him saying he wouldn't be coming home today, but I had immediately tossed it out.

After breakfast, I began making pastries. Taking up position in the kitchen, I put on my brand-new apron. The first item of the day was a stick-shaped almond treat called "sacristain."

Using the rolling pin, I flattened the pie dough I'd prepared last night, then poked holes all over it with a fork. Next, I brushed egg yolk over the dough and sprinkled crushed almonds over it. I then placed another layer of dough on top and pressed down with the rolling pin to keep the almonds in place. The second layer got another brushing of egg yolk, followed by a sprinkling of almonds and granulated sugar. Next, I cut the dough into strips and let them dry for a while before twisting them into spirals. These went into the preheated oven.

While I was waiting for them to bake, I used the leftover egg whites to make cookies called "langues de chat," or "cat's tongues."

First, I creamed the now-room-temperature butter that I had taken out of the magical cold storage an hour prior, and mixed in powdered sugar, the aforementioned egg whites, and vanilla beans. I added flour to the mixture and blended it together to make dough, which I stuffed into a bag and piped into thin strips on a greased metal plate. All that was left was to bake them.

As I was working, the sacristains had come out nicely. I opened the oven and the kitchen was filled with the fragrant aroma of almonds. The pastries had been baked to a golden brown.

The name "sacristain" had an odd ring to it. It originated from the church—apparently, a sacristain was a person who managed the vessels and staves used in ceremonies. The pastry was said to be named after them because it resembled the twisty walking stick they carried.

I sampled one of the treats. The layered dough was crisp and light, as was the almond taste. The texture of the crunchy granular sugar complemented it nicely as well.

Yep, they came out delicious.

After the sacristains and langues de chat, I baked sablés and financiers. I carefully packed the finished sweets into my basket so that they wouldn't crumble. My deliveries were always in the morning. As usual, it looked like I was going to be on time.

I put on my straw hat and left from the back door. If I went through the front, the duck would follow me. The neighbors also used the back door when they visited me, since they were wary of her.

I walked down the street at a steady pace. This area was so peaceful, you wouldn't think it was part of the royal capital. There were apple trees along the road, with a few lovely white flowers blooming here and there. They would reach their peak in another ten days.

In autumn, the kids and birds in this old part of town would compete for apples. They were a hard and especially sour variety, but I'd heard that they made for delicious jam. I'd been living in this district for two years now, but I had yet to try the apples...because I didn't think I stood a chance in the fight. I secretly aspired to win one day and have a taste.

The store I consigned sweets to was a pastry shop that catered to commoners. One of its employees was the pâtissier who used to work for my family. He couldn't bear to see me penniless and jobless with nothing to my name, so he asked the store owner to buy my sweets. I wouldn't be lying if I said I owed him my life. It was a lovely store with a red brick exterior and green roof, and it had long been favored by the capital's residents.

I opened the door and the chime rang.

"Welco— Oh, it's you, Francette."

"Good day, Solene."

"Good day to you too!"

The person smiling at me was Solene, the store's poster girl. We got along well. I consigned sweets here once every two to three days. They felt bad about my situation and didn't take a cut of my sales.

"Here's today's batch," I said.

"Yep, confirming them 'received.' Here's the proceeds from last time."

"Thank you."

The sweets I'd supplied them with the other day had sold out. Apparently, the store had an eccentric regular who liked my pastries, and he would be extremely disappointed if even one type ran out before he came. Every day for the past two years, he'd visited to see if my sweets were in stock. And each time he'd had his hood pulled low over his face, so no one knew who he was.

"Your customer was as suspicious as ever," Solene said.

"From what I've heard, I can't deny it."

The regular supposedly had a beautiful, unaccented voice, but he spoke unbelievably fast. He was tall and thin and wore an extravagant overcoat. Solene estimated that he was a moderately wealthy man between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five.

"Sorry you have to deal with a weird customer," I said.

"It's fine. He tips generously."

"That's good."

I thanked Solene and was about to leave when she stopped me to share this morning's bread with me.

"Francette, you won't have enough energy if you're always nibbling on potatoes. Make sure you eat bread too."

"I know. Thanks, Solene." I waved goodbye.

My stomach growled at the delicious aroma of dough in the oven. Potatoes alone weren't filling enough. Solene was right. I needed to eat bread. But if I had flour in my kitchen, I would rather use it to make pastries to sell. Because of that, I always ended up deprioritizing bread.

I thought about the breakfasts I'd had before my family's downfall: freshly baked bread, rich vegetable potage, thick slices of bacon, soft-boiled eggs, warm salad... It was certainly a life of luxury. I didn't particularly want to go back to those days, but I couldn't help but wish for nicer meals.

Maybe I should find some other work to do besides baking sweets. I could try starting a fortune-telling business, since my sister taught me how.

By channeling mana into a crystal, one could read another's fortune. It didn't require magical aptitude—all you needed was the incantation and a little bit of mana. The problem was that I didn't have the money to buy a fortune-telling crystal ball.

As I slumped my shoulders, dejected, I spotted a smooth, light-red sphere on the side of the road.

Could that be a crystal ball?! It's rare to see a colored one, but did I really just find one lying on the street? Isn't this too good to be true?

However, a lost item had to have an owner. The first order of business would be to take it to the knights' station. If the owner couldn't be found within a year, property rights would be transferred to the finder.

I'll take it to the knights first, and if it gets transferred to me in a year, I'll start my fortune-telling business then.

I ran over to pick up the mud-stained crystal, only for it to turn limp and squishy in my hands.

"Huh?! Eek!"

That was when I realized the thing lying on the ground wasn't a crystal—it was a *slime*.

With water making up over ninety percent of its body, the slime was famed for being the weakest of all monsters. Even an ordinary person without any combat training could defeat one simply by stepping on it and crushing it. I probably hadn't noticed the mana-storing core in this one's body because it was covered in mud. Cute, round eyes peeked out through the stains. They were bleary, as if the slime wasn't feeling well.

The moment I realized it was a slime, I tried to throw it. But my eyes met its own bright pair, and I couldn't bring myself to do it. Besides, if it were hostile, it would've attacked me already. Also, we were inside city limits. Monsters couldn't enter because of the great mage's barrier, meaning that this slime must've been tamed. Its owner was probably nearby.

The slime and I stared at each other for a while, but we obviously couldn't stay like that forever. I figured I had nothing to lose from questioning it.

"Excuse me, where is your owner?"

"I dunnooo."

"I-It talked!" I nearly fell down in shock. In fact, I ought to have been praised for not screaming.

"W-Water..."

"Water?"

"Gonna dry up..."

"What?! You're going to dry up? H-Hang in there for a minute!"

The orphanage was nearby. I put the slime in my basket, which was no longer full of pastries, and rushed there, slipping in quietly through the back so the children wouldn't see me. I headed to the well and drew some water. Unsure of what to do with it, I poured it into the open basket.

"Phew, I feel alive again!"

The mud came off, and the creature was renewed as a shiny, wobbly slime. I patted my chest in relief. It still wanted water, so I filled the bucket and put the slime inside. It began to swim around while humming a song. Looking at it this way, it was really cute. I wanted to poke it, but I stopped myself at the last second. Even if it was adorable, it was still a monster. You could never be too careful.

My knowledge of monsters came from the story of the monster dukes, which the children at the orphanage loved. It was more of a historical record than a fictional tale. It was said that most of the events had really occurred in the past, with only a few embellishments. I'd read the book over a hundred times, so I knew it by heart.

As I watched the slime swim around, I recalled the story of the seven grand monster dukes.

Once upon a time, there were seven evil monsters wreaking havoc on the world.

The Dragon burned cities to the ground in an instant with its powerful breath.

The Siren drowned valiant fighters at sea with a single song.

The Harpy brought sword-wielding sky knights down from their wyverns with its spells.

The Ogre devoured people to gain strength and intelligence.

The Treant lured people into a huge forest with no exit.

The Fenrir led a pack of beasts in its attacks.

The Slime swallowed people up like a bottomless swamp.

The dark age did not last long, for individuals rose up to defeat the monsters.

The king declared these people heroes and bestowed them with the highest rank after royalty.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The lord who had slain the Slime was given the title of Grand Slime Duke.

The monster dukes still existed now, a millennium later. "Grand Dragon Duke" had become a courtesy title given to the most skilled swordsman in the royal family. The current dragon duke was Prince Axel, a serious and honest man of virtue and grace, with an education to boot. He was only the second prince, but I felt that my sister would've been better off marrying him instead.

Prince Axel had been kind to me as well, probably because I was related to his future sister-in-law. After the fall of our family, he had even offered to take me in if I had nowhere else to go. I obviously wasn't going to burden him like that, so I had politely declined.

"Ahhh, that was good water."

I snapped back to the present at the sound of the slime's satisfied voice.

Laying a handkerchief over my skirt, I tapped my thigh and it jumped up into my lap. I'd wanted to wipe off its wet body, but apparently that wasn't necessary

for a slime. Still, it seemed to like the handkerchief, so I wrapped it up and put it back in the basket.

The orphanage director happened to pass by, so I mentioned that I had used the well.

"Feel free to use it anytime," the director said with a smile.

"I'm busy today, but I'll come by again," I said. "Sorry."

"We'll be looking forward to your visit."

I left and jogged over to the nearby knights' station. A man and woman were there, and upon spotting me, the lady knight came up to me.

"How may I help you?" she asked.

"Um, I found a tamed slime, and I wanted to ask if its owner reported it lost."

"A slime...?"

"I have it right here."

"Well, I'll be." The knight took a book labeled "Lost Items (Unresolved)" from the shelf and scanned it for a slime owner. "Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to have been reported," she said.

"I see."

"Could you please fill out this form?"

"Oh, yes." I wrote down details such as where I'd found the slime and the condition it was in, but when I returned the form to the knight along with the slime, she only took the form.

"I'm sorry, but the knights can't take custody of living things. We'll contact you if the owner comes forward, so, um..."

"Are you saying that I have to take care of the slime myself?"

"Yes."

Apparently I'd opened a can of worms by picking up this creature. I immediately accepted my fate. It's my fault for picking it up, so I guess I'll have to look after it for a while.

Just to be sure, I asked the slime, "Um, are you all right with staying at my place until they find your owner?"

```
"Okay."
```

That's that, then. And so, for the first time in my life, I went home with a slime.

When I opened the gate, the duck flew at me.

```
"Wh-Whoa!"
```

She had flown high enough to clear the fence. I thought ducks couldn't fly... Rather, if she could reach that height, she could escape at any time. I guess she can but chooses not to. I'm glad she likes it enough here to make it her permanent home instead of menacing the neighbors.

The duck squawked as she hung around my feet. I gently petted her and gave her a spare carrot from the garden, which she happily ate. I decided to make cheese gratin for lunch, but first, I had to figure out where to put the slime.

"Hey, you... Oh, I never got its name."

"Slime" was a species name, so calling it that would have been akin to calling a person "Human." Since communication was possible, it was better to ask for its name.

I peered at the slime in the basket and poked it. Its eyes snapped open.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"My name is Wibble!"

"Wibble... Well, I can see why." It certainly was wibbly-wobbly. Not wanting this to sound like an interrogation, I introduced myself as well. "I'm Francette."

```
"Fran."

"No, Francette!"
```

"Fra!"

It didn't seem to be able to remember long names. *Oh well. Now that I know its name, I can ask my question.* "Wibble, is there anywhere that would be comfortable for you?"

```
"Bath!"
```

"Oh, of course. The bathtub."

I brought Wibble straight to the bathroom and turned the magicite-powered tap, filling the tub with water. The slime gleefully leaped inside.

```
"Ahhh, this is Shangri-la."

"What's Shangri-la?"

"Dunno."

"Oh."
```

I left Wibble there for the time being and went to make my cheese gratin with the potatoes I'd harvested in the morning. It was a standard dish I often used to make at the orphanage.

First, I cut the potatoes into thin slices and fried them in butter. Next, I added butter and flour to a saucepan and let the mixture cook while adding milk. When it thickened, the white sauce was complete.

I layered the potatoes in the gratin dish and seasoned them with black pepper. I then poured the sauce on and sprinkled a generous amount of cheese on top. The dish went into the oven to bake, and once the surface was browned, the cheese gratin was ready to eat.

The version my family used to eat had truffles in it, but this one was simpler and delicious in its own way. Paired with a garden-fresh carrot salad and the white bread Solene had given me, it made for a fine feast.

I ate the gratin while it was still piping hot. The cheese stretched out as I scooped the creamy, sauce-covered potatoes up with my fork. It was unquestionably delicious. I kept eating, huffing as I let the potatoes cool down in my mouth. Partway through the meal, I started sopping up the white sauce with the bread. Even though it was equivalent to eating flour on top of flour, it was unbelievably good.

Now that my stomach was full, it was time to take a break. But first, I had to check on Wibble.

```
"Eeeee!"
```

Startled by the shriek, I peeked into the bathroom. Wibble was grinning and sloshing up and down in the tub. It seemed to be having fun, so I let it be.

After resting for a while, I went to make pastries to bring to the orphanage. They were, of course, the children's beloved soupirs de nonne, meaning "nun's sighs." They were basically bite-size deep-fried doughnuts.

The dessert was originally called "pet de nonne," meaning "nun's fart." I didn't know the details, but that was the initial inspiration for it. Apparently, when the dessert was given the nicer name of "soupir de nonne," with the explanation that "kids liked it so much that nuns would sigh whenever they had to make it again" was added after the fact.

I heated milk, water, melted butter, salt, and sugar in a saucepan. When the mixture came to a boil, I turned off the heat and stirred in bread flour and cake flour. When the dough came together, I added beaten eggs and made a kneading motion with the wooden spatula. Once it was all thick and sticky like a slime, I packed it into a pastry bag and squeezed it into hot oil. If I were in a hurry, I would've rapidly sliced the dough with a knife, letting the pieces fall in.

The dough sizzled as it fried. When the pieces turned golden brown and floated up, I scooped them up and, after thoroughly draining the oil, sprinkled sugar on top. The soupirs de nonne were now complete.

I tasted one. It was crisp on the outside and puffy on the inside—a simple yet delicious treat. I'd intended on bringing them to the orphanage tomorrow, but they definitely tasted better fresh. I decided to head over right away.

I gave Wibble a heads-up just in case. "Wibble, I'm going to head out. What about you?"

```
"Hmm, I'll stay here."

"Sure. Watch the house for me, okay?"

"Kaaay."
```

A slime that could watch the house. Incredible.

I left through the back door and went to the orphanage. There was a sister at the gate, so I gave the pastries to her.

```
"Oh, pets de nonne!" she exclaimed. "They look delicious."
  "Sister, they're called soupirs de nonne."
  "Right. I'm too used to what the children call them."
  I wanted to see how the kids were doing, but the sister stopped me.
  "You might want to go home early," she said. "I heard there's a group of
ruffians looking for someone."
  "Oh dear, that's scary."
  "A scoundrel laid his hands on the wife of a wealthy merchant, or so the
rumor goes."
  "That's horrible. He's getting what he deserves, then."
  "Indeed."
 I'll play with the kids next time. In situations like this, it's best to go home, take
a bath, and tuck in early.
  "I'll take my leave, then. Have a nice day, Sister."
  "You too."
 I hurried home. It looked like Wibble had been behaving itself while I was
gone.
  "Oh, Wibble, can I use the bathtub? I'll refill it later."
  "Are you taking a bath?"
  "Yes."
  "Warm, splash, scrub scrub?"
  "Yes, that's right."
  "Wibble can do it!"
```

The slime changed from clear to red. A magic circle appeared on the surface of the water—which instantly turned hot.

```
"Temperature, good?"
```

"Do what?"

```
"Oh, this is nice."
"Yay!"
```

A slime that could heat water—what a genius idea. Perhaps Wibble's owner had trained it to do this.

```
"Water, purified, clean!"

"Oh, I see. Thank you."
```

I hadn't exercised any caution in using a bathtub that a slime had been soaking in. It'd slipped my mind that monsters were petri dishes of bacteria. Trusting Wibble's claim that the water was clean, I went ahead with the bath. I had left a bucket of water in the changing room, but Wibble stayed in the tub.

```
"Um, Wibble, do you mind sharing the bath?"

"It's fine!"

"O-Okay then, here I come."
```

I took off my clothes and entered the bathroom. First, I'd wash my body. But the moment I reached for the soap, it vanished right before my eyes.

```
"Huh?!"

"Bub bub!"
```

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw Wibble furiously working the soap into a lather.

```
"I'll wash you!"

"Huh? What?! You have to be kidding me!"

The froth-covered slime began to wash my body.

"Ah... Aha ha ha! Aha ha ha! It tickles! Aha ha ha!"

"Does it itch anywhere?"

"No, i-it doesn't, but— Aha ha ha!"
```

My old skin cells were scrubbed away, leaving my body shiny and smooth. I could scarcely believe what I saw in the mirror. It had already been two years since my family had gone bankrupt, and I had been too busy to deal with skin

care. As a result, my skin had become dry and rough. I had developed bags under my eyes, and my lips had been completely neglected. But now, after Wibble washed me, my whole body was as polished as a boiled egg. My skin was more radiant than when the maids had spent hours taking care of it.

```
"Thank you, Wibble!"

"No problem."
```

I was going to replace the water as a show of appreciation, but it turned out to be unnecessary.

```
"Wibble wants to sleep."

"Oh, okay."
```

I wondered if a large basket stuffed with cushions would suffice for a bed. As I was preparing it, Wibble jumped onto my own bed instead. Apparently it intended to sleep with me.

I slipped into bed and covered myself with the blanket. Although it was spring, it got very cold at night. I considered lighting the fireplace for once. Unfortunately, I was too poor to use it every night.

```
"Fra, are you cold?"

"Hm? Oh, yes."

"Then Wibble will warm you up!"
```

The slime shuffled under the blanket. Just as I was wondering what it was up to, it pressed against me and rapidly heated up. The chilly bed and blanket warmed up in a flash.

```
"How is iiit?"

"It's warm. Thank you."

"You're welcome!"

Thanks to Wibble, the night was warm.
```

The next day was a cleaning day. I got up bright and early and grabbed my broom. Since the house was old, the floor needed to be waxed regularly or else

it'd warp into a miserable sight.

As I rolled up my sleeves, Wibble woke up.



```
"Good morning, Wibble."
```

"Good morning, Fra!" It blinked wearily. It was probably still sleepy. "What're you doing?"

"Cleaning. I'm going to sweep away the dust and wax the floor."

"Hmm, Wibble can do that too!"

"Huh?"

Wibble stuck itself to the floor and stretched itself thinner and thinner. I panicked and climbed atop a chair.

```
"Wha— Huh?! No way!"
```

I couldn't believe my eyes. Wibble formed a film over the entire floor, then snapped back to its original spherical shape. It spat out a clump of waste from its mouth.

"Gimme the wax!"

"Oh, um, here."

Wibble swallowed up the wax and again spread out over the floor. A second later, it reverted back to normal, leaving the floor sparkly clean and waxed.

"I-I think it's even better than when I do it!"

I picked Wibble up and petted it while thanking it. The slime smiled happily. After that, it showed me even more of its abilities by weeding the garden, feeding the duck, and helping me cook.

"S-So this is the power of a tamed slime!"

I wished every house could have an all-powerful Wibble. I felt compelled to ask it to live with me but swallowed my words right before they left my throat. Wibble had an owner, who could very well be searching for it right now. Wibble itself was probably worried too.

I picked up Wibble, who was playing with the duck, and rubbed my cheek against it. "I promise I'll find your owner."

"Okay. Thanks."

With Wibble's help, I finished all of my tasks before noon. Now it was time to go out to town and search for its owner. As soon as I stepped forward, I realized something: all I needed to do was ask Wibble for its owner's name. Then I would immediately know where to take it.

```
"Come to think of it, Wibble, do you know your owner's name?"

"Gabriel!"

"A man, then. What's his family name?"

"Gabriel!"
```

I fell silent. Apparently, it only remembered the first name. So close, yet so far.

```
"Wibble, do you know where Gabriel's house is?"

"Far! Not here."

"So he doesn't live in the royal capital?"

"Nope! He always comes here by going whoosh!"

"Whoosh?"

"Yep."
```

By "whoosh," did it mean that he flew to the capital on a wyvern or other creature? I didn't quite understand, but at least I now knew that Wibble's owner didn't live here. Was he a merchant, or a noble who came to socialize? Another possibility was an adventurer. That reminded me—I vaguely recalled hearing something about tamed monsters being registered with the adventurer's guild, but it could've been my memory playing tricks on me. It was worth a try, though.

Just as I was about to leave, I heard quacking coming from the yard.

"I wonder who it could be?"

I peered out the window and saw the letter carrier pacing back and forth in front of the gate. He usually came in the evenings, so this was considered very early. I went outside and accepted the mail.

"I'm sorry about the duck," I said.

"I-It's fine. Um, this was an express delivery."

"Express?" I looked at the letter. It was the usual card from my father. What was so urgent that he had to tell me by express mail? Was he going on a trip with one of his mistresses?

I gave the mailman an apology tip and waved goodbye. Back inside, I looked around for the letter opener, only for Wibble to extend a tentacle from its body, transform it into a knife, and cut the envelope open for me.

"Thank you, Wibble."

"No problem!"

I took out the card and found a cryptic message inside. There was only a single word: "Sorry." Nothing was written on the back.

As I tilted my head, wondering what my father was apologizing for, I heard the duck making a ruckus again.

"Another visitor?"

I picked Wibble up and went outside—just in time to hear an angry holler.

"Hey, you piece of shit duke, I know you're there! Get your ass out here!"

There was a large group of tough-looking thugs outside the gate, wearing clothes with lots of studs in them. Upon seeing me, they began to converse among themselves.

"Eh? A woman?"

"I bet she's the duke's mistress."

"Not only did he lay his filthy hands on Lord Maxim's wife, he has such a young girl for a mistress?!"

In the midst of this baffling situation, the dots in my memory connected perfectly: the sister at the orphanage yesterday telling me about "a group of ruffians looking for someone;" the apology from my father; the thugs' mention of laying hands on someone's wife. Based on the clues, I could guess that my father had most likely seduced a wealthy merchant's wife and run for the hills, leaving his daughter—me—behind.

"Lord Maxim demands compensation from the duke."

"Two hundred thousand geld!"

"What?!" I balked at the unreasonable sum.

Two hundred thousand geld was a lot of money—the kind of amount you'd expect a noble to prepare for their daughter's dowry. My father, having had his assets seized, would never be able to come up with that much. He must've fled knowing that this would happen. He really was selfish.

What to do... What can I do?

"Quaaaaack!" the duck screeched, charging at the men.

"N-No!" I hurriedly grabbed hold of her, restraining her in my arms. A duck couldn't possibly stand up to a band of thugs.

Wibble extended a tentacle and transformed it gloriously into a legendary holy blade. *Is it seriously going to fight?*

"Wibble, you stop too!" I shouted.

"Whyyy?"

"Because defeating these people won't solve anything!"

Even if we fended them off, it wouldn't change the fact that someone was demanding compensation from my father.

"Huh, now that I get a better look, you're a pretty li'l thing," one of the thugs said. "If we sell you to a brothel, you'll make two hundred thousand geld in no time."

"What?!"

The men kicked down the gate and stomped into the yard. I was scared speechless. This was when I found out that just like in stories, when you're truly terrified, you can't scream.

"Now be a good girl and come with us!" A thick, brutish arm reached out for me.

"Stop right there!" came a commanding voice.

Everyone fell silent. I looked in the direction of the voice, but no one was there.

A few seconds later, the hedge rustled and a man with leaves in his hair slowly made his way out of it on all fours. He stood up, revealing that he was a tall young man. He had long, pearl-white hair tied with a velvet ribbon, and his silver-rimmed glasses gave him an air of intelligence. He was probably around twenty years old. I was shocked to see someone emerge from the hedge.

"Eh? Who the hell are you?" a thug asked.

"I have no name to provide to the likes of you," the man replied.

"What?!"

The short-tempered thug aimed a punch at the young man, but right before it connected, his body was sent flying.

"Huh?!" I exclaimed. "How did that happen?!"

A green slime was bouncing on the cowering thug's belly. "Punishmeeent!" it cried out. It was jumping with the force of fierce blows, causing the man to groan repeatedly.

"Oh, it's Gabriel," said Wibble.

"That person is your owner?" I asked.

"Yep, uh-huh!"

The thugs turned their attention to the mystery man, Gabriel.

"Who the hell do you think you are, showing up and getting in our way?"

"You're using monsters 'cause you're too scrawny to fight yourself!"

"You'll get what's coming to you!"

Five or so thugs charged at Gabriel. However, just as before, they were sent flying before they could get close to him. The bulky men's assailants were a rainbow of slimes: blue, yellow, red, black, and green.

"What a weakling!"

"All bark, no bite!"

```
"Pfft, hee hee hee!"

"Let's play some more!"

"Boooring!"
```

Gabriel raised a hand, and on cue, the slimes transformed into long, thin ropes, coiling around the thugs so they couldn't move. The men had been subdued in no time at all.

Wibble leaped out of my arms and bounced towards Gabriel. I followed it.

```
"Gabrieeel!"
```

Wibble jumped into its owner's chest, but perhaps with too much force. "Urk!" Gabriel groaned, falling to his knees.

By the time I caught up to them, I was looking down at the young man. I took the opportunity to remove the leaves from his hair. He was startled at first, but when he saw the fluttering leaves, he realized what I had done.

He lowered his head politely and said, "Erm, thank you."

"That's my line," I said. "Thank you for saving me."

"N-No, I wasn't trying to save you or anything..."

"Come to think of it, what were you doing over by that hedge?"

"Well...!"

Gabriel suddenly dropped to his knees and scanned the area warily. What was he searching for?

"Um, erm, well, you see..." he continued.

"Gabriel, were you looking for Wibble?"

"Y-Yes, that's right! I was looking for this slime."

"I see," I said. I held out both of my hands, and he looked up at me blankly.

"Help me up, unless you'd like to sit there forever."

"Thank you...very much."

I took his hands and pulled him up. Wibble climbed onto his head and sat

there in the shape of a beret. It was so funny I couldn't help but laugh.

"Wh-Why are you laughing?" Gabriel asked.

"Sorry. Wibble is just too funny."

"Oh— What— Wibble, what did you—"

It wasn't the time to be giggling, though. We had to do something about the thugs. We couldn't just leave them lying in the yard.

"I'll have to call the knights," I said.

"Ah, allow me," Gabriel said.

He took a piece of paper from his inner chest pocket and wrote something on it with his fingertip. Upon closer inspection, he was wearing a pen tip that fit over his finger. I had no idea where the ink came from. When he was done, he folded it neatly into the shape of a bird. He blew on it lightly, and it soared through the air as if it really were one.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Carrier pigeon magic. I reported the incident to the knights, so they should be arriving soon to take these men away."

Just as I was about to thank him, a large carriage stopped in front of my house. It couldn't be the knights—they wouldn't have come so quickly.

"That's the emblem of Fastoux Trading," Gabriel remarked.

"Ah!" I knew my father had laid his hands on the wife of a wealthy merchant, but Fastoux Trading was a world-famous company. What has he done? I held my head in my hands.

The carriage door opened, and a middle-aged man—short and stout like a bear—came out. He seemed to be around fifty years old. He had sharp eyes with bold dark circles under them, a prominent hook nose, and a tight-lipped mouth. Just looking at him made me tremble at his intimidating aura.

When he saw me, he narrowed one eye as if he were evaluating my worth. It was more irritating than scary.

He lumbered towards us and introduced himself. "I am the president of

Fastoux Trading, Maxim Maillart. Am I correct in assuming that this is the home of Duke Mercœur?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid my father isn't here," I said.

"Oh, is that so?"

Anyone could see that there were men lying on the ground around us, but he pretended not to notice. Maxim Maillart was a very wealthy merchant. Who knew how malicious he could be? I couldn't afford to show any sign of weakness around him.

"You must've caught wind of your father's transgression," he continued.

"I heard a bit but not the full story. I only know what the men on the ground said."

"I see, I see. Ah, this was the work of our younger employees. Sorry about that."

"It's fine." My father was definitely to blame, but it had nothing to do with me. I had no intention of apologizing on his behalf.

"I never expected Duke Mercœur to elope with my beloved wife."

"Huh?!"

"Well, he hasn't returned home, has he?"

"N-No, he hasn't." I was so sure he'd fled by himself. I didn't think the two of them would abscond together.

"I've been doing everything in my power to search for them, but I cannot find them. I am terribly hurt by this, so I would like a show of good faith."

"The two-hundred-thousand-geld compensation?"

"Yes."

I could bake sweets for the rest of my life and never make that much money. Perhaps it would be possible with the method the thugs had mentioned earlier, though.

"You have two options," Maxim Maillart said. "First, you can earn the money at a brothel. The second option is to locate your father within three days."

If I couldn't find him in three days, it was off to the brothel with me. What a terrible deal.

"Choose whichever you like."

My throat felt dry and I couldn't speak. It would be foolish to think that I could find my father, who had fled immediately. No matter what I chose, this man was going to sell me to the brothel.

"So, what will it be?"

"We'll choose the third option," Gabriel declared, much to my surprise.

"What is this third option?" Maxim Maillart asked.

"I will pay the two hundred thousand geld."

"Why would you do that for a complete stranger?"

"We aren't strangers. I'm her fiancé."

"What?!"

I nearly shouted the same thing. What in the world was happening? I looked at Gabriel. He seemed to be telling me with his eyes to keep my mouth shut.

"As it turns out, I received two hundred thousand geld from her father as dowry," Gabriel said. "I will pay it to you in his stead. I trust that will be acceptable?"

"Oh, well, as long as I get the money, anything is fine."

Gabriel took a check from his chest pocket and quickly filled it out. "Will this suffice?"

"Ah, yes."

"We can deem the problem resolved now, yes?"

"Yes, indeed."

Maxim Maillart held up his hand holding the check and left. At the same time, the knights arrived, taking his place in the yard. The thugs were taken away, leaving me with only Gabriel and the slimes.

After the dust settled, I lowered my head and thanked Gabriel again. "Thank

you so much for saving me. I'm in your debt."

"Likewise. Thank you for taking care of my slime," he said, lowering his head as well.

I realized that I hadn't introduced myself. "My name is Francette de Blanchard. My father is Duke Mercœur." I shot him a glance, assuming he'd recognize the name...but didn't get much of a reaction. "Um, may I ask your name?"

"Er, mine?"

"Yes." I knew his first name was Gabriel, but his origins were still a mystery. Could he be someone famous? I looked at him skeptically, not quite convinced.

"My name is Gabriel de Griet Slime."

"Slime? Wait, are you the slime duke?!"

"Well...yes."

One of the seven grand monster dukes is at my humble abode?! Okay, yes, it was rude of me to not recognize him. But did he ever appear at the soirees? I don't remember.

Still, I should've realized it sooner. An ordinary person would never have been able to tame so many smart slimes.

"Um, let's not stand out here," I said. "Please come inside."

"Is anyone home?" he asked.

"No, it's just me."

"I couldn't possibly, then."

An unmarried man and woman shouldn't be alone in a room together with the door closed. My home tutor had drilled that phrase into my head more times than I could count. However, out here, we were subjected to the neighbors' eyes and ears. Since the knights had come, we'd already drawn the attention of some curious locals.

"Please don't worry about it," I insisted.

"No, but still..."

"It really is fine."

I gave him a push from behind, but he didn't budge. He clearly had no intention of yielding.

Then, Wibble slammed into him. "Gyak!" Gabriel shrieked.

I used the forward momentum to lead him into the house by the hand.

"I never considered that one of my tamed slimes might betray me," Gabriel muttered as he sipped chamomile tea.

I hadn't expected Wibble to help me either. "Sorry about that. The people in this old part of town love to gossip, so I didn't want us to be overheard."

"What are you going to do if I assault you?"

"You? Assault me?"

The moment I repeated his question, Wibble leaped into my lap and extended his tentacles as if to defend me.

"Wibble, what do you think you're doing?!" Gabriel asked.

"I will protect Fra from you!"

"Have you forgotten who your owner is?"

"You're being suspicious!"

It was funny to watch their owner-pet relationship break down, but this wasn't the time to be engaging in lighthearted conversation. I had to get back on track.

"Um, I know you paid the two hundred thousand geld for me, but I can't repay you at the moment..."

"Yes, I'm aware of Duke Mercœur's financial situation."

"Then why did you save me?"

"I wished to propose a contract."

"A contract?" What could it be for? Forced labor in his territory? Human experiments? I have no idea.

Gabriel adjusted the bridge of his silver-rimmed glasses and began to explain.

"I was thinking you could marry me."

"M-Marry?!"

A marriage was indeed a form of contract. But why me? Noble marriages were arranged when it was in the interests of both parties. He had nothing to gain from marrying me. My mind was full of question marks.

"Why do you want to marry me?" I asked. I had neither dowry, status, nor personal virtues. What was the point of marrying a woman who had nothing whatsoever?

"My great-uncle has been pushing me to find a wife. I've brushed him off for years, but he's been especially persistent as of late." Gabriel went on to explain that he had bought himself time by declaring that he was searching for the finest lady in the capital. "My younger cousin was recently wed, and now my great-uncle is telling me it is a disgrace for the head of the family to remain a bachelor for so long."

"Would he approve of me, though? My father didn't lose his rank, but he has a bad reputation amongst the nobility now."

"It's fine. My great-uncle despises gossip, so he doesn't listen to the tasteless rumors going around high society. I'm positive he would jump for joy if he heard I was marrying Duke Mercœur's daughter!" Gabriel insisted, pushing the bridge of his glasses up several times as he spoke. I was tempted to ask if they were the right size for him, but I refrained. It was probably just a habit of his.

"Well, even if my lineage is acceptable, I don't think I qualify as 'the finest lady in the capital."

"You do, though."

"Huh? How so?"

Gabriel's face turned beet red.

Why is he blushing? I wish he'd hide his shame, because it's making me feel embarrassed too. Anyway, something's not right here. No one would suddenly make a random lady his bride.

A possible reason came to mind, and I decided to ask, just to be sure. "Um,

have I met you somewhere before?"

Gabriel gasped, covering his mouth with his hands and hanging his head in disappointment. Judging from his reaction, we *had* met before.

"Could you jog my memory by telling me when? Could it have been when we were both children, some ten or so years ago?"

He shook his head. Our meeting had been quite recent, then.

"Please, could you tell me more?"

"No, it's fine if you don't remember! It really is not an issue at all!"

"A-All right, then." With that strong of a refusal, I couldn't keep pressing him. But unfortunately, I didn't recall ever meeting a man with his unique qualities.

Gabriel cleared his throat and straightened his back, pushing the bridge of his glasses up yet again. With a tense look, he asked me, "Do you know where my domain lies?"

"No."

"It's a lake region far from the capital called Triste."

"The place that's rumored to be more lake than inhabited land?"

"Yes, that is my territory."

"Oh." I didn't know anything about Triste other than that it had a lot of lakes.

What Gabriel proceeded to tell me about his land was more surprising than I ever could have imagined.

Located in the northeast part of the country, Triste was shrouded in deep fog at all times of day and year.

"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 leaving for the city. The population decreases every year."

At last, he paused to take a breath. I was impressed by his lung capacity.

"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."

Deep fog, a difficult climate all year round, a declining population, and slimes... He's telling me that his territory isn't attractive to a young prospective bride.

"My father married into the family, but he was raised in the capital, so..."

Apparently his father hadn't been able to stand living in the lake region, so on Gabriel's fifteenth birthday, he had forced him to inherit the title and left the house the very next day. His whereabouts were still unknown.

"Um, what about the rest of your family?" I asked.

"There's only my mother. I also have some relatives who live far away, such as my great-uncle and my aunt. I rarely interact with them, but when we do meet, it's extremely unpleasant."

"I-I see."

For some reason, Gabriel hung his head, seeming depressed. Wibble approached him and sympathetically patted him on the head with a tentacle.

"Cheer up! It's a nice place."

"For you, yes," said Gabriel. "It must be a paradise for slimes. But it's not fit for human life."

Still, the residents lived off the land there. As their lord, Gabriel couldn't run away.

"My wife has to be chosen from the nobility. From what I heard, my father tried several times to arrange something, but they all declined before even meeting me."

"If only they'd given you a chance, they might've changed their mind and married you," I mused.

"Huh?! What makes you think that?!"

"If they'd met you, they would've seen your pretty face."

Gabriel's good looks were accentuated by his lovely pearl-white hair and clear, ice-green eyes. He had the beauty of an exquisite doll—attractive in a different way from, say, Prince Axel.

"I've attended soirees in the capital," Gabriel said. "No one even gave me the time of day."

"That's odd." You'd think the ladies would flock to such a handsome man.

"How do I say this...? It could've been my gloomy aura making me unapproachable. People say my hair is the color of mildew and my eyes the color of moss."

"That's not true."

"No, I'm aware that I'm the type of person who thrives in the shadows."

Getting back on track, Gabriel explained that he'd had yet to find even a *prospective* bride until today when he'd come across my plight. Sensing that it was the opportunity of a lifetime, he'd taken action to put me in his debt.

"I'm truly sorry for disregarding your free will and naming myself your fiancé," he said.

"Don't be. I'm grateful that you saved me." Making an enemy of a merchant as wealthy as Maxim Maillart was something I had wanted to avoid at all costs. However, I didn't think there was any way I could repay the two hundred thousand geld. It was time to accept my fate.

```
"You may consider the two hundred thousand geld a gif—" "I'll marry you."
```

"Huh?!"

"Were you saying something just now?"

"No, not at all!"

"He said he'd give you all the mon— Mrgh!"

Gabriel covered Wibble's mouth and beamed. "We have an agreement, then!"

"Wait. There's one problem."

"Wh-What is it?" His smile instantly vanished, replaced by a look of horror.

He sure is expressive. "I can't get married without my father's permission."

"Oh, now that you mention it, I suppose that's true..." He slumped his shoulders. Noble customs dictated that a lady needed her father's approval in order to marry.

"I think we can have a detective look for my father while I live with you as your fiancée," I said. "Only if it's not too much trouble, of course."

"It's no trouble at all! Are you sure you're fine with this?!"



I nodded.

Gabriel's eyes widened so much that it seemed like they'd pop out of his head. "It's a damp and depressing land with more slimes than people," he reminded me.

```
"I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Are you sure? I'm an equally depressing man."

"I think you're an interesting fellow."

"Me? Interesting?"

"Yes. You're fun to talk to."

"F-Fun?!"
```

The six differently colored slimes gathered together and jumped around Gabriel. "Congrats! Congrats!" they all shouted.

"Erm, I know I'm inexperienced, but I hope you'll be able to get along with me and the slimes," Gabriel said, bowing his head deeply.

"Likewise," I said. Before I could bow back, I realized something. "Come to think of it, do you know exactly what caused our scandal? Why my sister's engagement with Prince Mael was revoked?"

```
"Huh? Um...I'm not sure."
```

"I want you to know the details. You can decide whether or not to marry me afterwards."

```
"I don't feel that this is necessary, but..."
```

It would be better for him to know where my family stood in society before marrying me. Thus, I recounted the story from two years past—a painful memory I'd never wanted to relive.



It was the evening of my glamorous debut in high society. My heart raced as I

[&]quot;Just listen, okay?"

[&]quot;Very well."

donned my fashionable dress, getting ready to attend the party.

However, what happened that night completely robbed me of my excitement. Crown Prince Mael, with his arm around the shoulders of his mistress, Victoria, denounced his fiancée—my sister—in front of the large crowd of attendees.

"My fiancée, Adele, has long been victimizing Victoria! I shudder at the thought of such a treacherous, shallow, and coldhearted woman being our future queen! Our engagement shall be terminated!"

I didn't miss the brief look of triumph on Victoria's face as she leaned into Prince Mael. In the middle of this grand soiree, my sister's honor had been torn to shreds.

"I hereby banish Adele de Blanchard from our country!"

What was he saying? I couldn't comprehend what was happening at all. Was Prince Mael, who openly did as he pleased with his mistress by his side, putting on this charade to justify his conduct?

The unbelievable declarations didn't stop there.

"As for Adele's sister—there she is. She will resent her sister for her crimes!"

The moment he pointed at me, I felt everyone's gaze pierce into me like sharp icicles.

"Duke Mercœur's family shall have all of their assets seized! They must relinquish their titles as well! Let them starve in the slums!"

The people around me quickly shuffled away. The warm looks they had been regarding me with at my social debut instantly turned cold. A chill ran down my spine and settled around my stomach. It seemed that not only my sister but our entire family was going to be punished. But why was he doing this to us?

Victoria, the woman clinging to Prince Mael, was no noble. She'd come from a merchant family and had used her exceptional beauty to approach him. Since she had no knowledge of noble etiquette or customs, Prince Mael, who had only ever dealt with subservient women, had likely found her fascinating. She had taken him to experience all of the pleasures of the world, be they gambling, smoking, or drinking.

Naturally, my sister, who was a paragon of righteousness and honor—the very "noble" in "noblewoman"—could not allow this. Her many protests had gone ignored by Prince Mael, so she had expressed her opinion to Victoria directly. Prince Mael had interpreted this as jealousy-fueled bullying, even though my sister had been making preparations for Victoria to be accepted as a royal mistress. Then again, Victoria had probably even considered *that* to be an insulting act—even though a woman who hadn't undergone queen training could never become crown princess in the first place.

My sister seemed to remain dignified as she looked up at Prince Mael. I could only see her back, so I didn't know what kind of face she was making. She must have been frustrated...and disgusted. I wanted to run up and hug her, but the watchful eyes around us pinned me to my spot with fear. I was scared of Prince Mael, who had suddenly broken off their engagement in front of so many people, but it was even scarier how easily *everyone* had changed their attitude based on his words and actions.

"Today was her sister's debut in high society, was it not?" Prince Mael continued. "I hear they get along well. How about banishing them together?"

"Prince Mael, please have mercy on her," my sister said. "She has nothing to do with my actions."

"Oh, but it was you who said, 'Every action taken by a person in a position of responsibility affects not only themselves but their family as well!"

My sister's dignified act crumbled as she looked down, drooping like a wilted flower. Now, because she'd spoken up for me, she had been forced to lose face.

"Where is Adele's sister hiding?" Prince Mael made a show of looking for me, even though he knew exactly where I was—he had pointed at me a few minutes ago, after all.

The people who had distanced themselves from me immediately jabbed their fingers in my direction. This must be what it's like to lie on a bed of thorns.

"Seize both Adele and her sister!"

"Brother, please wait." An authoritative voice rang through the hall, accompanied by the sound of the door opening.

The sudden arrival was Prince Axel, who held the titles of second prince and dragon duke. He had his golden hair brushed back, and his resolute stance was a thing of beauty. Since he was usually a man of few words, everyone turned to listen to him.

"What is it, Axel?! Don't get in my way!" Prince Mael protested.

"These ladies are the daughters of Duke Mercœur," Prince Axel replied.

"So what?!"

"Duke Mercœur's wife is a princess of the neighboring country. I think we ought to be careful about how we treat her daughters."

"Silence! I care not!"

My sister was taken away by the knights. As for me, a woman I didn't recognize took my hand and led me out of the hall. She introduced herself as Prince Axel's former nursemaid. With her help, I was able to escape the castle and return home. However, many knights had already stormed the manor and confiscated our furnishings. Our family had been ruined in a single night.

As Prince Mael had commanded, our assets were seized. However, thanks to Prince Axel's efforts, my father retained his title. That said, since our family had no male successor, it would eventually be relinquished anyway. Women and unrelated people were allowed to inherit monster duke titles, but only men could succeed to regular ranks.

Just thinking back to that day was painful, and I knew Gabriel wouldn't feel good hearing about it either. I cut the story short, feeling sorry for ruining the mood.

"That's basically what happened," I said, wondering what he thought. I peeked up at him and saw that he was crying profusely. "Wait, huh? Wh-What's wrong?!"

"The way you were treated was too cruel. It's inhumane."

"It was cruel, but is it really something to cry that much over?!"

He must be very sensitive. I'd never seen a man older than me shed so many tears before. It felt like I shouldn't look, so I turned my face away.

He was crying so hard that the slimes were trying to reassure him.

```
"Don't cry, Gabriel!"

"There, there."

"Cheer up!"

"Are you okay?"

"It hurts, I know."

"Everything will be fine."
```

I offered him a handkerchief, which he took and used to wipe his red, swollen eyes. *Poor thing...*

```
"It's all right, though," I said. "The story ends on a positive note."
```

"What do you mean?"

"My sister went to our mother's homeland and made a comeback in high society. Her engagement to their crown prince was announced the other day."

"Now that you mention it, I do think I caught wind of that."

The neighboring country was much larger than this one, so being selected as its future queen was the greatest honor one could ask for. It was going to be a marriage between cousins, and they were both the devoted and sincere type. This time, it would surely go well.

"You didn't go with your mother and sister?" Gabriel asked.

"[…"

"Were you worried about your father?"

"No, not in the slightest. My father is fine on his own. He has countless lovers to take care of him."

"Then why did you stay behind?"

"I guess I didn't want to deal with high society ever again."

People who treated me with kindness could suddenly do an about-face.

Realizing I was living in that kind of world had filled me with fear. And that wasn't only true of this country—I imagined similar things were happening in

other countries too. Everyone believed that the words of those in power were absolute. Instead of fighting back, they let them dictate how they lived their lives.

"What a despicable world we live in," Gabriel said. "Even though it was clear who was right and who was wrong, they let vile deeds go unpunished."

"Yes, exactly. When those with power insist that they're in the right, everyone supports them without a second thought. That's how noble society runs."

"It's truly awful."

Two years ago, my life had gone from luxurious to frugal. At first, I hadn't been able to get up by myself. It hadn't been rare for me to sleep until noon, not knowing what else to do. Even when baking sweets, I'd get the temperature wrong and burn them, eat them before they were fully cooked and upset my stomach, or find myself picking up tree branches in the neighborhood because I couldn't afford firewood. It had been a series of failures and hardships. But I had been able to persevere because I was determined to become happier than the man who had cast my family into misfortune, Prince Mael.

I'd never told anyone these inner thoughts of mine, but before I knew it, I had revealed everything to Gabriel.

"You did well to endure such an unfamiliar environment for two years," he said. "Not everyone could have done that. You are a woman worthy of high esteem."

"High esteem? No, you're exaggerating."

"There's no need to be humble."

For the past two years, I had constantly felt uncertain. But now, for some reason, it felt like a weight had been taken off my shoulders. Perhaps I had always wanted to tell someone my story and have them acknowledge my hard work.

"Oh..." Tears spilled from my eyes. I didn't even cry two years ago, when my sister was punished so cruelly.

It was humiliating to cry in front of someone else, but then again, I had just

witnessed Gabriel sobbing as well. I guess this makes us even.

Gabriel was very obviously flustered by my tears, which made me feel sorry. The six differently colored slimes gathered around me and tried to cheer me up, just as they had done for him.

```
"It's okay to cry!"

"You did well!"

"Yep, that's right."

"You worked so hard."

"There, there."

"We're proud of you."
```

With their encouragement, I managed to stop crying. I was grateful to my tears for ceasing quickly. Since Gabriel and I had both seen each other cry, there wasn't much lingering embarrassment either. Thank goodness.

For now, we decided that I would leave for Triste in a month.

"I think I'll send my aunt here at a later date to handle the marriage preparations," Gabriel said.

"What preparations?" I asked.

"I imagine you'll need various things, like dresses and accessories."

Right. I can't get married empty-handed. However, I couldn't possibly afford even a single new dress.

"I'll cover the costs," Gabriel added, noticing my inner turmoil.

"No, you shouldn't have to."

"Think of it as a loan, then."

"I don't have any means to pay it back, though."

"Why don't you start a business of some sort? I'll invest in it."

"A business..." The only work I could do was pastry-making. However, unlike here in the capital, I wouldn't have a regular customer to depend on. Would it go well?

"You can take your time to think it over."

"Thank you."

As a token of apology and gratitude, I invited Gabriel to stay for dinner. However, he politely declined, saying that he couldn't impose so much on an unplanned visit.

"Um, when would you be able to, then?" I asked.

"No, you don't need to make arrangements. Please focus on preparing for your new life."

"Th-Thank you."

Gabriel gave a gentlemanly bow. "Until next time, then."

"Yes, have a nice day."

The slimes followed him as he left...except for Wibble, who stayed in the house.

"Wibble, what are you doing?" Gabriel asked. "We're going home!"

"Wibble will stay with Fra!"

"I-Is this some kind of joke?!"

"Wibble says stay, so Wibble stays! Wanna be with Fra!"

Wibble coiled around my left arm and refused to leave. Apparently it had taken a liking to me.

"Um, if it's all right with you, I can take care of Wibble," I said.

"Wouldn't it be a nuisance?"

"Not at all. Wibble helps with the cooking and baking, so it actually eases my burden."

"In that case, please look after Wibble for me."

Gabriel bowed deeply and left—but not without the duck quacking up a storm and pecking him the whole way out.



Gabriel seemed to feel extremely guilty for leaving Wibble with me. As an apology, he first sent me a large number of silk handkerchiefs. I had no idea why, but I gratefully accepted them nonetheless. Aside from those, he also sent food and ingredients—things like flour, meat, fruit, bread, and chocolate. Thanks to him, I was able to eat fulfilling meals every day.

Wibble greatly increased my baking output as well, so I could now make twice as much money as before. I wanted to use my earnings to pay for the marriage preparations.

One week later, Gabriel's aunt came to visit. She looked to be in her midforties. She wore her hat low over her face, but I could see her gentle eyes peeking out from underneath. Her elegant mermaid dress suited her slim frame.

"You must be the bride of my adorable nephew, Gabby," she said. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Julietta de Molière."

The Molières were famed for being one of the richest noble families in the country. They were apparently acquainted with my mother, so Mrs. Molière had readily approved of me.

"I'm Francette de Blanchard."

"Why, what a sweet young lady! Gabby has a good eye for women, choosing such a lovely bride! Color me impressed!"

Gabby...? My blank stare was met with a bombardment of praise as Mrs. Molière squeezed my hand. I had been afraid that she would spend the whole day evaluating whether I was a suitable wife for Gabriel, but she seemed to like me, which was a relief.

"By the way, where did you get that dress?" she asked.

"Oh, um... It's a rental."

I had used my pastry sales to pay for it, since I didn't think it would be acceptable to browse stores for nobles in a tattered apron dress. I had tried to choose a standard dress that wasn't dependent on fashion trends, but perhaps it was off-putting to a noblewoman of Mrs. Molière's age.

"Um, is it strange?" I asked.

"No, not at all! Gabby said you likely didn't own any dresses, so I wondered where it came from."

"Oh, I see."

"How unthoughtful of him not to send you anything to wear for outings!"

"No, um, he's already been sending me a lot of other supplies."

"Such as?"

"Bread, chocolate...things needed to get by in daily life. It's been a great help."

Tears welled up in Mrs. Molière's eyes. "You've been through so much. Don't worry. Gabby will be responsible for giving you a happy life from now on!"

"Y-Yes, thank you."

Wibble slowly slid up to us.

"Why, if it isn't Wibbly!" Mrs. Molière said cheerfully.

"Not Wibbly. Wibble!"

"Right, Wibble!"

It seemed to be a reunion of sorts for them. Hand in tentacle, they did a little dance. It was a charming sight.

"Oh, but this is no time for dancing," Mrs. Molière said. "Shall we get going?"

"Yes," I said. "Thank you for accompanying me."

And so, we went out to town to do our shopping. Wibble waved at us with an extended tentacle, seeming content to stay home.

"Fra, Juli, have a safe trip."

"See you later," I said.

There was a magnificent carriage parked outside my house.

"Tee hee, what a cute little duck you have here," Mrs. Molière said.

"Y-Yes..."

The duck was demonstrating social awareness today. She wasn't making a ruckus or lunging at my visitor. She was simply behaving herself.

```
"What's its name?"

"I haven't chosen one."

"May I have the honor, then?"

"Er, be my guest."

"Thank you. Is it a boy? Or a girl?"

"Female— I mean, a girl."
```

"I see." Mrs. Molière stared at the duck and tilted her head. "Hmmmm... How about Alexandrine?"

"A-Alexandrine... U-Um, it sounds very noble. I think it suits her."

"Great!"

And so, the duck was given the name "Alexandrine." She seemed to puff her chest out with pride when Mrs. Molière told her, "You're Alexandrine now," but it was probably just my imagination.

Alexandrine, formerly "the duck," saw us off as we got into Mrs. Molière's glamorous carriage, which turned out to be just as impressive on the inside. The floorboards were completely covered in velvet, the seats were made of lustrous genuine leather, and the window frames had gold trim. It was more lavish than the carriage my family used to own.

"First, let's buy you some dresses," she said. "Triste only has one tailor shop and it's run by an old lady with bad hearing, so orders don't get conveyed properly at all." She recounted a tale of requesting an azure dress with puffy sleeves only to receive a steel-gray men's suit instead. Worse yet, after unfolding it, it had turned out to have no sleeves. "Just awful, don't you think?"

"Yes, indeed." I found myself curious about the sleeveless suit. What would that look like?

Our first stop was the most popular dressmaker in the capital—the kind of store that was hard to approach because there was always a long line. Mrs.

Molière went around to the back. Apparently there was a separate entrance for valued customers.

When we stepped inside, an employee greeted us with a smile. "Welcome, Mrs. Molière."

"Hello. I'd like to see the dresses I requested the other day."

"Of course."

The employee led us to a large private room with a gleaming chandelier. Several dresses were lined up on mannequins. At a glance, there seemed to be over thirty of them.

"We selected a variety for you, ranging from current trends in the capital to classic favorites that have stood the test of time," the employee explained.

"Why, they're all wonderful!" Mrs. Molière's eyes sparkled like those of a girl who was about to make her social debut.

"Lady Francette, please come this way."

"Okay," I replied, letting my measurements be taken while Mrs. Molière went over each and every garment. These dresses were premade, so they would have to be altered to fit my size.

"Very well, we will be taking all of these!" Mrs. Molière declared.

"Huh?!" I looked at her in shock.

She tilted her head in confusion. "Did you see any that aren't to your liking?"

"No, but I thought we would only be choosing one or two."

"Oh dear! With only one or two dresses, the servants won't be able to launder them in time. You'll need at least two per day, no?"

Indeed, my mother would change clothes at least thrice a day. That was the way of a noblewoman. They had morning dresses, afternoon dresses, teatime dresses, evening dresses, night dresses, and so on. Wearing the appropriate dress for the occasion was proper etiquette for women of the upper class. If my appearance was shabby, it would damage my future husband's—Gabriel's—reputation. Thus, this was not the time to be showing restraint.

"Please have a few more dresses made to order," Mrs. Molière continued. "As for autumn dresses, I will select some and have them sent to the estate."

"Autumn dresses?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Could it be that all of the dresses here are for summer?"

"Of course."

Buying over thirty dresses just for summer?! I sipped the tea prepared by the employee, an absent look on my face.

We went to several establishments after that, buying an unimaginable number of goods. Gabriel was paying for everything, which had me shaking with fear. Most of our purchases were going to be sent directly to Triste, including furniture—the selection of which we had entrusted to the store employees' judgment. There wasn't enough time in the day to choose every single thing ourselves.

I climbed into the carriage and leaned back against the seat, giving it my whole weight. I was exhausted, but Mrs. Molière was still full of energy.

"Um, was it all right to buy so much?" I asked.

"Why, this is nothing. The selection at every store was poor, perhaps because we're in the middle of the social season. We couldn't even get a third of what we needed."

"I-I see."

The social season was the period from spring to summer when all of the nobles mingled. They would flock to the capital from all over, resulting in long lines at every store. The city was full of life at this time of year.

"Tee hee, I love the social season," Mrs. Molière said. "Seeing so many people having a grand time gets me excited."

"Is that so?"

"It must be a normal sight for you, since you grew up in the capital."

Indeed, for me, it was an extremely ordinary springtime scene. Perhaps Mrs. Molière was comparing it to spring in her hometown when she described this as exciting.

"Shall we have tea somewhere?" she suggested.

"Sure."

We headed to Mrs. Molière's favorite café. It was popular for its spacious terrace, but we took the magicite-powered elevator to the third floor instead. There, we were led to a balcony with a sweeping view of the city.

"Have you been here before?" Mrs. Molière asked.

"No, I haven't."

"Their cherry clafoutis is exquisite."

"I can't wait to try it."

Clafoutis was a pastry made by pouring custard into tart batter, arranging fruits dipped in syrup on top, and then baking it.

"Clafoutis is my favorite dessert in the whole world," Mrs. Molière said, a faraway look in her eyes.

The dish was brought to us right away, along with aromatic tea. Mrs. Molière dug in with glee. I took a bite as well. The clafoutis was crunchy on the outside —harder than a cookie—but the filling was creamy like pudding. The sweet-and-sourness of the cherries was a nice complement.

"It really is delicious," Mrs. Molière said with a smile. She then peered at me, concerned. "You must be tired, being dragged around to so many places."

"No, I'm fine."

"If only we could've called merchants to the estate instead."

Normally, upper-class nobles didn't go shopping like this. They called merchants to their homes and selected from their wares. However, the social season was an exception. Almost all merchants refused to make personal visits during this time because there were so many nobles gathered in the capital.

"Um, I had fun," I said.

"I'm happy to hear that."

Mrs. Molière ate up her clafoutis and ordered an additional sandwich. I was full, so I passed.

"By the way, Miss Francette, I noticed that you're quite modest, or rather, you seemed unaccustomed to shopping sprees. Did you not buy many dresses when you lived as a noble?"

"I think I was given the normal amount. But since my older sister was engaged to the crown prince, the family budget seemed to prioritize her, so..."

"Oh dear! Were you envious that she got everything?"

"No, not at all."

My sister was a hard worker. In order to work on her diplomacy, she had mastered the languages of several foreign countries, traveled to various lands to do charity work, and held salons to interact with many people. I never could've done any of that. To me, it was only natural that my parents would invest so much in her.

"I see," Mrs. Molière said. "I was always jealous of my older sister."

Her older sister was Gabriel's mother. From the sound of it, she had been given many special things that Mrs. Molière had not received, such as the education and etiquette training required of the future slime duchess and a handsome fiancé with a good background.

"However, my sister complained that I had it better."

"Why was that?"

"I had freedom."

Once her sister had inherited the title, she'd had no choice but to continue living in Triste. She wasn't allowed to go elsewhere and live as she pleased.

"When I grew up, I realized why my sister envied me. I'm sure she still feels that way now," Mrs. Molière continued, telling me that if I married Gabriel and had a child with him, her sister would become free. "I thought I wouldn't have to worry about her anymore, but now it pains my heart to know that you'll be the next one trapped in that dull place."

Mrs. Molière explained that she had moved to the capital when she got married. She hadn't been back to her homeland in decades.

"I'm ashamed of my lack of patriotism," she admitted.

"I got the sense that you do love your hometown, though."

"How so?"

"Clafoutis is a local specialty of Triste. If you didn't care about your birthplace, wouldn't you prefer eating the desserts popular in the capital?"

Mrs. Molière had gotten a distant look in her eyes when she ate the clafoutis. She must've been reminiscing on her old memories of her homeland.

"Ah...yes, you may be right."

Apparently, when she had just moved to the capital and introduced herself as being from Triste, some people had mocked her, saying, "That backwoods land with nothing but lakes, fog, and slimes?" Being subjected to so many of those comments had convinced her that her homeland was a dull place.

"There are a lot of different places in the world, each with their own upsides and downsides," I said. "People who only look at the bad things might just have a narrow perspective."

"Yes, I agree."

I promised Mrs. Molière that I'd write her a letter when I found a place in Triste that I loved. She gave me a sweet, girlish smile and said, "I'm looking forward to it."



Gabriel's gift of food assistance was delivered to me by the slimes. The sight of the colorful creatures carrying food in baskets felt like something straight out of a fairy tale. To avoid drawing attention in town, an invisibility spell had been cast on them. This also let them pass by Alexandrine the savage duck unharmed.

The day before yesterday, I had written Gabriel a letter, asking if I could see him before going to Triste. I hadn't gotten my hopes up, but today, I received a reply saying that he would have time tomorrow. I quickly penned a response

and entrusted it to the slimes.

Every time the slimes came, I asked Wibble if it wanted to go home with the others, just in case it changed its mind.

```
"Nope. Stay with Fra."

"All right."
```

The answer was the same as always. With Wibble cooking, baking, and accompanying me on shopping trips, I could no longer imagine life without my multitalented partner.

The other slimes played in the bathtub for a while before going home.

The next day, I wore the day dress Gabriel had bought for me. It was an innocent lilac color. I also put on makeup for the first time in a while. Next, I arranged my hair. The back part of my hair went into a French braid, while the sides went into rope braids that I secured at the back with an accessory made of pearls. I used a second mirror to make sure everything was neat and symmetrical.

"Yes, a fine job!"

I'd gotten much better at doing my hair over the past two years. At first, I hadn't even been able to braid it properly. I'd tried going to a hair salon once but hadn't ended up with the hairstyle I'd wanted. After that, I'd just practiced like crazy.

Gabriel was going to be meeting me at my house. A fancy café had been another option, but this was probably the only place where we could have a long chat.

I'd baked a chocolate pie for us to snack on and was proud of how well it had turned out. All that was left to do was wait. Too restless to sit still, I started pulling weeds in the yard. That was when I heard a shout from Gabriel.

"Wh-What are you doing?! That's a servant's job!"

My fiancé sped past the gate towards me, carrying a bouquet of flowers. Naturally, Alexandrine charged at him. "A-Ahh!"

"Alexandrine, bad!"

My scolding stopped the duck's attack, but she continued to quack noisily. She perceived Gabriel as an enemy.

"I'm sorry she's so violent," I said.

"No...it's my fault for coming through the front gate when you wrote in your letter to use the back door." Apparently he had wanted to take a look at the house before going around to the back. "You can let Wibble take care of weeding the lawn."

"It can do that?"

"As a general rule, Wibble can do anything humans can."

"How skilled."

Gabriel slowly extended his hand towards me. I wondered if he was going to caress my face, but instead, he plucked a blade of grass from my hair. What was I expecting? I'm so ashamed.

"Ah, my apologies," he said. "I couldn't help but notice it."

"It's fine. Um, thanks."

He offered me the bouquet. "I met with my aunt earlier, and she said to buy you flowers."

"Oh, I love daffodils. They're beautiful!"

"I'm glad you like them."

There's no reason to stand around, so I should invite him in. But first...

"Thank you for buying me this dress as part of our marriage preparations, Your Grace, as well as everything else."

"There's no need to thank me. You're going to be my wife, so this much is nothing. More importantly..."

"What's more important?"

"Please don't call me 'Your Grace.' I'm not worthy of such esteem."

```
"You're the slime duke, aren't you?"
"Yes, but..."
"What should I call you, then?"
"Just 'Gabriel' will do."
"Without any form of address?"
"Yes."
"All right then, Gabriel."
```

"Thank you." He swiftly adjusted the bridge of his glasses, a faint tinge of red in his cheeks. I couldn't tell if he was happy or embarrassed to be called by his name.

```
"You can just call me 'Francette' too."

"Understood...F-Francette."

"If it's hard to pronounce, 'Fran' is fine."

"Ah, it does seem easier to say."

"'Fran' it is, then."

"Yes. Thank you, Fran."

After we decided what to call each other, I led him into the house.

"I baked chocolate pie today," I said. "Gabriel, do you like sweets?"

"Huh?! Oh, I-I can eat anything."

"Okay, that's good to know."
```

I should have asked about his preferences in my letter. I had unfairly assumed that it'd be fine because my father had a big sweet tooth. When inviting guests over, it was crucial to know what they liked.

I brewed a pot of tea and brought it and the chocolate pie to the table. I could hear Wibble and Gabriel having an upbeat conversation.

```
"Gabriel, can I tell Fra you bought all her sweets?"

"Absolutely not!"
```

"What's wrong?" I asked, checking in on them.

Gabriel had his hand over Wibble's mouth. "Nothing."

"Oh, okay. Well, the pie's ready, although I don't know if it'll be to your taste."

"Thank you."

I nervously watched as Gabriel elegantly lifted a piece of pie with his fork. Since he said he could eat anything, he probably doesn't like sweets that much.

The moment he put it in his mouth, his ice-green eyes snapped wide open.

"How is it?" I asked.

"It's goo— No, it's incredibly delicious!" he exclaimed, loud enough to make the old, worn-out house shake slightly. I was glad to see that he enjoyed my baking.

"So, the reason I called you here today..."

"There was a reason?"

"Did you think there wasn't?"

"Yes." Apparently he thought that since we were engaged, it was normal to meet for no reason.

"Oh...it feels like I've already achieved my objective."

"What did you need me for?"

"I wanted to ask if you had changed your mind."

"About what?"

"Well..." It'd been a few weeks since our engagement, I explained. This would be around the time when he'd come to his senses and realize that marrying me was a mistake. "I wondered if you'd had a change of heart."

"No. Not in the slightest."

"That's good, then."

"And you? Are you dissatisfied that our engagement is nothing more than a financial contract?"

"I have no complaints. Marrying the slime duke is a great honor. Plus, you're a very kind gentleman. You're too good for me."

"Too good for you? No, that's my line." He averted his gaze and adjusted the bridge of his glasses, his cheeks slightly flushed. *He must be shy.* "Speaking of which, Fran...I heard a rumor concerning you."

"Oh? I wonder what it could be."

My sister had always been the center of attention in high society. She was beautiful, smart, and treated everyone with equal kindness. Everyone had praised her as a woman fit to be our nation's future queen. Meanwhile, I was so plain compared to her that no one had ever gossiped about me.

"Back when your sister was still engaged to Prince Mael, I remember hearing that you were engaged to Prince Axel. I'm curious as to how that turned out."

"Engaged to Prince Axel? Me? No way. Never. Definitely not!"

Prince Axel, the dragon duke, was the chief commander of the knights and the most skilled swordsman in the country. He was perfection personified. Even though I was only distantly connected to him as the sister of his brother's fiancée, he treated me kindly and exchanged words with me whenever our paths crossed. He had even danced with me at my social debut. However, there had never been any talk of us getting engaged.

"Besides, if *both* of Duke Mercœur's daughters got to marry into the royal family, we'd practically be asking people to hate us," I added.

"I see."

My social debut had become a traumatic experience, with my sister's engagement revoked and our family cast into ruin. But dancing with Prince Axel was my one fond memory from that day. He was like a good older brother figure to me, and I couldn't tell you how many times I'd dreamt about how much better it would've been if my sister had been engaged to him instead. I quess it wouldn't be reality if everything went the way you wanted it to.

"Someone must've gotten the wrong idea," I said. "Don't worry about it."

"That's a relief to hear."

Our conversation stalled, so I tried to ask Gabriel some questions.

"There's something I've been curious about too. Do you have time?"

"Yes. I can stay for hours if necessary."

"No, it's not going to take hours." I decided to start with my most burning question. "Do you have a lake where my duck can swim around?"

"The lakes are infested with slimes, so I can't recommend them. My home has several bathrooms, so we can dedicate one of them to the duck."

"An exclusive bathroom for the duck? How luxurious."

"It would've gone unused anyway, so don't worry about it."

Still, the lakes are infested? It sounds like the slimes are more relevant to daily life than I thought.

"Also, the duck—her name is Alexandrine—is rather loud and violent. Would she be a bother to the neighbors?"

"It won't be an issue. The manor is located away from the village, on top of a small hill. The houses aren't densely packed like they are here." He added that his relatives lived in the next town over, so he rarely saw them. "My mother likes animals, so I imagine she'll be fine with the duck."

"That's good."

I continued to ask other questions, such as whether there were places where Alexandrine could walk, play, and relax. Sunbathing was likely impossible, but other than that, it seemed like she would be able to live there without issue.

"Is there anything else?" Gabriel asked.

"Hmm, I think that's everything I wanted to know."

"Um, how can it be everything? You've only been asking questions about your duck."

"Now that you mention it, that's true."

"Surely you have other concerns?"

"Hmmmm... Not really, I suppose?" I might have questions when I get there,

but I can just ask them as they come up.

With nothing left to ask, it was time to end the meeting. I invited Gabriel to stay for dinner, but he declined because it hadn't been part of the plan.

"We can save that for another time," he said. "I'd love to enjoy your home cooking in Triste, after you get accustomed to living there. I'm sure you're very busy right now."

"Understood. Thank you." I gave him some sablés I'd prepared as a gift.

"Are you sure I can have these?"

"Yes. It's in return for the things you sent me."

"Thank you," he said with a smile. Perhaps he actually loved sweets, contrary to his lukewarm statement about them earlier. "Until next time."

"Yes, see you then."

I had him leave through the back door this time so that he wouldn't get attacked by Alexandrine. As I was wondering where he'd parked his carriage, his body was suddenly enveloped in light. A magic circle appeared, and in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

"W-Was that what I think it was?" I asked, holding Wibble in my arms.

"Teleportation magic!"

"T-Teleportation magic?!"

Only a select few people in the country could use such a high-level spell. Who knew that Gabriel had been hiding an extraordinary amount of magical talent?

The teleportation was surprising enough already, but what happened next was even more shocking. As soon as Gabriel was gone, there was a knock at my front door.

"Oh? Who could that be?"

I didn't hear Alexandrine quacking, even though she usually made a racket threatening my visitors. What kind of person could have avoided her wrath? I peeked through the small hole in the door.

"Huh?!"

The visitor was a handsome man with blond hair and blue eyes—Prince Axel, without a doubt. I hurriedly opened the door.

"Long time no see, Lady Francette," he said in a gentle voice.

My mind went blank. Lost for words, I decided I should at least kneel first. "Y-Your Highness, it is an honor to—"

"No need for stiff formalities. I only came to see how you were doing."

My confusion must've been apparent from my face, because he proceeded to explain further.

"I heard Duke Mercœur is missing. I was surprised when I received the report from my subordinate today."

"Oh...yes, he is." Since the knights arrested the thugs who came for my father, Prince Axel must've heard about it.

"Due to an internal issue, I didn't hear the news until now." Prince Axel explained that Maxim Maillart had paid the knights a large sum to cover up the incident. Because of that, the whole affair—including my father's disappearance—hadn't been relayed to the upper ranks. "Maxim Maillart seems to be ashamed that his wife left him for another man. He did everything he could to keep the incident from coming to light."

The knights involved had been paid off with two hundred thousand geld. It must've been the money Gabriel had given Maxim Maillart to save me. Still, I was surprised that Prince Axel would investigate this case personally. Was there something bigger going on behind the scenes?

"Did Duke Mercœur act strangely at all before his disappearance?" Prince Axel asked.

"No. He was staying at his lovers' estates as usual, rarely coming home."

"He hasn't been coming home? Have you been living alone all this time?"

[&]quot;Essentially, yes."

[&]quot;Do you have servants?"

[&]quot;No. Oh, but I do have a duck."

```
"A duck...?"
```

"I let her run free in the yard. She's very fierce and attacks visitors."

I leaned out the door to peer into the yard. Alexandrine was quietly pecking at weeds in the far corner. Clearly she chose which visitors to attack. I recalled Gabriel's scream and decided that the duck needed training.

"I knew I should've taken you in," said Prince Axel. "It's not too late. I'll be your guardian."

"Oh, um, I'll be fine."

"That was what you said before, the first time you declined my offer. In reality, you weren't fine."

"No, I know what you mean, but I really am fine now."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"I'm engaged."

"Engaged? To whom?" he asked with an intimidating glare.

I clenched my trembling hands and replied, "To Gabriel...the slime duke."

"The slime duke?!"

"Yes."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Right here. He was the one who saved me when those thugs came."

"I see... So *he's* your fiancé." Prince Axel seemed to know Gabriel personally, perhaps because they were both monster dukes. "Indeed, he will protect you. And you'll have a stable life with him."

"Yes, I hope."

Not wanting to keep him standing, I offered to make him a cup of tea, but he declined. I also offered to go to the knights' headquarters in case he wanted to know more about the incident, but he declined again.

"I only came to see your face," he said.

"O-Oh. If you'd called for me, I could've visited you anytime."

"You're right. I should've asked you to come." He patted me twice on the head, a faint smile on his face for the first time today. His touch was gentle, like how a brother would treat his younger sister. "I won't be able to spend time with you anymore."

"Prince Axel...thank you for treating me so kindly these past years."

"No, I couldn't do anything for you."

"You had your position to consider."

"Still, I should've been able to do something."

He cares for me so much even though we were barely related. What a warmhearted person.

I thanked him once again.

"The knights will assume responsibility for investigating Duke Mercœur," Prince Axel added. "If we learn anything, I'll send a letter to Triste."

"Understood. I hope the search goes well."

"I'll come see you in Triste sometime," he said before leaving.

My heart was still pounding from the unexpected visit. I doubt it'll ever happen again, but if you are going to come again, please let me know in advance, I protested softly in my mind.





At last, it was time for me to join Triste's ducal family. Not that I was actually getting married yet, but still.

I'd already said my farewells to the neighbors, the pastry store, the orphanage, and the people I knew at the market. Gabriel had said that if I felt homesick, he could teleport me back to the capital whenever I wanted. So I told everyone we'd still be able to see each other.

My luggage consisted of a single briefcase and a duck under one arm. Wibble had hopped onto my shoulder too. Gabriel had hired a gardener to take care of my house here, in case my father ever decided to come back. The cleaning would be handled as well, so I had nothing to worry about at all.

Gabriel arrived at the scheduled time, emerging from a magic circle. "You're ready, I see. Sorry to keep you waiting. Take this," he said, handing me a cute, frilly umbrella.

"Is it raining in Triste?" I asked.

"No, this is for self-defense."

"Huh?" How am I supposed to defend myself with an umbrella?

Gabriel said nothing, instead offering me his hand. I gently placed my fingertips atop it.

My new life in an unfamiliar land was about to begin. I had a feeling it would definitely go well.

"Shall we go, Fran?"

"Yes, let's."

A magic circle appeared, engulfing us in light. The scenery around us spun and changed in an instant.

Chapter 2: The Fallen Noble Francette Moves to the Lakes

We were transported to a small hill overlooking a misty village. The land was made up of dense forests and lakes, all shrouded in fog. The air was warm and damp to the point where it made my dress feel heavier. Apparently Triste was hot during the day but cold at night. I was surprised by how different the climate was from the capital.

I'd accidentally dropped my briefcase when we landed. Gabriel picked it up from the ground, but he refused to give it back. He seemed intent on carrying it to the house for me.

"Do you have teleportation sickness?" he asked.

"What's that?"

"People who can't adapt to teleportation magic will suffer symptoms such as headaches and feeling ill."

"Oh, I see. It's okay. I don't feel anything of the sort."

"That's good to hear."

Alexandrine was doing fine too. She looked around curiously at her surroundings. When Gabriel approached her, she quacked and flapped her wings. She still saw him as an enemy. It would probably be hard to make them get along.

I had recently made a cloth bag for Alexandrine. She quieted down when she was inside it. It fit snugly around her body, so it made her feel safe and secure, as if she were in her nest. I put Alexandrine in the bag and wore it over my shoulder.

Wibble was the same as always, but there was a small glimmer in its eyes, as if it were excited to be back home.

"So this is Triste," I said.

There was fog in every direction. In some places, it was thinner and you could see distant scenery, but in others, you couldn't see anything at all. And everywhere I looked, there were lakes, big and small. The sky was overcast, but apparently, this was considered bright. It was usually darker than this.

"Are you cold?" Gabriel asked.

"No, I'm fine."

Gabriel turned around and pointed at an old castle surrounded by fog and a dark forest. "That is my home. Isn't it unsettling?"

"Well...it certainly has character."

I took one step, then another. The flowers on the ground were damp too, and droplets of water splashed around as I walked.

"Fran, all of the puddles have slimes lurking inside. Stay away from them."

"Really?"

"Yes. They attack those who carelessly step on them."

There happened to be a small puddle nearby. I stood on tiptoe to peer inside, but as far as I could tell, it was just a small hole filled with rainwater.

Gabriel approached the puddle and hit it with his cane. A slime the size of my fist jumped up, and he immediately smacked it down. The crushed slime lay dead on the ground.

"As you can see, even the smallest puddles are dangerous. Please exercise caution."

"U-Understood."

Gabriel explained that large slimes could also be hiding in tiny puddles.

"So I need to be careful around bathtubs and sinks too?" I asked.

"No, it's safe inside the house. We have a slime-warding barrier."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Are there slimes in the little water drops on the leaves?"

"No. They need at least as much water as you can scoop in the palm of your

hand."

"Okay, that's good." Either way, I'd best be vigilant.

"If you do encounter a slime, hit it with that umbrella. You'll probably be able to defeat it with a single strike."

"So that's why you said it was for self-defense."

"Yes. I was afraid you wouldn't want to come here if I explained it before we left, so I didn't tell you. Um, I'm sorry."

I wasn't pleased about his silent deception, but he'd confessed the truth and apologized, so I decided to forgive him. However, I couldn't guarantee that I would forgive him if this happened again. I told him that he should explain such situations right away instead of expecting me to approve after the fact.

"I will from now on," he said.

"Please do."

As a couple, it was important to learn to compromise. I wanted to slowly deepen our relationship, listening to his thoughts rather than only pushing my own opinions.

"That umbrella was specially made for you," Gabriel explained. "It's enchanted with a spell that increases its strength when fighting slimes."

I opened the umbrella and saw a magic circle drawn on the inside. It was an antislime weapon designed for a lady living in Triste.

"It was made for you, but if you find it unwieldy, I'll have it improved."

"Does that mean I can keep this umbrella?"

"Yes. Please carry it with you at all times when you walk outdoors."

"Understood. It's a lovely umbrella. I like it. Thank you."

"In that case, it was worth giving it to you." Gabriel quickly pushed the bridge of his glasses up and added, "Although, as your future husband, it was only the right thing to do!"

After walking through the damp field for a while, we reached a dense forest. The farther in we went, the stronger the smell of greenery became. It must've

been because the leaves were covered in moisture.

"Hm?" Water drops were falling from above. "Is it raining?"

"No, this is fog drip."

"What's that?"

"Well..." He explained that fog drip wasn't rain. It was a unique phenomenon in lake regions, where fog clinging to trees condensed into droplets. They fell to the ground when blown by the wind.

Since it felt like rain, I opened my umbrella. But apparently locals didn't bother using umbrellas just for fog drip.

"Most of our coats are water-repellent, so umbrellas aren't necessary."

"Are they mainly just for women to protect themselves, then?"

"Not quite. We still use umbrellas in heavy rain. If I'm away from home and don't have one on me, I do this." Gabriel put Wibble on the tip of his cane and gave it a light tap. Wibble thinned out and expanded into a dome shape. "It's a slime umbrella."

"Wow, that's the slime duke for you." I couldn't help but be impressed.

We passed through the forest as we talked and arrived at the foggy castle we'd seen earlier.

"It's very majestic," I remarked.

"It's unnecessarily large, that's all."

Gabriel explained that the castle had been built out of slate quarried from Triste's mountains. The tall spire contained an enormous piece of magicite that shone like the moon at night. It served as a lighthouse in this dark and foggy land.

Before passing the robust gate, Gabriel turned around and said, "Um, I should have mentioned this earlier, but my mother is a bit...high-strung. You don't have to force yourself to make conversation with her."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that odd warning, so I simply nodded.

The old castle was surrounded by a moat filled with water. I looked inside and

saw that it was tightly packed with stakes.

"Are those to ward off slimes?" I asked.

"Yes. The stakes are engraved with a spell that pulls in slimes that fall into the moat. When the slimes are stabbed, the stakes absorb their mana and become stronger." Gabriel added that the moat was infused with a spell that used the slimes' remains to purify the water. That was why it was clear enough to see the stakes.

"Did you come up with this?"

"Yes. Well, it's nothing special."

"No, it's incredible! Not only does it exterminate slimes, it also purifies the water!"

Gabriel adjusted the bridge of his glasses and averted his gaze.

"It must've been difficult to put together," I remarked.

"Well... Never mind—that's enough about me. Let me show you around inside." He tapped his cane in front of the moat. A magic circle appeared, activating the drawbridge. "My cane and your umbrella are infused with a spell. If you tap the tip of the umbrella right here, the drawbridge will automatically lower, like so."

"I see. So it's like a house key."

"Correct."

The bridge was sturdy, but it didn't have railings. Seeing the stakes in the moat filled me with fear.

Sensing my plight, Gabriel offered me his hand. "You can hold on to me if you'd like."

"Thank you. I'll admit I was scared."

"You'll get used to it after crossing every day."

"Will 1?"

I placed my hand over his. He held my hand tightly and even supported my waist. My heart skipped a beat. Was it racing because he was doing a

surprisingly good job of reassuring me? Or was it because I was afraid of falling off the bridge? Either way, it was still scary, so I appreciated the help.

Unfortunately, my relief was short-lived. My foot got caught in the mud and I lost balance.

```
"Eek!"

I braced for impact, but there was none—Gabriel had caught me.

"Fran, are you all right?!"

"Y-Yes."
```

Gabriel hadn't let go of my briefcase. He was supporting my full weight with one arm. I'd thought he had a slim frame like a young nobleman in a romance novel, but he turned out to be stronger and more muscular than expected. The contrast made my heart race.



"The ground is muddy, so please be careful," he said.

"Y-Yes, you're right. Thank you."

Even after he let go of me, my heart continued to pound for a while.

"Let's keep moving," he said.

After passing under the raised portcullis, I found myself in an intimidating yard surrounded by solid ashlar walls. They must've been built this way to keep slimes out.

"The slime-repelling magic was only completed a hundred years ago, so my ancestors before that prevented invasions by building high walls," Gabriel explained.

"I see." This old castle must've been fending off slimes for a very long time.

On closer inspection, I noticed that most of the plants in the garden were vegetables, and most of the trees were fruit trees. I didn't see any of the decorative flowers commonly found in a noble's garden, like roses or lilies.

"There was a slime famine three hundred years ago," said Gabriel. "We raise vegetables and livestock in the castle so that we can distribute food to the people if it ever happens again."

"A slime famine?"

"It was a dark age when slimes evolved to enjoy eating meat and vegetables." He explained that the slimes had devoured all of the vegetables and livestock in the village, not leaving a single drop of blood behind. The ruler at the time had saved his people from starvation by exterminating the slimes, making them cough up blood all over the place.

There were many gardeners hard at work. They bowed when they saw Gabriel.

Something caught my attention. "Um, may I ask a question?"

"Yes, of course."

There was a clear film over the soil in the garden. It looked like a stretchedout slime. I couldn't help but wonder what it was. "The film is soil slime. It speeds up plant growth," Gabriel said.

"S-Soil slime?!"

"Yes, it's made from slime remains. In Triste, we typically sow wheat in the fall, let it sit over the winter, and harvest it in early summer. However, by using this soil slime, we can harvest them after just one month!"

"Really?"

"I'm not lying." It turned out that Gabriel had developed it in order to secure enough food for all of the people in his domain. Using slimes as an ingredient seemed dubious, but he said the crops were properly purified and free of slime components. An external party was contracted to verify food safety. "By the way, no one knows about this besides the workers here."

"Was it okay to tell me, then?"

"Of course. You're going to be my wife, Fran," he said, blushing shyly. When he realized I was looking at him, he quickly turned away.

I had no idea why he was so interested in me. I found myself wanting to ask him about it later, after I'd gotten accustomed to living here.

Inside the castle, there were livestock pens, a brewery, a flower garden for raising bees, a chapel, a weapons storage room, and many other facilities I couldn't keep track of. And there were enough workers to pass one with every step you took. All of them respected Gabriel and bowed politely when they saw him. He seemed to be a good ruler.

Finally, we arrived at the living quarters. A large number of servants were there to greet us.

"Welcome back, my lord," said the steward, a woman in her thirties with short brown hair. She bowed deeply.

I'd never seen a female steward before, so I was surprised. She was quite beautiful.

"I'll introduce you to the servants later," said Gabriel. I imagined meeting his mother was the higher priority.

Gabriel left my briefcase with one of the servants. The steward took

Alexandrine off my hands and said she would let her play in the bathtub.

"Now, let me show you around inside, Fran," said Gabriel.

"Yes, please do."

It was surprisingly bright inside the castle. Once again, slimes were the key.

"We use 'slime lamps' here—slimes hardened to be like magicite and used as light sources," Gabriel explained. Unsurprisingly, he was the one who had made these living lamps out of light-element slimes.

We walked down a long, stone corridor, then went up to his mother's room on the second floor.

Gabriel knocked on the door. "Mother, I have returned. I'd like to introduce you to my fiancée, Lady Francette."

An attendant opened the door for us.

The refined woman inside smiled at me. But not a second later, she began to shriek at an unbelievable volume. "Oh nooo, a city dweller! What's the point?! She'll just get sick of this place in half a day and leave anywaaay!"

Gabriel gave me a sad look that seemed to say, "See? I told you she was strange." I seriously wasn't sure how to respond.

"Mother, please calm down. She is my fiancée and understands what our land is like."

"Your father said the same thing! In the end, everyone leaves! Oh, you poor child, to be abandoned so soon!"

She was certainly an intense person. I didn't know if she was going to believe me, but I did know that trust had to be earned through one's actions.

"My name is Francette de Blanchard," I said. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Blanchard? Are you from Duke Mercœur's family?!"

"Y-Yes."

"Mother, I told you the other day who I was marrying, did I not?" Gabriel said.

"Sorry, I wasn't paying attention at all."

"Mother...I'm too dumbfounded for words." He explained my situation to her again. "So as you can see, she isn't an ordinary noble. We can't get married right away either, because her father is still missing. We'll have to remain engaged for the time being."

"Oh my. Poor girl, you've suffered so much at your young age!" Gabriel's mother came up to me and squeezed my hand. "You're welcome to call me mother, dear."

"Th-Thank you," I said.

Gabriel's mother—now my mother-in-law—grinned and said something completely unexpected. "No father to turn to means you'll be staying here forever!"

"Mother, how could you say that?!" Gabriel exclaimed.

She's probably not a bad person...I think. My mother-in-law seemed to have deep emotional scars from all of the people who'd left Triste. Young people were leaving in droves, and there was nothing that could be done about it. That had made her even more agitated.

"Miss Francette, if you stay here until I die, I shall bequeath my entire fortune to you."

"Mother!"

"What is there to complain about? It isn't as though I'm telling her to have many children or dedicate her heart to you."

My mother-in-law explained to me that it wasn't necessary to have a direct descendant inherit the title. Gabriel tried to stop her, but I agreed that it was important to know.

"What's important is that you care about Triste," she said. Her words were gentle yet persuasive. "You could provide an heir, but if you fled back to the city with all of our money, I'd still be upset."

They didn't have many relatives. My mother-in-law only had one sibling, her sister, Mrs. Molière, who had married a man in the capital. The only other relative was her late father's brother—Gabriel's great-uncle.

I'd heard that this great-uncle had a malicious streak. He had a son and a daughter. The daughter hadn't married, while the son had a wife and two daughters. That was it for their family tree.

"I wanted at least five children, but I was only able to have Gabriel," my mother-in-law said. "Perhaps our family's genetics are not conducive to having many children."

In the worst-case scenario, anyone who strongly aligned with Gabriel's goals could be adopted and inherit the title of Grand Slime Duke, as well as the family's assets. The title wasn't restricted to men—women and adoptees had inheritance rights too. What mattered was passing the monster duke title on to the next generation.

"So don't worry about your role in all of this, since you aren't obliged to give birth to an heir. You can buy anything you want, and feel free to call over traveling bards or theater troupes. If you dislike socializing, you can stay cooped up at home. You can also have other lovers."

"Mother!!!"

My mother-in-law continued, ignoring Gabriel's protest. "You can do anything you want as long as you don't leave this land."

"Um...I understand." She was saying that I didn't have to fulfill the typical duties of a noble wife. The only thing she forbade was abandoning Triste for somewhere else. It was a simple and clear rule.

"Miss Francette, what do you think of Triste?"

"Mother, why do you keep asking questions that are hard for her to answer?"

"Gabriel, be quiet for a moment. Well, Miss Francette?" she asked with a wide smile.

I'd only just arrived, so I hadn't had time to get a proper look at the scenery. However, there was one thing I could say. "It's different from the capital in every possible way, so I was surprised. I don't have a good grasp of the land yet, so I'd like to get a better understanding of it."

"Oh, is that so? Gabriel, why don't you give her a tour of the village

tomorrow?"

"Yes, that's a good idea."

My mother-in-law smiled cheerfully. I was relieved that I hadn't gotten on her bad side.

"If I'd known Miss Francette was coming, I would've asked the head chef to make clafoutis," she said.

"Clafoutis..." I repeated.

"Do you know of it?"

"I've had it before." I wasn't sure if it was safe to bring up Mrs. Molière, so I didn't go into specifics.

"I see. Clafoutis is one of the most delicious desserts in Triste. My sister, who left, loved it too."

I was startled by the mention of Mrs. Molière. It seemed that she wasn't a forbidden topic after all.

"Mother, Aunt Julietta helped with Lady Francette's marriage preparations," Gabriel said.

"Oh, is that so? Why her?"

"Um, my mother is currently in the Empire with my sister, who's getting married soon," I explained. "I didn't have any relatives I could rely on, so Mrs. Molière helped me."

"Have you been all alone ever since your father disappeared, then?"

"Yes."

"It must've been difficult for you."

Seeing her like this, I realized that she looked and spoke just like Mrs. Molière. My sister and I didn't resemble each other at all, so ever since childhood, I'd always envied sisters who looked alike.

"Um, it was actually Mrs. Molière whom I had clafoutis with," I admitted. "She said it was her favorite dessert."

"Ah...I see."

My mother-in-law looked conflicted. She must've been close with her sister, but the marriage had separated them. However, I knew that Mrs. Molière hadn't abandoned her homeland. She still ate her beloved clafoutis every week.

"I told Mrs. Molière I'd write her a letter when I found a place in Triste that I loved, and she smiled with joy," I said.

"Why would she be happy? She left Triste. She abandoned us!"

"Mother, a person can love Triste without rooting themselves here forever," Gabriel said.

My mother-in-law looked at him, startled.

"Please think about how foolish it is to force someone to live here."

With that, the introductory session was over. I felt nervous leaving my mother-in-law alone like that, but Gabriel said it was fine.

"My mother needs time to collect herself and think by herself."

"That may be true, but..."

I'll ask her to make time for me another day so that we can have a long chat. But first, I have to get used to living here.

Gabriel had a room prepared for me. "I hope it's to your liking," he said.

In theory, any room would've been comfortable compared to my leaky-roofed home in the old part of the capital. But to be honest, I was quite fond of that house. I'd even call it my personal paradise. I'd remodeled it to my tastes, repainting the furniture and embroidering the curtains as I liked. The days of struggling to figure things out on my own had been tough, but looking back, it had been a fulfilling life.

"Here it is," Gabriel said, opening the solid oak door.

The room was illuminated by a beautiful crystal chandelier. An intricate carpet made of interwoven wool and silk lay over the marble floor. The large windows were draped in layers of heavy, loose curtains that swayed gently. There was a

round mahogany table in the center of the room, with comfortable-looking cabriole-legged chairs around it. The glass-paned cabinets and open shelves lined with teacups and glasses were stylish too. It was an elegant and neat room themed around the color white.

```
"How is it?" Gabriel asked.

"It's lovely. I like it."

"That's a relief."
```

He told me to wait in the room while he went to call the servants over. Wibble, who had been riding on his shoulder the whole time, stayed behind, hopping into my lap.

```
"Gabriel looks happy."

"Really?"

"Yep. He's over the moon."
```

Apparently, the wallpaper and floor were newly replaced, and the furniture had been commissioned from local craftsmen. However, Gabriel hadn't been able to find curtains he liked in the village, so he had bought them in the capital.

"Don't tell his mom he got them from the capital."

"You're right. I shouldn't."

If he was this happy about my arrival, then it was worth coming. What would I be able to accomplish in Triste? I wanted to try to find something before we got married.

The room had two doors. One of them led to the bedroom, which had a massive, luxurious bed with a canopy. Next to it was a fully equipped kitchen that even had an oven. The floor was covered in beautiful blue tiles.

```
"This is Fra's kitchen! Gabriel had it newly made for you."
```

"I had no idea."

It looked like Gabriel had arranged it so I would have access to anything I might need. Had he given me the kitchen because I'd talked about baking pastries? My heart raced with excitement at the sight of the brand-new

equipment.

Gabriel returned with the servants. He first introduced me to the steward. She had been wearing an apron dress earlier, but now she was in a dashing butler's tailcoat.

"This is the steward, Constance Bartel."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said. "I'm Francette de Blanchard."

"Likewise, Lady Francette. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. Please let me know if there's anything you need."

"I will, thank you."

It turned out that she usually did her work in men's clothing, but she had worn an apron dress earlier to avoid startling me. Since I hadn't been perturbed by the idea of a female steward, she had changed into her normal attire.

Next, I was introduced to my personal attendants. I was surprised to see that they were triplets with the same face. They each had their cocoa-brown hair swept back in a chignon, and they wore dresses of different colors with aprons over them. They looked around the age of seventeen or eighteen.

One of them was holding Alexandrine, her eyes shining with adoration. Another wore glasses, while the last one looked sleepy. Despite having identical faces, they seemed to have unique personalities. The animal lover was Nico, the bespectacled one was Rico, and the sleepy one was Coco.

"It's nice to meet you, Nico, Rico, and Coco," I said.

"We look forward to serving you," they replied in unison.

Nico stayed in the room, while the other two left. Constance also left, a maid with a pot of tea taking her place. Gabriel explained that the tea was made from tea leaves grown in Triste and that it was served with spiced cookies.

I took a sip and breathed a sigh of relief. After all of those tense situations, I now felt much more at ease.

"I'm sorry for the flurry of introductions," Gabriel said.

"No, I was happy to meet everyone. I'm glad they all seem like kind people."

```
"Kind…?"
"Yes."
```

Gabriel turned to look at Nico, who was standing in the corner, gleefully hugging Alexandrine to her chest. She must've really liked animals. It was also rare for Alexandrine to behave so well while being carried. Perhaps she felt comfortable in Nico's arms.

"Don't you think they're all misfits?" Gabriel asked.

"One of the people you introduced me to was your mother, you know."

"My mother is the misfit representative of Triste."

"Am I joining this band of misfits too, then?"

"You are a lady with common sense, Fran. Not a misfit."

"Is that so? I suppose I'll have to work harder to adapt to life here, then."

Gabriel looked like he wanted to say something, but instead, he only sighed. "Anyway, please take your time getting accustomed. My mother said to take you to the village tomorrow, but if you aren't feeling up to it, we can leave it for another day."

"If you aren't busy, I'd love to see the village."

"Are you sure? There's nothing there."

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it."

"Very well. I'll show you around tomorrow, then."

"Thank you."

Gabriel swiftly pushed up the bridge of his glasses, stood up, and excused himself with a bow. I turned to Nico, the only other person left in the room, and gestured for her to come over.

"Do you like animals?" I asked.

"Yes! This duck is so cute!"

"Her name is Alexandrine."

"Lady Alexandrine! What a wonderful name."

"May I ask you to take care of her?"

"Of course!"

I taught Nico everything she needed to know about the duck, including feeding her, bathing her, taking her for walks, dealing with her droppings, giving her a place to sleep, and collecting her eggs.

"I'll help when I have time, so we'll be working together," I said.

"Yes, my lady!"

Nico told me about her sisters—how Rico had to wear glasses because she ruined her eyes reading too many books in dark rooms, and how Coco liked staying up late at night, which was why she was always sleepy during the day. As I'd thought, these triplets had a lot of character.

"What is Constance like?" I asked.

"The steward is a stoic workaholic. You can count on her for anything."

"I see."

I asked her for some basic information about the central serving staff. After that, I'd just have to talk to them myself to understand what they were like. How well I fared in this new environment was completely up to me. I vowed in my heart to do my best.

I had dinner with Gabriel and my mother-in law.

"Tee hee, it's been so long since I last shared a meal with someone other than my son," my mother-in-law said.

"I hope you don't mind it becoming a regular occurrence," I said.

"On the contrary, Miss Francette, I hope we'll be together for a very long time!"

"That's enough, mother."

A special wine had been prepared for us. Constance deftly uncorked the bottle without making a sound.

"Our land grows grapes, albeit very few," Gabriel said. "Our relatives say the

wine is exquisite."

"Gabriel, it doesn't sound convincing when it's coming from our own family."

"Mother, we produce so little of it that we have none left to sell to outsiders. Besides, my eccentric great-uncle said it was delicious, so you can be assured that it's true."

"Oh, did he now?"

The well-regarded wine was served to us, bubbling as it was poured.

My mother-in-law raised her glass and proclaimed, "To my son's splendid wife!"

"Mother, she isn't my wife yet."

"Will you ever stop complaining? Fine, to my son's splendid fiancée! Cheers!"

We raised our glasses, the atmosphere so warm and friendly that it was hard to believe we were sitting around the dining table for the first time.

The slime duke family's specialty dishes were brought out one by one. The starter was mushroom pie. In Triste, mushrooms harvested in fall were dried so that they could be consumed from winter to spring. The pie had a wonderful, concentrated flavor.

The soup was chicken consommé made by simmering a "poule"—a hen—for several hours. It was simple yet rich.

"This soup is delicious," I remarked.

"We take our poultry seriously," Gabriel said. It turned out that Triste had a thriving poultry industry, centered around chicken but also including goose, quail, and turkey.

The main course featured poultry as well—it was quail rôtissage seasoned with locally picked herbs. The roasted meat was very tender and tasty.

Triste also grew a lot of corn, which was used as feed for the poultry as well as produced for general consumption. It wasn't a sweet enough variety for potage, so instead, it was ground into powder and made into cornbread. The bread's simple flavor went well with any dish.

When I heard that dessert was slime jelly, it gave me pause. The light-red, wobbly dish was brought to the table.

"Um, is this jelly made from slimes?" I asked.

"No, it's not," said Gabriel. "It looks like slime, but it's ordinary gelatin."

"Thank goodness."

The berry-flavored jelly was sweet, tart, and delicious. Our first evening meal went by amicably.

I took a bath to wash away the day's fatigue. A cloth sachet of medicinal herbs was floating in the hot water, giving off a nice smell.

Wibble scrubbed me, making my hair and skin shiny and smooth. I remembered how startled I'd been the first time it had washed me. By now, it was a daily occurrence. Wibble always offered to do it, so I'd become spoiled. I wondered if everyone in Triste used tamed slimes to wash themselves. I'd have to ask about it.

After filling a bucket with water for Wibble to play in, I went to my bedroom. Alexandrine was already fast asleep in her basket. I quietly slipped into bed so as not to wake her.

As usual, Wibble came to sleep with me.

"Wibble, are you sure you don't want to sleep with Gabriel?"

"Gabriel moves too much in his sleep. Wanna stay with Fra."

"Oh, all right. Let's sleep together then."

"Yeah!"

I hugged Wibble to my chest and closed my eyes. Perhaps because I'd been too nervous to sleep the night before, drowsiness washed over me as soon as I lay down. Excited for what tomorrow would bring, I drifted off to sleep.

The next day, I woke to the croaking of frogs. It was still dim outside. I looked at the clock and saw that it was morning. This must be what Triste's mornings

are like.

Wibble was stretched thin like a blanket over my body. I peeled it off and it woke up with a start, returning to its original round form.

"Good morning, Wibble."

"Morning, Fra."

Alexandrine slowly got up too, seemingly woken by our voices.

I opened the curtains. As I was looking at the scenery outside, the bespectacled attendant, Rico, came in.

"Good morning, Lady Francette," she said.

"Hello, Rico."

Rico seemed to be a quiet girl. I wondered what kind of personality Coco had.

"What kind of dress would you like to wear today?" she asked.

"I'll be going out after breakfast, so I'd like something that won't look out of place in the village."

"Understood."

A few minutes later, Rico returned with a chamois-yellow dress.

"I thought this one might be nice, but do you think it's too plain?" she asked.

"No, it's fine. I haven't married Gabriel yet, so if I wear something too flashy, people might think I'm getting ahead of myself."

"That...could be the case, yes."

I couldn't help but laugh at her matter-of-fact yet honest response. She was a good girl.

The dress Rico had prepared for me was plain in color but beautifully embroidered. The sweet violets, stitched in white, represented chastity in the language of flowers. No one would get a bad impression when they saw it.

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen this dress before," I said. "It wasn't in the batch that Gabriel bought from the capital, was it?"

"No, it wasn't. It was made by a tailor in the village."

"Um, was it the one I heard about? The one who has poor hearing so orders don't get conveyed properly?"

"Yes."

Apparently Gabriel had patiently placed an order with her anyway, for the sake of stimulating the village's economy. He had requested a dazzling coral pink dress with rose embroidery, and instead, he had received this.

"Lord Gabriel said it was a miracle that the dress was finished at all."

"I see."

I put the dress on. It was a perfect fit. The skirt went just above my ankles. The ground was always damp, so this was the ideal length for keeping the hem dry.

"How would you like your hair done?" Rico asked.

"However young ladies wear their hair here, please."

"Understood."

The current trend was to braid a lock of hair on each side, bring the braids around to the back of the head, and tie them together with a ribbon. Only unmarried girls were allowed to wear half-up hairstyles, so this was the last period of time I'd be able to.

"I like it," I said. "Thanks, Rico."

Rico bowed and took her leave.

Breakfast was a solo affair, it seemed. This was because Gabriel was an extremely early riser, while his mother woke up two hours after him.

For breakfast, I was served a bowl full of café au lait and a plate consisting of bread with buttercream and jam, a white truffle omelette, and thick slices of bacon. I was surprised to be able to eat white truffles in early spring, since they were only in season in autumn and only stayed good for about ten days. Perhaps the autumn harvest had been preserved with some kind of magic.

Either way, it was a luxurious meal. Even before my family went bankrupt, we'd never eaten truffles for breakfast. The slime duke's family must've been

richer than I'd thought.

I savored each and every bite.

Wibble decided to join us on our outing. It disguised itself as a velvet ribbon on my dress.

"You can even do that, huh?"

"Yep, I can!"

Having Wibble turn into a pendant could make my life easier at soirees. Accessories were heavy, after all.

I passed Alexandrine to Nico, along with the egg she had laid this morning. Nico was elated, thinking it might hatch if she kept it warm, but unfortunately, it was unfertilized. I didn't want her to get her hopes up, so I explained to her how the process worked.

"Um, would I be allowed to introduce Lady Alexandrine to some prospective partners?" she asked. "Some of the families in the village have pet ducks!"

"As long as you're willing to take responsibility for raising the chicks, I have no issue with it."

"Thank you!"

I didn't know what she was going to do with more ducks, but at least we had plenty of space to raise them. Since she would be the one taking care of them, I gave her my approval.

It was almost time to leave. The youngest of the triplets, Coco, came to send me off. In a manner more relaxed than her sisters, she said, "Lady Francette...please take this." With that, she handed me my umbrella.

"Thank you," I said.

When going outside, one had to carry with them a weapon for defeating slimes. For me, it was the umbrella, but for Coco, it must've been the whip hanging from her waist. She looked sleepy, which was unsurprising given her hobby of staying up late. Her eyes weren't even all the way open.

The triplets looked identical at a glance, but I'd now seen that their personalities were so unique, I doubted I'd ever get them mixed up.

Gabriel was waiting for me at the entrance. Today, he wore a moss-gray frock coat.

As soon as he saw me, he adjusted the bridge of his glasses. "Fran, good morning."

"Good morning."

I began to descend the stairs, and he gallantly ran up to me, offering his hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I placed my hand atop his, and he gently squeezed back.

I let him escort me down the stairs, which he did in an awfully dashing manner. I'd never had a man do this for me before, so I was extremely flustered. Part of me thought, I'm just going down the stairs. Isn't he being a bit overprotective? It wasn't a bad feeling, though. I recalled the previous day, when my heart had pounded as we crossed the drawbridge. But before I could ponder what it all meant, Gabriel spoke to me.

"That dress..."

"Ah, I heard from Rico that you ordered it from a tailor in the village."

"Sorry, I was trying to get something fancier than that, but..."

"No, it's wonderful. I love sweet violets. Thank you," I said, lightly clutching the skirt with the delicately embroidered flowers.

"As long as you like it, that's all that matters."

We set out right away. As we walked through the yard, a gardener stopped his work to greet us. It was early in the morning, but he was already hard at work, dripping with sweat.

We passed through the gate and crossed the drawbridge. Gabriel gently led me by the hand, and my heart raced yet again. Today was quite the nerveracking day.

It seemed that we had to go to the village on horseback, since the forest paths weren't wide enough for a carriage. The stableman was waiting for us

with a large black horse that looked down at us.

"Wh-What a big horse," I said.

"This is the typical size here," said Gabriel.

"I see."

"Fran, have you ridden a horse before?"

"When I was little, with my father."

"Ah. In that case, try to remember what that was like and get on."

"Do you think I can do it?"

"You'll be fine. It's not difficult."

I never thought I'd be riding a horse. It made me regret not joining my sister when she was taking lessons.

We affixed my umbrella and Gabriel's cane to a belt attached to the saddle. Gabriel got on the horse with ease and offered me his hand.

"Step on the stirrup and hoist yourself up in one motion," he instructed.

"Got it."

I held tightly onto his hand and put my foot on the stirrup. Readying myself, I pushed down with my foot, and at the same time, there was a strong tug on my arm, pulling me onto the horse's back. I sat down, riding sidesaddle.

"It's quite high up," I said.

"You'll get used to it right away. Hold on to the saddle grip."

The saddle had a protruding part shaped like a doorknob. Just as I worried whether holding that alone would be safe enough, Gabriel wrapped an arm around my waist. It distracted me from my fear, making me realize just how close we were at the moment. Being aware of it filled me with embarrassment. I'd never been pressed against him like this before.

I caught a faint whiff of a fresh-smelling herbal cologne and snapped back to attention, realizing that I wasn't wearing any sort of perfume. I wasn't good with strong fragrances, so the most I ever did was massage scented oil into my

hair after taking a bath. I couldn't tell what I smelled like, so I could only pray that I wasn't giving off a weird odor.

The horse began to walk slowly.

"Do you think you'll be able to handle it?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes, I'm fine."

I actually wasn't fine at all. I hadn't known we'd be *this* close together while riding the horse. I remembered when Gabriel had caught me as I was about to fall yesterday and was further filled with shame.

"Fran, please relax your body. The horse can sense when you're nervous."

"O-Okay."

"It may be scary at first, but you'll get used to it. Have faith in the horse."

As I listened to Gabriel's gentle, soothing voice, I felt the tension in my body disappear. My heart wouldn't stop pounding, though. *Calm down, calm down,* I repeated to myself as we proceeded through the thick forest.

Fog drip rained down on us, but the dress from the village repelled the droplets.

"This dress doesn't absorb water, huh? Is this the waterproofing you mentioned yesterday?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right."

Hearing his voice in my ear startled me, even though it should've been expected given how close we were. I felt restless each time he spoke. Riding pillion really wasn't good for my heart.

"Is something the matter?" Gabriel asked.

"N-No, not at all. You know, I've never worn a dress that repels water."

"It's usually only done for men's overcoats, but you were concerned about the fog drip yesterday, so..."

"You had the dress treated right away?"

"Yes, essentially."

"I had no idea. Thank you." He'd been so considerate of me, and I'd almost missed it. It was important to have conversations like this, no matter how trivial the topic. "Has this waterproofing technique been passed down in Triste from long ago?"

"No, I came up with it. Slimes are processed and..."

"And?" I repeated, since he'd trailed off. I wanted to turn around, but I wasn't used to being on the horse yet.

"Erm...does it unnerve you to wear a dress treated with slime?"

"Not really. It doesn't smell like anything, and it feels like normal fabric. It's amazing that you were able to come up with this technique."

"O-Oh. That's good." Apparently some people had objected to using slimes as water repellent, thinking it was disgusting. "I'm sorry for applying it without asking you first."

"No, don't worry about it."

Gabriel had come up with many inventions using slimes, but he seemed to limit their use to within his territory.

"In a world where monster consumption is forbidden, there are many people who scorn the use of monsters," he explained. "Even some of the locals detest me for it. It was wrong of me not to tell you about this before our engagement."

"Well...yes." After hearing his story, I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. However, if I hadn't known about it, I may have found myself in a problematic situation without the means to handle it. So I didn't want him to hide anything from me. "I might be able to help you when I become your wife, so please don't be afraid to tell me anything."

"Thank you...Fran."

His voice sounded shaky. Perhaps he had gone through a lot in the past. *Just for today, I'll pretend I don't notice.*

We came out of the forest into a vast flat field shrouded in fog. Compared to yesterday, when we had been here in the early afternoon, the fog was thicker and the temperature cooler. The air was chilly.

"Are you cold?" Gabriel asked.

"No, because you're warm." Only after the words had left my mouth did I realize how improper it was to imply that I was warm because our bodies were pressed together.

As I was beginning to panic, I heard a laugh from behind me.

"I'm glad I'm of use as a heater."

"Y-Yes."

I was surprised to hear him laugh so lightheartedly. I'd learned so much about him just by riding this horse—things I probably wouldn't have heard or noticed under normal circumstances. Clearly, it was important to try new things.

As we approached the lake, I saw a large sign. "'Swimming and boating are prohibited'...?" Were there really people who would swim or paddle a boat in a foggy lake where you couldn't see anything?

"People did," said Gabriel.

He explained that there were days when the fog cleared up in the afternoon and days when the sky was only a little cloudy. Apparently there had been an incident in the past where sightseers had been attacked by slimes in the lake. At the bottom of the sign, in red letters, were the words "The lake is infested with violent, man-eating slimes. You will die."

"It used to say, 'Beware of slime attacks.' But people still went into the lake, so we changed it to something more straightforward."

"I-I see."

There were clueless tourists who came here only because it was a lake region. "They bring their boats here, expecting beautiful lakes, lush nature, and serene landscapes," Gabriel lamented.

There was a beautiful lake region, but it was in the northwest part of the country. It was a famous sightseeing location that even people in the capital knew of. But I couldn't comprehend how someone could mistakenly come all the way here instead by accident.

"When they see the foggy lakes with slimes peeking out of them, they always

ask, 'Are you sure this is a lake, not a swamp?'" It frustrated Gabriel because they most certainly were lakes. "It's humid and damp, the lakes look like swamps, and there's nowhere to sightsee. I've had people tell me I should be calling Triste a wetland, not a lake region." But he couldn't deny it, not when it was the kind of environment where mushrooms sprouted up everywhere, all year round.

"Now that you mention it, there were a lot of white truffles in the omelette I had for breakfast," I said. "Are they common here?"

"Yes. I hear that people usually have dogs or pigs search for them, but here, if you dig around randomly in the damp forest soil, you have a high chance of finding them."

"Ooh, that's interesting."

Gabriel explained that truffles were harvested in bulk in autumn and preserved in magical storage. Mushrooms were everywhere in Triste, so they were essentially worthless. People here didn't eat them because they weren't filling.

"In our household, we only use them in breakfast omelettes or mix them with oil to add flavor," he said.

"In the capital, white truffles are a luxury ingredient. So I was surprised to be able to eat them for breakfast."

"I see."

White truffles were twice as expensive as black ones because no cultivation method had been discovered for them. It was said that they were rare because people had been harvesting them excessively as of late.

"Out-of-season truffles would probably be considered priceless treasures," I said.

"That's useful information. This fall, we'll harvest a large quantity of truffles and sell them after some time has passed." Gabriel hadn't been aware of the rarity of truffles because he hardly ever interacted with outsiders.

"Didn't the people who left for the capital try to sell them?"

"Even if they'd seen the opportunity, they may have been unwilling to contact their families here. Everyone is prepared to cut all ties when they go to the capital."

"Oh, no wonder, then."

Mrs. Molière hadn't once returned since getting married either. They all must've accepted that they were leaving home for good.

"Um, Gabriel, there's something that's been on my mind," I began.

"What is it?"

"I've been seeing a lot of snails here and there."

"Yes, perhaps they're enjoying a stroll after waking up from their winter hibernation."

A humid place like this must be paradise for snails. "It reminds me—snails have been decreasing in numbers lately too."

"Oh, is that so?"

"When they're served at banquets, there are much fewer than before."

"At banquets?"

"Yes."

"Wait, do you eat those?"

"Yes. Do you not eat snails in Triste?"

"We do not!"

Gabriel pointed out that snails were infested with bacteria, but I recognized the ones here as the edible variety, escargot, also called "shells of the land."

"I see. So nobles in the capital enjoy eating those."

"Yep, they do."

There was a glimmer behind Gabriel's glasses. He must've realized the potential these snails held.

"We'll just have to sell them, then," he said.

"I'm sure they'll fetch a high price."

Escargots were in season during winter, when they stocked up on nutrients for their hibernation.

"I can't believe people eat those things," Gabriel said.

"They're delicious. Shall I treat you to an escargot dish sometime?"

"If it's your home cooking, I suppose I'll eat it."

I couldn't help but laugh. Disgusted as he was, he was still willing to try it—as long as it was my cooking.

After crossing the dense forest, descending a small hill, and taking a road past scattered lakes, some stone houses came into view. At a slow enough pace that we could still chat on horseback, it took us thirty minutes to reach the village. There was a wall built around it to ward off slimes.

Outside the village were vast fields of crops like wheat and corn. There was a spinning windmill, probably grinding grain, and a hut nearby for a miller to keep watch from. A little farther away was a large building that seemed to be for raising poultry. Gabriel said it had a team of fowl knights that patrolled for slimes.

"Fowl knights?" I asked.

"Yes, they're permitted to call themselves knights within my territory."

Poultry was an important source of food and revenue for the people of Triste, so the knights worked every day to protect the birds from slimes. As we were discussing them, the village came into full view.

"That is our sole village, Chagrin," said Gabriel.

"Why is it named that?"

"Long ago, a royal who visited the land looked at the village and said, 'Everyone here must have been vexed that they'd been brought to a land with nothing but slimes and told to build a village.' He ordered that the village be named 'Chagrin.' It was essentially an insult."

"What a terrible story."

"It really is."

We dismounted from the horse and stepped into the village, which had a stone-paved road lined with stone houses. I thought I spotted beautiful flowers in the windows, but upon closer inspection, I realized they were plants with red and orange leaves. It must've been difficult to grow flowers in this climate. I also saw a tall church spire in the center of the village.

Merchants came by once a week, but they didn't carry everything one would need. If you wanted something, you had to specifically request it from them.

"That's the blacksmith's house, and that's the weaver's house," Gabriel explained. You could go directly to their houses to order items. The tailor who'd made my dress lived here too, but she was a night owl, so she was asleep at this hour.

"What's that big building over there?" I asked.

"Ah, that's a vacant house. It used to be inhabited by a family that served as knights, but they moved to the capital after being awarded decorations."

"I see."

It wasn't the only empty house—the homes of all of the people who'd moved away had been left as is. Just in case, maintenance was performed on them once a month so that someone could move in at any time.

"To be honest, I would like to resolve the vacancy issue," said Gabriel. The slime duke's family bore the management costs. If the houses could be rented out, they would be a source of income, but as things stood, they were only a deficit.

"They're such large, nice houses too. It's sad to see them go to waste."

"Indeed." He ended that topic there and resumed his tour of the village. "Bread, meat, and vegetables are sold by vendors in the church plaza."

The villagers hadn't noticed Gabriel's arrival, perhaps because they were so hard at work. A running child bumped straight into him.

"Whoa!" the child exclaimed. Judging from his wide eyes, it seemed less out

of surprise from the impact and more out of shock upon seeing Gabriel.

"Run for it!" another child shouted. "You're gonna get eaten by slimes!"

"N-Nooo!"

Hearing the children's screams, the other villagers made a show of running into their houses and closing their windows.

Gabriel pushed the bridge of his glasses up, looked back at me, and said, "Um, I know I said 'some' of the locals detest me, but I think it's actually most of them."

I tried to find the right words to say. I decided to ask a few questions first. "How often do you come here?"

"Every week, I visit the church on Finch Day."

"What do you do afterwards?"

"I go home."

Now it made sense. I realized both sides were misunderstanding something.

"I think they're afraid of you because they don't know you well," I said.

"Afraid? They don't detest me?"

"No, they don't detest you—it's only fear."

Gabriel had spoken of performing various experiments using slimes, which may have seemed unsettling to the villagers. This land's problems weren't the kind that could be solved overnight. We had no choice but to take the time to gradually deepen our understanding.

There were several stalls lined up near the church. Aside from the aforementioned bread, meat, and vegetables, they also sold grilled skewers and soups that were being cooked in large pots. There was a lot of foot traffic. Many people gaped when they saw Gabriel arrive.

It was a larger market than I'd expected. There were around twenty stalls in all.

"It sort of feels like a festival," I said.

"A festival?"

"Yes. On festival days in the capital, people sell food outside like this."

"So our village is like a festival every day, then."

"It looks like fun."

"Well, I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

I'd always been told to stay away from the festivities because it was too dangerous. Whenever I'd seen them, it had been from the inside of a carriage.

Gabriel suggested getting something to eat. "What would you like?"

"The grilled skewers over there smell good."

"That's white eel caught from the lake."

Gabriel explained that a slime-proof device was left in the lake overnight to catch the eels, which were then grilled in a savory sauce made from fermented soybeans.

The man flipping the white eels called out to us when we approached. "Welcome, pretty lady— Wait, if it isn't our lord duke! Are you on an undercover date?"

"It's not undercover. She is my fiancée," Gabriel declared proudly. I, on the other hand, shied away from the shopkeeper's stare.

"Well, well! You're in luck, because I just got a fresh eel!" The shopkeeper suddenly took out a basket, stuck his hand in, and held a long, snakelike animal up high.

"Eek!" Terrified by the creature writhing every which way, I immediately clung to Gabriel.

"You shouldn't show a young lady a live white eel," Gabriel said. "Put it away right this instant."

"A-Apologies," the shopkeeper said. I was sure he had good intentions, but my heart just hadn't been ready.

"Sorry, you went to the trouble of showing me," I said.

"No, it was my mistake. Um, I know it doesn't make up for it, but you can have this."

The shopkeeper apologetically offered me a skewer. If I hadn't seen the live eel, I probably would've happily taken it. Still, I braced myself and accepted it.

"Thank you," I said. "I noticed it smelled really nice."

"It's fatty and delicious."

"I'm sure it is."

Gabriel told me I didn't have to force myself to eat it, but there was no way I couldn't, not with this atmosphere. It was my first time eating like this outside of standing buffet parties. I looked around and saw everyone standing and eating. I supposed it was considered normal here.

I purged the white eel from my memory, cast away my manners, steeled my resolve, and took a bite.

"Oh my, it's delicious!"

The meat was surprisingly soft and full, and it didn't have any muddy odor at all. The soybean sauce tasted unlike anything I'd ever eaten before, but it was savory and good. Halfway through the skewer, I suddenly realized that Gabriel was staring at me.

"You should try it too," I said.

"N-No, I'm fine."

"Just do it!"

It was embarrassing to gobble up the whole thing myself, so I dragged him in, encouraging him to eat the rest. He finished it in two bites.

"You both have healthy appetites," the shopkeeper said.

"Thank you," I said. "It was delicious. I'll come back for more."

"Looking forward to seeing you again."

I suddenly noticed that the people around us were staring at us less fearfully than before. Perhaps seeing Gabriel eat the grilled eel skewer had made him seem more relatable. The white eel had helped him in an unexpected way. We concluded our tour of the village about an hour after arriving. Gabriel had been more concerned about the people's stares than he'd let on.

"Sorry, I felt like there were more eyes on me than usual, and it was making me uncomfortable," he said.

"I'm sure they were looking at me, not you. They were curious about the unfamiliar face."

"Now that you mention it, I have heard that outsiders draw a lot of attention." He explained that he usually didn't stay long in the village, leaving quickly once he'd finished his business. Even when he had come here with his parents, they hadn't had the time to relax. "I think I enjoyed eating the grilled skewer at the stall, though," he said with a faint smile.

I found myself smiling along with him. "Did you think it was funny when I screamed at the sight of the white eel?"

"No, that's not what I meant. How do I put this...?"

He seemed troubled, so I apologized for teasing him. Then, I told him my honest thoughts. "I enjoyed it too. It was surprisingly fun to eat while standing outside."



"Oh, yes, it was."

We promised to try a bunch of other foods together the next time we were hungry, and we got back on the horse. I assumed we'd be returning home, but instead, we headed in a different direction.

"Where are we going, Gabriel?"

"There's a place I want to show you."

What could it be? I wondered as we rode through the landscape of fog, lakes, fields, and forests. After fifteen minutes, we reached our destination on the other side of a small forest.

"Wow...!"

Sweet violets, as far as the eye could see. The flowers were only supposed to be in season from winter to the beginning of spring, but here, they bloomed all year round. Without thinking, I crouched down to smell them. The scent filled me with joy.

"You said you liked sweet violets, so I thought you might like this," said Gabriel.

"Thank you! They're beautiful!"

The fragrance was thick in the air, perhaps due to the fog. It smelled sweet, elegant, and fresh.

"In the capital, these are grown in greenhouses," I said.

"Sweet violets?"

"Yes. The perfume is popular with noble ladies, and you can't have a tea party without candied violets." In fact, I'd heard that the popularity of the perfume had made it difficult to find candied violets in confectionery stores in recent years. "Oh, that's it! Why don't we make candied violets out of these and sell them?"

"To repay your debt?"

"No, I just think it'd be nice if they became a local specialty of Triste."

"You..." Gabriel covered his face with his hand, for reasons unknown to me.

"I haven't forgotten about the debt, of course. But these belong to Triste in the first place, so I wasn't thinking about repaying you with them."

"Was it the same with the truffles and snails?"

"Yes. I was hoping it'd be an opportunity for everyone to learn about the wonderful ingredients that can be found in Triste. And you'll need money to develop your territory, right?"

Gabriel suddenly knelt down beside me and squeezed my hand. "You are the first lady who has ever put so much thought into this land. You have my sincerest appreciation."

"O-Oh." The abruptness of the situation and the seriousness in his eyes surprised me. I found myself feeling restless yet again, my heart racing.

"Please use the sweet violets here however you like. The money from the sales will all belong to you."

```
"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Gabriel!"
```

I squeezed his hand back, and he flinched, as if he'd just realized something. He quickly let go of my hand and bowed deeply.

"I'm sorry for touching you when we're only engaged," he said.

"Isn't holding hands appropriate?"

"Is it?"

"I think so."

I'd never been taught what acts were forbidden before marriage. Well, we probably weren't supposed to be alone together either. But this wasn't the capital, so I chose to think of it as outside of jurisdiction.

"Still, the women of the capital have strange taste, eating violets," Gabriel said. "Oh, sorry. Do you like them too, Fran?"

"Yes, I do. My sister said she hates them, though. She thinks they taste like weeds and that it feels like drinking perfume."

"Your sister is quite the honest person."

"I know, right?"

By the way, although sweet violets were a well-known example of edible flowers, only the leaves and the flowers themselves were safe to eat. The roots and seeds contained neurotoxins. If you ate them without thinking, you'd be vomiting for quite a while, so caution was required.

"I recall hearing that they were used in medicine a long time ago," said Gabriel.

"Was it because they're effective against coughing and mouth sores?"

"Yes, I think it was something like that."

I decided to pick a few flowers first to make a trial product. Just as I was about to ask Gabriel if he had something I could put them in, Wibble—who had been wrapped around my umbrella as a ribbon—reverted to its original form and raised its tentacle.

"Wibble will carry them!"

"Why, thank you."

I thought it was going to transform into a basket, but instead, it devoured the violets.

"Oh, that's what you meant."

"Leave it to me!"

Wibble swirled the swallowed flowers around in its translucent body. I asked what it was doing.

"Making the sweet violets clean!"

Apparently it was purifying them for me. This was a natural habitat for slimes, so I couldn't deny the possibility of them crawling over the violets.

"That's so smart of you, Wibble!"

"It's just something slimes naturally do," said Gabriel.

Wibble angrily swung at him, offended. I wish they'd get along.

When we returned to the castle, my mother-in-law charged at us at full speed. Her eyes were bloodshot; it frightened me a bit.

"Mother, what's the matter?" Gabriel asked.

"I couldn't find Miss Francette anywhere, so I was afraid she'd gone back to the capital. I've been searching for her all day!"

Gabriel and I were both stunned. My mother-in-law still didn't trust me one bit.

"Were you not the one who told me last night to show her around the village?" Gabriel asked.

"Why, yes, I was."

"Did you ask the servants where she was?"

"I can only believe what I see with my own eyes!"

"I have no words."

I silently extended my arms to express that I was present, and to my surprise, my mother-in-law hugged me.

"What a kind girl you are, going out with my son," she said. "I couldn't be happier."

"O-Oh." The sudden embrace had caught me off guard, but it didn't feel bad. If anything, it was kind of nice. It was a strange feeling because I didn't even have memories of my own mother hugging me.

"Miss Francette, were you disappointed when you saw the village?"

"No, I had fun."

"Did it make you want to live here forever, then?"

"Mother!!!!!"

"Gabriel, would you please stop screaming in my ear?"

"I cannot help it when you say such hopeless things."

I decided it was time for a tea break and invited my mother-in-law, parting

ways with Gabriel. Wibble clung to him. Perhaps it didn't like my mother-in-law—when their eyes met, it extended its tentacles and shook them frantically.

"Fran, please don't take my mother seriously," Gabriel said. "You don't have to humor her."

"Why, that's harsh. I am happy to spend time with my future family."

"Well, you're about to be a part of it, so you can just look *very* closely at your own face in the mirror."

"I don't have that much free time."

The argument seemed like it was going to go on forever, so I put my hands on my mother-in-law's shoulders and ushered her into the living room. The girl who brought us tea and sweets was probably Coco, given how sleepy she looked. She barely glanced at her hands as she cut the dessert—a cake called "millas" that looked like a giant flan. It was a commonly made dish in this area, but I had never seen it before, so I couldn't help but stare.

"Millas is essentially a cake made out of corn flour," my mother-in-law said.

I tried it right away. It had a simple taste and a texture similar to a custard tart or crème caramel. Even though it was my first time eating it, it felt strangely nostalgic.

"Are there other pastries made with corn flour?" I asked.

"No, I think it's only millas. I'm not too knowledgeable about pastries, though. I don't like them enough to eat them every day."

Despite saying that, my mother-in-law seemed to have a sweet tooth. She put three sugar cubes in her tea and asked for whipped cream on her millas. After that, she dropped the cream into her tea as well.

"Speaking of pastries, I noticed there weren't any stores selling them in the village," I said.

"That's because families make them at home."

She explained that each household had its own style it was proud of, so they wouldn't bother with buying pastries from a store. I'd been hoping I might be able to sell them here, but reality was not so kind. I'd have to sell them in the

capital, then. Gabriel had offered to take me there anytime I liked. It was a three-day trip one way by carriage, so his teleportation magic was extremely appreciated.

"Was there anything interesting in the village?" my mother-in-law asked.

"Yes. I ate a grilled white-eel skewer."

"You ate white eel?"

"Yes, it was delicious. The meat was soft and thick, and the sauce was savory."

"I-I see."

My mother-in-law had apparently never had it before. I offered to go with her sometime, but she only gave me a strained smile in response.

"Gabriel tames slimes and does research on them, so the people feel even more uncomfortable around him these days," she said. Even in past generations, the slime duke's family had never been on good terms with its people.

"But the workers here are friendly towards him, aren't they?"

"They're only acting that way because they get paid well. Some of them aren't locals but immigrants brought in from elsewhere."

"Immigrants?"

"Yes. They have the country's permission to stay here, of course. My husband who fled was too kind for his own good."

Apparently it was Gabriel's father, the previous ruler, who had brought them here. He had constantly been helping others—so much so that you might've said his hobby was charity work.

"It would've been fine if his aid had at least gone to his own people," she continued. "But he was only ever concerned with the less fortunate. For a while, the residents complained that we only cared about outsiders and not our own people."

"Um, why is it a problem that Gabriel tames slimes?"

"My son is probably the only person in the entire world who would do such a thing."

"I see." I had assumed the people of Triste had made a contract with some of the slimes, allowing them to coexist.

"You must find it unsettling too, don't you?"

"No, I like them."

"Oh my. You're on the same page as my son in that sense." She gave me a conflicted look.

I had been startled when I first found Wibble, but since it had been unexpectedly cute, I no longer felt uncomfortable around slimes.

"Well, at any rate, please get along with my son and his slimes."

"Of course, that was the plan." I hoped I'd be able to support him one day. But first, I had to find my father and get his permission to marry.

"I wonder where your father has gone," my mother-in-law said, seemingly thinking the same thing as me. "Why don't you have someone else adopt you?"

"I considered it too."

The knights were investigating, though, so it was only a matter of time before he was found. For now, I just had to wait.



It was time to make candied violets out of the flowers I'd picked earlier. Coco offered to help, so we went to the kitchen and donned matching aprons.

"Lady Francette...are you going to eat these flowers?" she asked.

"Yes, they're popular with noblewomen in the capital."

"Do they...taste sweet?"

"No, they don't. It's more about enjoying their appearance and fragrance, I suppose."

"You enjoy the appearance and fragrance of flowers...by eating them?" Coco frowned and tilted her head, confused.

"I never thought about it before, but you can appreciate those without eating them, huh? How strange." I couldn't help but laugh. Coco smiled gently too. "Do you like sweet violets?" I asked.

"They've been everywhere for as long as I can remember, so to me...they're no different from weeds."

"I see." I giggled. Time was wasting, so we had to get to work. "Candying edible flowers is done using a traditional technique called 'crystallization.'" It sounded complicated, but the process itself was actually quite simple. "First, we wash and dry the sweet violets. The difficult part is cleaning them while maintaining their beauty."

This time, we could skip this step because Wibble had already taken care of it.

"These flowers...are in very good condition. How did you wash them?"

"Using the power of magic."

"Is...that so?"

It wasn't a lie. Not exactly, at least. Though it hurt my conscience to say that, the people of Triste didn't have a good impression of slimes, so I figured it was best not to tell the truth.

"Next, we use a brush to apply beaten egg whites to the violets."

"Egg whites...you say?"

"Yes. Ideally fresh eggs that were laid today."

After carefully coating both sides of a flower in egg whites, I sprinkled granulated sugar over the entire thing. "All done. Easy, right?"

"Yes!"

Coco and I repeated the short but uninteresting process with the other violets. It took about an hour and a half to finish all of them.

"That just about does it," I said.

Coco wiped the sweat from her brow.

"Hey, Coco. Do you want to try one?"

```
"May I?"
  "Yes, of course."
  I picked up a candied violet and fed it to her. The moment it entered her
mouth, her eyes widened in surprise.
  "It smells nice!" she exclaimed.
  "Doesn't it?"
  Not a second later, she grimaced.
  "What do you think? You can be honest."
  "It feels like...eating weeds covered in sugar."
  Naturally, I laughed at her candid review.
  "Um, they...look very pretty. I think...they would look lovely on a table."
  "Indeed." They had a different appeal than flowers in a vase. "I'm thinking of
making these into a Triste specialty."
  "A...specialty?"
  "Yes. I'll package them in cans with a drawing of a sweet violet on the label.
Wouldn't it be cute?"
  "I think...it would be."
  "Right? I wonder if there's anyone with artistic talent around. Do you know?"
 Coco shyly raised her hand. "Um...I can draw. I'm...not very good, though."
  "Really?!"
  "Yes, I practice every night...but I haven't improved much."
  "Is that why you stay up late? To practice drawing?"
  "Yes."
 In that case, I want Coco to draw the illustration for my canned sweet violets.
  "Um, I'll draw a few variations... I think you should wait to see them before
deciding."
  "That's true. May I ask you to start now?"
```

"Okay." She bowed deeply and left. She seemed to have a spring in her step as I watched her go.

That took care of the packaging. The next issue was preservation. Sweet violets only kept their beauty and taste for two days at most. Past that, their color would fade and their fragrance would weaken. Freshness was the key to candied violets. I'd have to consult with Gabriel or the chef.

For now, the violets I'd picked today had turned out well. I decided to make sweets to accompany them and share them with Gabriel and my mother-in-law. As I was mulling over what to make, Wibble came up to me.

```
"Fraaa, whatcha doing?"

"I'm making sweets."

Wibble leaped onto the kitchen counter.

"These are candied violets made from the flowers you purified for me."

"You eat flowers?"
```

If the people of Triste were reluctant to eat violets, I'd have to use them as decorations instead. I couldn't serve them on top of biscuits with whipped cream, the way noblewomen liked to eat them.

"Yes, I do."

```
"Fra, what're you making?"

"I think I'll make a blueberry-jam cake and decorate it with candied violets."

"Wibble will help!"

"Thanks."
```

And so, it was time to begin. Wibble gripped a whisk in its tentacle and mixed egg whites for me at a low speed. Doing it slowly gave the resulting batter a smoother texture.

I whisked the eggs with sugar in a bowl. Once the egg whites were foamy, I added the egg yolks, continuing to mix slowly. Then I added flour, melted butter, and vanilla beans, stirring carefully to avoid ruining the batter's consistency.

I poured the batter into a greased cake pan and put it in the preheated oven. It would take around thirty minutes to bake, and in the past, I would've used this time to do housework. There had been more than a few occasions when I'd worked too hard and the cake had burned. But now, I could simply sit on the chair in the kitchen and relax. Wibble sat in my lap as I read a book and took in the aroma of freshly baked cake. What a luxurious time.

The cake turned out nicely.

"Fra, Wibble wants to help."

"Can you whisk the cream for me, then?"

"Yeah!"

After the cake had cooled a bit, I sliced it into two layers and began to decorate it. I spread the cream Wibble had whisked for me over the bottom layer and topped it with jam made from locally sourced blueberries. I had tasted it a little while ago—it was a bit sour, but it would go perfectly with the sweet cream. Next, I reattached the second layer of the cake and spread cream over it as well. I squeezed additional dollops of cream around the perimeter and placed the candied violets on top of them.

"It's done!"

The violet and blueberry cake was complete. It had exceeded my expectations, so I was very satisfied. Wibble extended a tentacle and shook hands with me.

I arranged for the cake to be served as tonight's dessert. I couldn't wait to see everyone's reaction. But before that, I had to report my results to Gabriel. He was working in his office, so I couldn't take up too much of his time.

Rico and Wibble came with me. Rico was carrying the silver tray of candied violets, and for some reason, Wibble was sitting on it as well. Perhaps it was too lazy to walk on its own.

Gabriel's office was located two rooms down. Rico knocked on the door, and he immediately gave us permission to enter. The office also served as a reception room—there were sofas and a table in front of his desk. Gabriel looked at me and pressed his fingertip to the bridge of his glasses.

"Sorry for the intrusion, Gabriel," I said. "Are we interrupting your work?"

"No, I was about to take a break."

"It won't be much of a break if you're talking to me, though."

"It will!" he objected, slamming his desk loudly as he stood up with force.

Is it just me, or do his eyes look bloodshot?

A maid brought us tea. I suddenly remembered why I was there.

"I tried candying the violets I picked earlier," I said as soon as Gabriel had sat down on the sofa.

"You work fast," he said.

Rico placed the candied violets—and Wibble—on the table. Gabriel reached for Wibble, but it quickly dodged him, bouncing on the table a few times before settling in my lap.

"Wibble, you're bothering her!"

"I don't mind," I said.

"Gabriel, she says she doesn't mind."

"I mind!"

Gabriel stood up and reached for Wibble again. However, just as he was about to touch it, it jumped out of the way. Humans couldn't stop their movements so suddenly, so he ended up grabbing my thigh.

"Eep!"

"Ah! I'm sorry!"

Although my dress had been in the way, being grabbed so firmly startled me. I shrieked louder than I should've.

"H-How can I make it up to you?" Gabriel asked.

"You didn't do it on purpose, so don't worry about it."

"I have to worry."

Wibble ran away, bouncing out of the room. Rico was tasked with capturing

it. After Gabriel calmed down, I gestured for him to sit beside me.

"I'm not sure about this," he said.

"You don't want to sit beside me?"

"It's not that I don't want to, but it feels too close in proximity."

"Oh? Even though we were so close when we were riding the horse?"

"You have a point, now that you mention it." Convinced, he sat down next to me. "I'm so sorry about Wibble. It's been such a nuisance to you."

"I don't think Wibble's a nuisance at all. In fact, it's been helping me."

"You said the same thing before, didn't you?"

"Yes. Wibble's a good slime. It works very hard." It had helped me bake a cake today. If I'd been alone, it would've taken much longer. "I think Wibble's probably the smartest slime out there." What surprised me was that the people of Triste weren't making use of slimes themselves. "It's good at cleaning, it helps me cook, and it's even better at bathing me than my maids were. It makes my hair silky and my skin shiny and smooth."

"W-Wait a second. What do you mean, bathing you?!"

"It washes me in the bath. Do you not bathe with your slimes, Gabriel?"

"I don't, and I never taught them how to wash anyone!"

"O-Oh, I see."

Gabriel held his head in his hands. "Grr, I'm so envi— No! Have you felt unwell because of it? Do you have any symptoms, like itchy skin?"

"Not at all."

"Where in the world did it learn how to do that? Are you *sure* you're all right?"

"Yes." I didn't want Gabriel to touch my skin, but I figured my hair would be fine. "Try touching it. Feel how silky it is."

"Y-Your hair?!"

"Yes."

He refused, but I encouraged him to get on with it. He hesitantly reached out and ran his fingers through it. The moment his fingertip gently grazed my cheek, my heart skipped a beat. I'd only been expecting him to touch my hair, so I hadn't been ready for such a thrill.

"Um, it's silky, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes. Your hair is beautiful and very pleasant to the touch. However..."

"However?"

"As I am unaware of your hair's prior state, I don't think I can compare it."

"Oh! Th-That's right. I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. I benefited— Never mind, it's nothing."

How awkward and embarrassing. I wanted to dig a hole and crawl into it. Trying to hide my shame, I changed the subject. "Oh, right! Would you like to try a candied violet?"

"You went to the trouble of bringing them here, so I shall." Gabriel picked one up and put it in his mouth. "This is...amazing. The fragrance of the violet has been completely encapsulated."

"Yes, it's an old technique called 'crystallization' that has been passed down among pastry chefs."

"Crystallization, you say. I do see why women would like these."

"How does it taste?"

"I shall refrain from commenting."

His furrowed brow gave away his opinion. I laughed because he'd reacted exactly how I'd expected.

"I like putting them in my tea," I said. Since we'd talked for so long, the tea had already grown cold. I placed a candied violet in my cup and it floated at the top. "See? Isn't it cute?"

"So you can appreciate its cuteness as you enjoy your tea."

"That's right."

I brought up the question of how to preserve the candied violets. At this rate, even if we were able to mass-produce them, there would be quality issues.

"There's no need to worry about preservation," Gabriel said. "In this land, we have magic-enhanced jars and cans that can extend the shelf life of their contents."

My problem was effortlessly solved.

Once again, it was dinner for three. The main courses were hearth-grilled lamb and trout meunière, both using local produce. They were very delicious.

Dessert was the sweet violet and blueberry cake. I hadn't yet told them that I'd made it myself. My mother-in-law's eyes lit up when it was brought to the table.

"What a lovely cake!" she exclaimed. "I've never seen a cake decorated with flowers before."

"I baked it," I said.

"You did, Miss Francette?"

"Yes. I hope it suits your taste."

My mother-in-law thought the cake was too pretty to eat, so I explained the edible flowers to her.

"They're sweet violets," I said.

"Sweet violets? As in the sweet violets that grow around here?"

"Yes."

She suddenly furrowed her brow. The expression on her face was identical to Gabriel's.

"Sweet violets are safe to eat," I said. "In olden times, they were used as medicine to relieve coughing and mouth sores."

"I see. I did have a mild cough today, so perhaps I needed this." My mother-in-law scooped up a piece of cake with a candied violet on it and put it in her mouth. "Why, it's delicious! And it has such a nice fragrance."

From the sound of it, eating it together with the cake had diminished the grassy taste of the violet. I stroked my chest in relief.

"Mother, Fran is thinking of making candied violets a new export of Triste," Gabriel said.

"Sweet violets, an export of Triste?"

"Yes. The flowers seem to be popular with noblewomen in the capital."

"In the capital? Hmm, I see."

"We're planning to sell candied violets in the capital. What do you think?"

There was a tense air around my mother-in-law. Hearing about the capital may have made her uncomfortable. I prayed as I waited for her response.

"I don't see why not. The cake is beautiful, and we have so many sweet violets that I'm tired of seeing them. If they have value, it would be wise to take advantage of that."

"In that case, I'll discuss with Fran about moving forward with the plan."

"Yes, go ahead."

I looked at Gabriel, and he looked back at me. We shared an easy smile. The sweet violet plan was progressing well.

After dinner, Coco showed me the sweet violets she'd drawn. Her work exceeded my expectations.

"Coco, these are brilliant!"

"Oh, no...I don't deserve such praise."

Her drawings were more beautiful than any picture of sweet violets I'd ever seen. With these on the packaging, no one would be able to resist picking up our products.

"From now on, you're not allowed to draw at night," I said.

"Huh?!"

"In exchange, please draw during the day. That's your job. At night, you must

sleep properly."

"Lady Francette...are you sure about this?!"

"Yes." In addition to the label illustration, I had one more request for her: a Triste landscape with blooming violets. "Can you draw a field of sweet violets for me, exactly as it is in reality?"

"You mean...without a blue sky? Just...the usual clouds and fog?"

"That's right."

Once the picture was finished, I'd have it put up in the pastry store in the capital where Solene worked. If even one person saw the landscape and took interest in Triste, we'd profit from it.

"I can count on you for this, right, Coco?"

"Yes!"

Now, all that was left to do was pray that everything would go well.

Side Story: The Slime Duke's Repayment

Triste is a lake region located in the northeast part of the country. As everyone is aware, it is a cursed land with more slimes than humans. I was born as the eldest son of Triste's ruler and given the name Gabriel.

For as long as I can remember, my parents would fight every time they saw each other. My father would run away from his own domain to aid other regions, while my mother would try to keep him here. My father thought that staying here would narrow his perspective. He insisted on going to other places and broadening his horizons. On the other hand, my mother believed that being absent was akin to betraying his people. She felt that he should stay put and study the land.

Both of them tried to win me over to their side, but I couldn't agree with either of them. Personally, I was more interested in the slimes. They had been enemies of our people for a very long time, but one day, I realized we might be able to use them for something when I saw them blocking a canal that led to the fields.

The water in Triste was not very clean. It had to be purified before we could use it. However, the water that flowed through the slime was clearly clean. Realizing that slimes might have the ability to purify water, I acted quickly, learning how to tame monsters from a magic tome I'd found in the basement. I thought taming a slime—the weakest of all monsters—would be a piece of cake, but no matter how many times I tried, the slimes ignored me. I was seven years old at the time, without a single slime under my command.

It wasn't until I was eight that I encountered the first slime that would form a contract with me. That summer, I found a slime that had been run over by a merchant's carriage. It was dried out and struggling to breathe. Thinking this was my chance, I tried the contract spell, but the slime rejected me. Even on the brink of death, it wouldn't obey me. Frustrated, I ripped the slime off the ground and took it home with me.

I threw the slime into a bucket of water and sprinkled a restorative over it. The slime regained its round form and began to move around energetically. I cast the taming spell once more, but again, it was rejected. I was so angry, I ended up brawling with the slime. We were evenly matched, and in the end, I won. I cast the spell on the worn-out slime again, and this time, it submitted to me. I named the slime Wibble.

I bestowed Wibble with mana and knowledge. It gained the ability to understand and speak human language. It used its newfound words to tell me that slimes had purifying powers. My hypothesis was correct. I was now convinced that I could make use of this ability. By using slimes, we could potentially improve the yield of our crops, which didn't grow well due to the barren soil in our land. Perhaps the water was the issue. I immediately made the suggestion to my father, but not only did he not believe me, he refused to even discuss it with me. I had no choice but to do it myself.

I slipped out of the house, tamed more slimes, and worked on purifying the lake we used for agricultural water. The results didn't appear right away. Instead, the lake slowly became cleaner, bit by bit. I reported my success to my parents, but they told me the water quality had improved because it had rained more than it had the previous year.

My hard work went unacknowledged. It didn't really matter, though. I wasn't doing it for the sake of acknowledgment anyway. After that, I did everything I could to improve the land through slimes—without anyone knowing. In the future, Triste would belong to me. There was no harm in making it a better place. Plus, I wasn't lonely at all because I had my slimes. So no matter how hard I worked, I was fine.

Several years passed. My father fled, leaving me with the dukedom. I'd already learned how to handle his work, so his disappearance didn't cause any issues at all. My mother was depressed, but I figured she'd cheer up soon enough. She was optimistic in the strangest of ways.

After a period of peace, a problem arose in the form of my great-uncle. He claimed I was a freak obsessed with slime research and demanded I hand over my title. I was ridiculed—apparently a man who couldn't even get married could not be trusted to govern Triste. No one realized that life in Triste had

become more comfortable compared to the previous generation. There was no point in explaining, so I didn't bother. All anyone would talk about was marriage, marriage, marriage. What was the big deal? Getting married was surely a much simpler task than taming slimes.

Annoyed, I went to a soiree in the capital to look for a bride, but this endeavor ended in utter failure. Being crammed into a small space with all of those people made me nauseous, and I felt like I could hear vicious insults regarding a country bumpkin slime duke's presence. Feeling as if I was going to die, I fled the party hall. There was no way I would find a fitting bride in a place like this. It was time to go home.

As I stumbled my way down the hallway, my condition worsened. The contents of my stomach suddenly surged up, and I threw up on the spot. What a disaster. How could I throw up in such a place? I knew I had to call for someone to clean my mess, but I was too dizzy to stand up. I heard the jeers from people passing by.

```
"Filthy.""What is he doing?""Such a disgrace.""He must be from the countryside."A royal mistake in the royal capital. Truly awful. I wanted to die.Just as I gave in to despair, a voice called out to me.
```

"Um, are you all right?"

in high society.

It had a beautiful lilt to it, like the chirp of a robin. An intricately embroidered silk handkerchief was held out in front of my face. I gratefully accepted it, wiped my dirtied mouth, and looked up. There stood a lovely maiden with hair the color of a newborn fawn. Her wisteria eyes peered at me with a look of concern. Judging from her pure-white dress, this party must've been her debut

She has much better things to be doing than tending to me, I thought. But I chose the worst possible words to express it.

"Leave me alone. Go away."

How could I be so harsh to someone who'd kindly reached out to me and lent me her handkerchief? I was furious at myself.

Anyone would've walked away at that point, but this lady didn't.

"I'll go with you to the first aid room. You look very pale."

"I said, leave me—"

"Excuse me, you over there! Would you mind cleaning this up?" she said to a passing servant.

She pulled on my arm. Fortunately, there wasn't any vomit on my clothes. She then proceeded to drag me to the first aid room. She even asked the nurse to look after me because I was feeling unwell and had thrown up.

By the time I realized what was happening, she was gone. I tried to go look for her, but the doctor told me to rest. Though my body was exhausted, I couldn't possibly rest—not when my heart was filled with guilt for the woman who had helped me. I only stayed for about thirty minutes before returning to the party hall.

I wanted to apologize to and thank the kind lady. I feared I might not be able to find her in the large crowd, but I ended up spotting her immediately. She had become the center of attention in a very bad way.

The atmosphere in the room was bizarre. Crown Prince Mael had his arm around a woman as if he were defending her. He pointed at another woman and declared that he was canceling their engagement and banishing her from the country.

If I recall correctly, the woman being banished is...Prince Mael's fiancée, Lady Adele. Rumor has it that she's diligent and righteous, possessing the perfect qualities of a queen. Why is this happening to her?



It turned out that my savior had been Lady Adele's younger sister, Lady Francette, who was now attracting looks of scorn. Why was she being treated like this too? I wanted to run over and rescue her, but my feet remained in place. If someone like me defended her, wouldn't that hurt her reputation even more? And I was too afraid of people's judging eyes to leap into the fray again. I was a spineless coward.

Meanwhile, Lady Francette was swallowed up by the crowd, never to be seen again that night. She had saved me, but I had been unable to return the favor.

I had the slimes investigate the matter of Duke Mercœur's daughter, Lady Adele. All they were able to tell me was "Lady Adele didn't do anything."

The problem was with Prince Mael. It seemed that he favored his commoner mistress, Victoria, and wanted to marry her instead, which had meant pushing Lady Adele aside.

I did some research on the woman named Victoria. She was the daughter of Maxim Maillart, president of Fastoux Trading. The man was a world-famous merchant, but I had heard several unsavory rumors about him before. To make matters worse, Victoria's mother—Maxim Maillart's ex-wife—was a criminal who sold illegal drugs. Prince Mael couldn't be in his right mind if he was thinking of bringing a woman of such questionable lineage into the royal family.

If I'd been one of the country's leaders, I would've disinherited Prince Mael and his mistress and inaugurated Prince Axel as king instead. Prince Axel—bearer of the title of dragon duke—was the most skilled swordsman in the country and the commander of the knights. He had spoken with me at the soiree because we were fellow monster dukes.

Prince Axel was a perfect man in every way: handsome, courteous, pure of heart, and virtuous in both speech and actions. He was the complete opposite of me, and the sense of inferiority stabbed at my heart. Prince Axel had shown me respect. And he had easily done what I had failed to. When Lady Adele's engagement had been revoked, Prince Axel had told Prince Mael not to treat Duke Mercœur's daughters badly. To be honest, he had been very dashing. If I had been a woman, I would have fallen for him. As a monster duke, I was also

permitted to speak out when the royal family did something wrong. However, my trembling legs and hoarse voice had prevented me from doing so.

Lady Francette, the woman whose kindness I would never forget, must have been deeply scarred from that incident. Duke Mercœur's assets and even his manor had been seized. From what I'd heard, he was now living a modest life in the old part of the capital.

Wibble finally found their house for me, and I tried to take a look, only for a duck in the yard to clamor wildly at me. It was so fierce, I ran away. A guard duck instead of a guard dog... How terrifying.

The next day, I quietly peeked through a gap in the hedge so that the duck wouldn't spot me. Lady Francette was there. On the night of the party, she had worn a beautiful dress and seemed to be blessed with all the joys of the world, but now, she wore a plain apron dress, the kind a maid would wear.

What an unfortunate girl. Wanting to support her, I had brought all the money I could carry. But would she accept it? What if she thought it was humiliating or creepy? I couldn't get myself to take that huge step forward.

After several visits, I learned that Lady Francette was selling her homemade sweets at a pastry shop. She looked glum as she went home. They must not have been selling well. That was when I realized: couldn't I support her by buying her pastries?

I began my purchases the very next day. I normally only ate sweet things once or twice a year, and not because I liked them. However, I was curious about Lady Francette's pastries, so I tried them. They were very delicious. I didn't know why, but Lady Francette's handmade sweets were the only ones I could enjoy. I started eating them every day.

And so, I spent my days buying up all of Lady Francette's pastries.

Two years after Lady Adele's banishment, my mother and great-uncle were still nagging at me about marriage. Nothing had changed on that front.

One day, Wibble said something unbelievable. It told me I should just marry

Lady Francette. A gentle, refined, beautiful, and wise lady like her would never be a good match for a coward like me. I told Wibble it was impossible, and it confronted me with a fury I hadn't seen since the time we'd formed our contract. For the first time in ages, our fight turned into a physical brawl.

In the end, I was the victor. But after losing, Wibble ran away from home. I wasn't too concerned. We were still connected by our contract, so I could easily find it. I let it be for a few days, but it still wasn't coming home, so I checked its current location. Much to my surprise, Wibble was at Lady Francette's house. Why? Just...why?

Bewildered, I went to take Wibble back. When I arrived, I found a group of thugs closing in on Lady Francette's house. I trembled with fear as I peeked through the hedge. Two years ago, I hadn't been able to save her. I didn't want that to happen ever again. So this time, I made up my mind to take action.

I wasn't as dashing as Prince Axel, but I managed to save her. She thanked me, and I was relieved that I'd made it in time. However, one thing didn't sit right with me: the thugs had been sent by Maxim Maillart, president of Fastoux Trading. He was also the father of Prince Mael's fiancée, Victoria. What if there was something going on behind the scenes?

Apparently, Lady Francette's father had eloped with Maxim Maillart's second wife. I had a bad feeling about this. It wasn't safe to leave her here by herself.

I gathered the next century's worth of courage to ask Lady Francette if she would be my wife. I thought my heart was going to explode, but somehow, I got her to accept. Going forward, I'd be able to protect her directly. I was filled with relief.

By the way, Lady Francette didn't remember meeting me two years ago. I suppose it was a good thing. I certainly wasn't going to say, "I'm the pathetic man you helped two years ago—you know, when you found him throwing up in a hallway." That would be far too unbecoming.

However, there was still a problem. Lady Francette's father was missing. A noble lady couldn't marry without her father's permission. For the time being, she would have to live in Triste as my fiancée, since I couldn't leave her alone in the capital while I searched for her father.

And so began my life with Lady Francette. She was an unusual woman who wasn't afraid of my tamed slimes and even doted on them. She also listened to me talk about my slime research and praised me for it. No one had ever acknowledged it before. The moment she understood me, I nearly burst into tears, but that is my secret to keep.

Every day I spend with Lady Francette brings me unimaginable joy. I would give my life to protect our time together. I only pray that no one will ever hurt or torment her again and that her days will continue to be peaceful.

Chapter 3: The Fallen Noble Francette Reunites with the Dragon Duke

Once a year, the monster dukes governing the various regions gathered in the capital for a meeting. Gabriel was going to be away for about three days to attend it.

"It makes me depressed every year," he said. "The monster dukes are so needlessly arrogant."

"It sounds stressful," I said.

Gabriel explained that each year, the knights would join the meeting to discuss the monsters running rampant in the country. If a powerful one had been spotted, they would go over and defeat it.

"What are the monster dukes like?" I asked.

"They have...strong personalities."

The only one I'd met before was the dragon duke, Prince Axel. The other monster dukes rarely turned up at social gatherings.

"The siren duke is a woman," said Gabriel. "I believe she's around thirty. She's the head of the Bureau of Magical Research and very talented. She's also unbelievably strong-willed, which has earned her the nickname 'Golden Lioness of the Magical Research Bureau.'"

"Golden Lioness..." Part of me wanted to meet her, but part of me was scared.

Apparently she was interested in Gabriel's slime research, but Gabriel refused to share any information with her. "I don't want people to ravage Triste's land for research purposes," he said.

"Understandable."

Gabriel had come up with many inventions that improved people's ways of

life, but if his techniques were to spread, leading people to ruin Triste's environment to obtain slimes, that would be a problem. I fully sided with his opinion.

"The harpy duke is the leader of the Inquisition," Gabriel continued. "Rumor has it that those who are subjected to his glare will be chased to the ends of the world. He has such an intimidating presence that simply speaking with him makes one tremble with fear. Every time we meet, he interrogates me as to whether I'm worshipping slimes as gods."

"How awful."

"Indeed. Next, the treant duke is seventy-seven years old. He's a cardinal of the Holy Church, but he'll come up to me with a smile and pester me for donations."

"You can't let down your guard, huh?"

"Exactly. And at twelve years of age, the fenrir duke is the youngest of all. He's ridiculously beautiful and he knows it. What a precocious child."

"Now I'm curious about how he looks."

"You're better off not meeting him. He'll corrupt you."

"What kind of child is this?"

Last was the ogre duke, who had apparently never attended the meeting before. Even their identity was being concealed, so Gabriel didn't know who had inherited the title.

"Rumor has it that they were cursed by an ogre and cannot show themselves to others," he said. "However, we don't know the truth."

"I see." If even a fellow monster duke doesn't know who they are, that just makes me even more curious. Anyway, it sounds like the monster dukes really do have unique personalities. "Who do you get along with, Gabriel?"

"Who could possibly get along with me? Before the meeting begins, I remain silent unless someone addresses me."

I hummed.

"Prince Axel is the only one I have exchanged words with willingly. He spoke to me at a soiree without a hint of arrogance—he showed me respect as a fellow monster duke."

"I believe it." He had shown me kindness as well, even though I hadn't been the one engaged to Prince Mael. "When my family went bankrupt, Prince Axel actually asked me to live in the palace."

"Wh-What?!" Gabriel shouted, startling me. He trembled as he continued, "W-W-W-Was he trying...to take you in as his wife?!"

"Of course not! He was inviting me to work at the palace since I had nowhere to go."

"Did he say those exact words?"

"No, but before I got engaged to you, he offered to be my guardian."

"Your...guardian?"

"Yes. He wanted to help me out of sympathy."

"Why didn't you accept his help?"

"I felt bad. Also, after seeing my sister get banished from the country, I was scared of being involved with the royal family... That might've been part of it."

"I see..."

After my father disappeared, I probably wouldn't have lasted much longer on my own. It was fortunate that Gabriel had offered me a way out. I couldn't thank him enough.

"Gabriel, thank you for saving me," I said.

"What brought that on?"

"When I think about what happened two years ago, I can't help but feel happy that there was someone willing to help me."

Gabriel gently squeezed my hand. It felt like he was silently reassuring me that I'd done my best, and my heart was filled with appreciation.

"Can I make you some sweets to eat in the capital?" I asked.

"Of course. I'd love that."

"Great." Maybe cookies, since they're easy to eat on the go. He leaves tomorrow, so I'll have to get started right away. "Oh, right. Could you pass some to Prince Axel too?"

"To...Prince Axel?"

"Yes. Before I came here, he went out of his way to check up on me at my house."

"Prince Axel...went to your house?"

I wanted to express my gratitude and let him know that I was doing fine in Triste. But when I asked Gabriel to pass on the message, he grimaced.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "I shouldn't be troubling you with this."

"No, it's fine. I'll bring them. Please have them ready."

"I can just mail them to the palace."

"If you send them as an individual, they'll get caught in inspection. I recall hearing that it can take over a month, so your sweets might spoil before they reach him."

"May I count on you, then?"

"Very well." Gabriel's reply was strangely bitter.

From the way Gabriel had spoken, he wasn't close with Prince Axel, and yet I had imposed a favor on him. If I were in his shoes and someone I knew had asked me to deliver a gift to Prince Axel, I might've been annoyed as well.

He still accepted my request, though, so I'm going to rely on him this time. It's time to get to work.

Making the same cookies as usual would be boring, so I decided to use an ingredient local to Triste—namely, corn flour. First, I brought butter to room temperature, mixed it until it was creamy, and added salt and sugar, a little at a time. Then, I sifted in wheat flour and corn flour and kneaded the mixture until the dough was nice and moist. I shaped the dough into a log, wrapped it in a

wet cloth, and put it into cold storage.

After thirty minutes, I cut the cylindrical dough into round slices, arranged them on a greased metal plate, and baked them for about fifteen minutes. With that, the Triste-style cookies were complete. I let them cool down a bit before adding the finishing touch: royal icing. It was easy to make—simply add egg whites to powdered sugar, squeeze in some lemon juice, and stir.

I covered the cookies in royal icing. For Prince Axel's, I also decorated them with candied violets. As for Gabriel's, I mixed red food coloring into the icing and drew Wibble's face on them. They were very cute.

I drew a heart on the very last cookie and put it in the box to give to Gabriel. There's no ulterior significance behind it, I thought as I closed the lid.

For Prince Axel's share, I wrote a message of gratitude on a card and tucked it into the decorative ribbon on the box.

It'll be awkward, but I should bring these to Gabriel myself. I headed to his office, but he seemed to be communicating with someone via crystal, so I left the cookies with the slimes.

Gabriel didn't come to dinner either, since he had to prepare for his trip. It felt like he was avoiding me, but maybe it was just my imagination. Worried, I asked my mother-in-law, and she told me he got like this every year. That was a bit of a relief.

The next day, my mother-in-law and I saw Gabriel off. Wibble was waving its tentacle at him. Apparently it was staying home.

Gabriel, carrying his travel bag, looked back at us with an exasperated expression. "This send-off is a bit much, seeing as I'll only be gone for three days."

"I don't see what the problem is," said my mother-in-law.

I still felt awkward about yesterday, and Gabriel didn't seem to be in a good mood either.

"Fran, thank you for the cookies," he said. "I'll be sure to savor them."

```
"O-Oh, you're welcome."

"I'll give Prince Axel his share too. Don't worry."

"Thanks...please do."
```

It ended up being a stiff farewell. Gabriel disappeared in a pillar of light, and I let out a sigh.

My mother-in-law patted me on the shoulder. "Let's have tea." "Okay."

I brought out the leftover cookies from yesterday for us to have with our tea. They were the same as the ones I'd made for Prince Axel.

"Why, what lovely cookies!"

My mother-in-law's praise cheered me up, just a little. *Drinking this fragrant tea will help calm my restless mind*, I thought. But the moment I took a sip, an unexpected question came my way.

"Are you two fighting?" she asked.

"Oh, um, no. We aren't." I somehow managed to swallow the tea instead of spitting it out. I pressed my hand to my chest and began to explain the awkward situation. "I, um, asked him to do something for me."

"What was it?"

"I asked him to deliver cookies to Prince Axel."

"Ah, I see." That was enough for her to get the picture. "Miss Francette, you told my son you were making cookies, and he was delighted. Am I right so far?"

"Yes."

"After that, you asked him to give them to Prince Axel as well. When he heard that, his mood suddenly soured. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

My mother-in-law burst out laughing. What was so funny?

"Ah, it's too much," she said.

"Um, is there something strange about it?"

"My son is jealous of Prince Axel."

"Jealous...?"

With tears in her eyes, my mother-in-law explained her take on Gabriel's feelings. "My son thought you were only making the cookies for him, but he was wrong. When you asked him to give them to Prince Axel too, he realized he wasn't special, and now he's frustrated."

"Ummm...do you really think so?"

"There's more than enough evidence. By the way, Miss Francette, may I inquire as to your relationship with Prince Axel?"

"I don't think it can be called a relationship, but..." I explained that my older sister had been engaged to his older brother, Prince Mael, and that was the only reason he had been so kind to me. I relayed everything he'd done for me thus far.

"I see, I see." My mother-in-law seemed to suspect that Gabriel felt inferior to Prince Axel. "I once asked my son what he thought of Prince Axel, and he said he was a popular man of character and strength, all traits that he lacked. He was clearly envious. It's no wonder that he wasn't pleased to hear that you were baking cookies for Prince Axel."

"Oh, but the cookies I gave him were different." I had decorated Prince Axel's cookies with candied violets because I wanted him to know more about Triste. But since Gabriel didn't seem to like candied violets, I had drawn Wibble's face on his cookies instead. "I only made the Wibble cookies for him, so I think they're very special."

"Oh my. You should have told him that."

It was too late. Gabriel had already left for the capital.

"My son must see Prince Axel as his rival."

"Wh-What?!" Our relationship isn't anything for him to be concerned about...

"Still, what was Prince Axel thinking? Visiting a lady's home is rather excessive."

"He must've been really worried."

"Worried, hm?"

When Gabriel comes back, I'll explain the cookies to him, I vowed in my heart.



Today, my mother-in-law had gone out in the morning for quite a sensitive matter. She was headed to the house of her runaway husband's mistress to give her money for her living expenses. The mistress had a child, so my mother-in-law felt obligated to make sure they were cared for.

I had debated going with her but decided to stay home this time. Now I was making candied violets with Nico and Rico.

"Coco wanted to thank you again," said one of the triplets. "She's happy that she can draw without having to stay up late."

"Her drawings are wonderful, so I want a lot of people to see them," I said.

The other day, Coco had given me a drawing of Alexandrine. She had depicted the duck so beautifully and elegantly that Nico had been willing to pay money for it. It currently hung on my wall, and I admired it every day. It was well received by others too—when my mother-in-law saw it, she wanted to have Coco do a family portrait for us.

We had finished making fifty or so candied violets now, and I had placed a printing order with the village newspaper for the package illustration Coco had prepared. It would be ready in a week.

I had also discussed the candied violets with Solene. The store was willing to sell them, which I was grateful for. They also agreed to put up Coco's illustration. Everything was going well.

Just as I was pumping myself up for the final stretch, the steward, Constance, came to inform me that we had guests.

"The master's second cousins, Lady Diane and Lady Liliane, have come to visit."

"Huh?!"

If they were Gabriel's second cousins, that probably meant they were the granddaughters of the malicious great-uncle I'd heard so much about.

Apparently they had come to see me. I couldn't imagine why.

"Lady Diane and Lady Liliane... Understood," I said.

"I brought them to the parlor."

"I'll be right there."

Nico and Rico tilted their heads in the same direction. They seemed just as clueless as me.

"Those two hardly ever come here," said Nico.

"They complained that it's too hard to get to," said Rico.

"I see," I said. Perhaps they had heard that Gabriel was getting married and were curious about his fiancée. I took off my apron and brought Nico and Rico with me to help me look more presentable.

Wibble, who had been taking an afternoon nap, bounced over to me.

"Fra, are you going somewhere?"

"No, we have guests."

"Oh. Wibble will come too."

I placed the slime on my shoulder. I wanted to redo my makeup, but it wouldn't be good to keep the ladies waiting too long, so I only reapplied my lipstick before heading over to the parlor.

"I apologize for the wait," I said.

The two sisters—who almost looked like twins—stood up when I entered. One of them was a beautiful young lady, about eighteen or nineteen, with her snow-white hair elegantly pulled back. The other was a beautiful girl, about fifteen or sixteen, with her also snow-white hair gracefully pinned up. The beautiful sisters smiled at me.

"Greetings. I am cousin Gabriel's second cousin, Diane," said the beautiful young lady.

"I am her younger sister, Liliane," said the beautiful girl.

I smiled and introduced myself. "I'm Gabriel's fiancée, Francette."

"We are pleased to make your acquaintance," said Diane.

"I hope you will treat us kindly," said Liliane.

"Yes, of course," I said.

I gestured for them to sit on the sofa and sat down with them. A maid brought us tea and candied-violet cookies. The sisters had never seen them before, so their expressions stiffened.

"Wh-Why do these cookies have weeds on them?!"

"How uncouth!"

Their sudden shrieks startled me. However, thinking about it, I realized their reactions were natural. In Triste, sweet violets were considered weeds that sprouted up everywhere.

"I apologize," I said. "Candied violets are popular in the capital, so I had them prepared, thinking you might like them."

"Goodness! Are you implying that we are country bumpkins who are ignorant of the trends in the capital?"

"How rude!"

My attempt at hospitality had failed. If I had thought about it a little more, I would've known better, but it appeared that my judgment had been clouded.

"I truly did not mean to offend you," I said.

"Hmph."

"I doubt it."

It seemed that I'd made a terrible first impression. How did it end up like this?

"When I heard that cousin Gabriel was getting married, I wanted to see how wonderful his bride was, but it appears that she is nothing special."

"Yes, yes. Cousin Gabriel's judgment has deteriorated."

This had nothing to do with Gabriel. It was my own failing. However, arguing back would only anger them further. For now, all I could do was endure in silence.

"It seems that she has been acting high and mighty in the house of the grand duke despite not even being engaged."

"Oh, the audacity."

That I couldn't deny. The engagement would be immediate if only we could find my father. My mother's approval wouldn't validate our engagement or marriage, not when she wasn't even in the country.

The sisters continued to criticize me.

"Rumor has it that Prince Mael renounced his engagement to your sister and banished her from the country."

"Is it true that your family has fallen?"

"It is," I admitted.

"Such a repulsive family."

"It horrifies me to think that such a woman is going to marry the slime duke."

Even my family was being insulted because of me. I didn't know how to handle this situation. As I was trying to find the right words to say, Wibble suddenly spoke up.

"Fra isn't repulsive. If anything, you are."

"W-Wibble?!" I exclaimed.

The sisters finally noticed Wibble's presence, their faces scrunching up with disgust.

"Eek! This wretch has a slime on her shoulder!"

"A-And it s-spoke!"

Wibble jumped onto the table, extended its tentacles, and whirled them around.

"Eeeeek!"

"Gross!"

The sisters stood up and fled from the parlor. Their screams echoed through the hallway, and then there was silence. "The storm has passed."

"That it has." Was that the right way to handle the situation? I didn't know.

"Fra, are you okay?"

"Y-Yes." My hands and shoulders were trembling. I'd never felt this way before.

"Fra?"

"Pfft!" I let my emotions loose, unable to contain them any longer. "Ha ha ha! Aha ha ha!" The way the composed sisters had grimaced so dramatically the moment they noticed Wibble, and how they had pulled their dresses up to their knees and run away—why, they'd made their escape without a whit of grace!

"Fra, you had fun?"

"Yes, I did. That makes me a bad person, doesn't it?"

"It's okay. Those sisters were worse."

"I'll call it even, then." I wiped the tears from my eyes with my handkerchief, leaned back on the sofa, and let out a long sigh. "Now I've done it." I picked a fight with Gabriel's second cousins. His relationship with his great-uncle is bad enough as it is...

When my mother-in-law returned, I informed her of the earlier commotion.

"Oh my, Diane and Liliane came here? How unusual," she said.

"Yes, they did."

I told her everything that had transpired.

My mother-in-law rubbed her temples and sighed. "Those girls are troublesome. They must've waited until Gabriel was away to come and try to drive you out."

"Oh...I feel bad about what I did, though."

"Don't worry about it. Those girls needed to be taught a lesson."

"If you say so..."

Apparently, neither of the sisters had a marriage partner lined up. There had

been talks of one of them becoming Gabriel's bride.

"Those two were always arrogantly offering to marry Gabriel, as if they were doing him a favor," my mother-in-law said. "They were probably serious about it."

Agewise there wasn't an issue, and since they were from the same family, they wouldn't need to prepare a large dowry. For the sisters, Gabriel was an excellent target.

"So they must've been upset when he suddenly decided to marry you," she concluded. "Gabriel and I never considered them as candidates, though, since his great-uncle would obviously let it get to his head. And those girls loved to make biting remarks at Gabriel, so he was always brushing off their talks of marriage to begin with."

Noble marriages relied on dowries. It was essentially a miracle that I had received a proposal without one.

"If they come back, you don't have to deal with them, Miss Francette. I will get retribution for you."

"I-I'm counting on you." My mother-in-law is so dependable!

Needless to say, she looked very cool.

The next day, Nico reported that a package had arrived from Diane and Liliane. Her face was sullen.

"What did they send?" I asked.

"I-It was...a box full of earthworms."

"Oh my."

I was right in assuming that it would just be more harassment. Despite the vast amount of wildlife in this region, it must've been difficult to gather a box full of worms. The sisters had probably ordered their servants to do it.

"You can feed them to Alexandrine," I said. "She loves earthworms."

"Oh! Y-You're right!"

"She'll get fat if she eats too much, so share them with the villagers' ducks too."

"Understood!"

After Nico left, I let out a deep sigh. I'd have to write a thank-you letter.

How should it go? For now, I'll just let them know that my pet duck enjoyed the worms. Though there's a chance they'll send me other things, like snakes, spiders, frogs, or slugs... That would be troublesome. What should I write?

Suddenly, I recalled my mother-in-law's words. *If they attack me, I have to attack back.* Inspired, I wrote in my letter that the next time they sent me something, I'd send the same thing back. That would stop the harassing gifts.

Later, Nico came back and reported that Alexandrine had eaten the earthworms with glee. The ones in Triste were fat and filling. During her break, she'd shared them with the people she knew who owned ducks, and they had been well received. With the worm problem solved, I placed my hand on my chest in relief.

I'll turn a blind eye to this incident. Those sisters are probably angry because they can't get married, not because they truly hate me. When you're born into nobility, marriage is an unavoidable issue. It's a cruel system. It'll probably be a long time before society decides that there's more to life than getting married.

No new gifts or letters arrived from Diane and Liliane after that. I hoped things would remain this way.

When Rico informed me that Gabriel had returned, my heart leaped. *Is he still angry with me?* I awkwardly made my way to his office. *The first thing I'll do is thank him for delivering my gift to Prince Axel and apologize.*

I knocked on the door, and it opened immediately.

"Fran!" Gabriel greeted me with a smile, easing my tension. "Thank you for the cookies. I was so surprised and happy to see Wibble's face on them."

"Oh, um, yes. I'm glad you liked them."

My stilted response startled him. "Um, I'm sorry," he said with an awkward

expression. "I should've let you know that I was back."

"No, it's fine. Um, welcome back."

"I'm home."

For some reason, this simple exchange was making me feel terribly embarrassed. Gabriel was blushing too. He invited me into the room so that we wouldn't have to continue the conversation at the door. Constance brewed tea for us, and sipping it calmed my heart.

"Fran, I'm sorry," Gabriel said.

"For what?"

"Before I left, I was sulking like a child."

"That was my fault. I shouldn't ask you to make personal deliveries for me."

"It was the best option. Prince Axel was very pleased with your gift. It also became a talking point."

"A talking point?"

"Yes, he had your candied-violet cookies served at the monster duke meeting."

"What?!" I'd thought he'd enjoy them in private, but apparently my cookies had been placed under a *very* big spotlight.

"Everyone praised them. It ended up becoming an unexpected advertisement for your candied violets. The siren duke, Lady Magritte, was interested in placing an order for the cookies. It's not urgent, so would you be willing to accept?"

"Y-Yes. Of course!" Learning that my sweets had found recognition filled my heart with joy.

"After the meeting, I decided to have my cookies too, but I was surprised when I opened the lid and found Wibble's face on them."

"Those were special. I made them just for you."

"That's what I thought... I was very happy."

I'm glad my feelings got through to him after all.

"However, regarding the letter my mother sent via express mail— Ah, have you heard of wyvern mail?"

```
"No, never."
```

Apparently there was a courier service that could deliver mail from Triste to the capital in just half a day. They used tamed wyverns to quickly reach faraway lands.

"But they don't treat the mail with much care, so it hasn't pervaded noble circles yet," Gabriel said.

```
"I see."
```

It turned out that my mother-in-law had used wyvern mail to report Diane and Liliane's visit to Gabriel.

"It seems that my second cousins were extremely rude to you. I'm very sorry."

"No. it's fine."

"I will send them a written complaint."

"You don't have to."

"But they made a fool of you. I cannot let them get away with it."

I didn't want his relationship with the branch family to worsen because of me. I bowed my head and said, "May I handle this myself? Introducing an outsider into a problem between women will only complicate matters. Please don't do anything."

"Am I an outsider...?"

"In women's matters, yes. A woman's enemy is her fellow woman."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yes, it is."

"Very well. However, if they do anything else to dishonor you, I'm sending them to a convent."

"I'll fight carefully so that won't happen."

I honestly didn't know how to settle things with them, but I wanted to get along with the other women living in this land—even if it was looking difficult.

"Also, this is for you, Fran." Gabriel placed a stack of papers on the table.

Wondering what they were, I peered at them and saw the words "Duke Mercœur Investigation Findings."

"It's what the detectives and slimes found, as well as the report from the knights," Gabriel explained. "Please look them over for yourself."

"Th-Thank you."

The report had been given to him by Prince Axel, while the rest was from Gabriel's personal investigation. I picked up the papers with trembling hands and turned the front page.

My father was still missing, but he had left tracks in various places. The problem was with Maxim Maillart's wife, whom he had taken with him. She had apparently told a close friend that she "might be killed." What if they had fled from the capital because she feared for her life? That would mean my father was helping her, but there was no proof. We had to hear the story from their own mouths.

"We couldn't find any key information," Gabriel said.

"It's fine. Thank you."

The knights, detectives, and slimes were still on the hunt. They were going to expand the scope of their investigation, which could potentially yield more information.

"I hope we find your father soon," Gabriel said.

"Yes."

My father was a free spirit, but I wanted to believe that he wasn't immoral enough to commit a crime, and I wanted them to find him as soon as possible in order to prove it. For now, all I could do was pray for his safety.



Alexandrine had made a name for herself as a ferocious duck in the old part

of town, but after moving to Triste, she had calmed down quite a lot. Part of it was because Nico gave her a lot of attention, but I suspected it was also because she no longer had to protect me. The thought that she had always been on guard for my sake filled me with affection. Whenever I'd return from a walk and give her a hug, she'd quack gently and I'd thank her again.

Unfortunately, she still saw Gabriel as an enemy. She'd lunged at him again when they'd crossed paths today. I really wished she'd stop, but it must've been a compatibility issue. I asked Nico to try to keep Gabriel and Alexandrine away from each other as much as possible.

As for the cookies that the siren duke, Lady Magritte, had ordered, I baked them the next day and sent them off. She had requested that they be sent immediately via wyvern mail, so I padded the package with cushioning material to prevent them from breaking on the way...but I didn't know if they would truly be all right.

I continued to worry until I received a letter from Lady Magritte. She had received the cookies on the same day I had sent them and had savored every last one. The payment came with another order. She had ordered three boxes last time, but this time, she wanted ten. With the help of Nico, Rico, and the maids, I worked diligently on fulfilling the order.

Gabriel suggested making the candied-violet cookies into a product. I immediately requested an illustration from Coco, and it was finished at the same time as the cookies. It depicted Alexandrine's side profile with a few sweet violets. Its elegant aesthetic would make anyone want to pick up the box.

I carefully packed the cookies and sent them by wyvern mail.

Amidst these hectic days, Triste's rainy season passed and it was now early summer. It was less humid than usual, making day-to-day life feel more comfortable.

Although I was still busy, one day, Gabriel asked me if I wanted to go to the forest with him to pick mushrooms. The deadline for the cookies and candied violets was approaching, but I'd been told that sometimes breaks were necessary, which I agreed with. I accepted his invitation and we rode a horse to

the mushroom forest.

"Do you pick mushrooms every year?" I asked.

"I only went annually when I was a child."

"So you haven't gone in a while?"

"That's correct."

He must've taken me on this outing because he was worried that I was working too hard.

"I'm quite the workaholic myself, but you're far beyond my level, Fran. I was surprised."

"Sorry. I got a lot of orders, so I was happy to make them."

"No matter how much fun you're having, your body needs rest. Then again, I'm not sure how much rest you'll get when I'm taking you out like this."

He sighed in my ear, and my heart skipped a beat. I still wasn't used to how close we were when on horseback. But it wasn't an unpleasant kind of nervousness.

"You're busy too, so I really appreciate that you're taking the time to be considerate of me," I said.

"It seems to be in your nature to overwork yourself. Even in the capital, you were always—"

"Always?"

"N-No, it's nothing."

What did he mean by "in the capital"? He cut off his sentence, so maybe he misspoke.

While we were talking, we arrived at Moss Forest. It was said that many mushrooms could be found here. As the name suggested, it was a place where the ground and trees were covered in moss. There was a hut at the entrance, and we left our horse with the supervisor there.

"There are slimes in the forest, so you must remain vigilant," said Gabriel.

I picked up the basket hanging from the saddle. Wibble was inside, and when it saw me, it jumped onto my shoulder.

"Fra, let's go together."

"Of course."

Gabriel thought the slime would be a burden on me, but Wibble was only the size of a fist and hardly weighed anything. I told him it was fine, and he sighed.

"If your shoulder ever feels uncomfortable, please let me know," he said.

"I will."

Moss Forest was very different from normal forests. The mossy ground was soft and spongy. Walking on it felt strange—it was nothing like walking on a fluffy carpet.

The forest was filled with colorful mushrooms, like a scene from a children's book. I'd never seen anything like it before. I almost expected a fairy or some other mystical being to peek out from behind the trees.

"Red, yellow, green—there are so many colorful mushrooms!" I exclaimed.

"Fran, it's all right to be excited, but be careful not to slip and fall."

"Right. I can't say I won't slip, but I'll do my best."

Just the other day, I'd nearly fallen when my foot got caught in the mud. I couldn't claim that I was fine.

Gabriel held out his hand, probably concerned after hearing my response. "It's dangerous, so please hold on to my arm."

"Th-That might be better, yes."

And so, I clung to Gabriel as we walked. It was terribly embarrassing to be escorted like this outside of a party, but this was no time to shy away. I had to keep my eyes on the ground ahead.

Perhaps because I wasn't saying much, Gabriel took the initiative to speak more. He knew so much about mushrooms that I wondered if he was an expert in mycology.

"These are pepper mushrooms," he said. "When cooked, they taste like

they've been seasoned with pepper."

"Wow, I bet they would be delicious in soup."

"Here, they're used to garnish meat dishes."

It turned out that Triste had many other native edible mushrooms, like the citrus mushroom with a tart, fruity taste, the explosive mushroom that caused a strange bursting sensation in your mouth, and the steak mushroom with a juicy, meat-like mouthfeel.

The forest grew darker the farther we went. Gabriel had deployed a monsterwarding spell, so we hadn't encountered a single slime.

"Hey, Gabriel—is it safe to go this deep into the forest?" I asked.

"Yes. There's something I want to show you."

"What is it?"

"You'll find out."

After another ten minutes of walking, I spotted a faint light in the distance.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Shining mushrooms."

The mushrooms glowing in the dark forest were as beautiful as a sky full of stars.

"They're so pretty," I said.

"Indeed." Gabriel explained that he'd found this place when he got lost in the forest as a child. Later on, he'd used slimes to find the exact location. Today was his first time coming here in a while. "I've been meaning to show you this ever since you came to Triste."

"I see. They really are beautiful." I gazed at the scene for a while, captivated.

"Fran, these shining mushrooms are actually edible."

"Huh? You can eat them?"

"Yes, they're very delicious, with a firm texture and a rich flavor. But when you eat them..."

"What happens?"

Wibble descended from my shoulder and swallowed up a shining mushroom. Its body then began to radiate a faint light.

"Oh my, Wibble is glowing!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, eating these shining mushrooms makes you give off light."

Wibble bounced around, the light trailing behind it like a shooting star. The sight soothed my heart. This must be the real rest he was talking about.

"Thank you, Gabriel."

"It's nothing."

I'll take the rest of the day to rejuvenate and get back to work tomorrow.



The social season would be coming to an end soon in the capital, with the nobles leaving their city townhomes and retreating to their grand country houses in the lands they came from. A large number of them had placed orders for candied violets and cookies to bring home as souvenirs.

Apparently the candied violets had become the talk of the town after Lady Magritte shared them with the queen, who later placed an order of her own. The pastry store that Solene worked at was the only place in the capital that sold them, so they had a long line of customers every day. I felt bad about burdening them, but they told me it was very appreciated.

I wanted to be able to serve as many customers as possible. The triplets, the maids, and I already couldn't keep up with the pace, so we hired women from the village and began mass production in an unused bakehouse. Gabriel made a magicite-powered washer to purify the sweet violets, reducing Wibble's workload.

The business grew unexpectedly quickly, and as per Gabriel's recommendation, I registered a trademark. Since Coco often drew Alexandrine and lakes for our packaging, I named the company "Lakeside Duck Bakery." Our only products had been candied violets and cookies, but we expanded our selection to candies, cakes, custards, and jellies. There were even customers

coming all the way to Triste to buy them.

Triste was clearly getting more traffic, but this posed a problem. The person most aggravated by it was Gabriel.

"The village has no lodging, restaurants, or gift stores!" he lamented.

Just as he said, Triste was useless as a tourist destination. Even though we finally had people coming, the village didn't benefit directly from it. Currently, visitors were being given vacant rooms in the old castle for overnight stays, their meals provided by a temporarily hired chef. However, since the castle was also the stronghold of the grand duke, Gabriel didn't like letting tourists in.

"What are we supposed to do about this?" he groaned.

It would take time to plan out and build inns and restaurants, but the facilities were needed *now*.

"Ugh...if only I could make them appear out of nowhere with magic."

"Well, that's not going to hap— Wait, no, it is possible!" I exclaimed.

"What do you mean, Fran?"

I suddenly remembered the empty houses I'd seen on my visit to the village. Some of them had been large enough to be considered mansions. Gabriel had said that maintenance was performed on them once a month, so they could be used without incurring much repair cost.

"You can set up inns and restaurants in the empty houses," I said.

Gabriel's eyes widened. "That's it!"

Who would've thought that the vacancy issue from the decreasing population could be put to good use?

Gabriel immediately got to work, ordering for the empty houses to be cleaned and selecting trustworthy people to manage the inn.

The busy period passed, and I now spent my days in leisure. Constance had nonchalantly taken over the accounting work that I'd always struggled with late into the night, for which I was grateful.

Lakeside Duck Bakery's workshop had been moved from the old castle to a vacant house in the village. A large glass window had been added to the outer wall so that people could observe the sweets being made. This was popular with the tourists, and I'd heard that a crowd formed there every day.

Triste had changed a lot in a short period of time, but was this really for the best? Worried, I consulted with my mother-in-law.

"A land without people will wither and die," she said. "Triste would have met that fate sooner or later. I think change is a good thing."

"I'm worried that I might've caused distress for the people who love Triste's tranquility, though."

"No one loves Triste for being quiet! This is a cursed land, infested with swarms of slimes. Five hundred years ago, it was said that no one would ever dare to approach this place. It's a miracle that people are coming here at all!"

"R-Really?"

"Yes!" My mother-in-law sat beside me and squeezed my hands. "Miss Francette, you have my gratitude for bringing life to this land. Thank you so much."

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

"There will be people who will envy and speak ill of you, but you cannot let them get to you."

"Yes, you're right."

Speaking with my mother-in-law made me feel a bit better.

Wibble told me there were lots of flowers blooming in the garden, so we went for a walk together. The autumn roses were beautiful—a feast for the eyes. Roses were my sister's favorite flower. I remembered how she'd display them in her room every day.

Speaking of my sister, I hadn't written to her about recent events yet, even though we used to exchange letters once a month. Life had been busy, so it had been put on the back burner. In her last letter, she had said that she wished to

talk in person about my engagement to Gabriel and our father's disappearance. To be honest, I was very hesitant to meet with her; it felt like if I went to the Empire, I'd never be able to come back.

The gardener offered to let me have some of the roses. As I was deciding which to take, Nico and Alexandrine came running towards me.

"Lady Franceeette! Please return at once!" she shouted.

"Huh?"

What had happened to make her panic like this? Nico was more prone to jumping to conclusions than her sisters, so she had probably overheard something unimportant and mistaken it for a serious problem.

"Lady Francette, please hurry! It's an emergencyyy!"

"What's wrong, Nico? Calm down and tell me what happened."

"O-Okay. U-Um, the d-d-dragon duke, Prince Axel, is here to see you!"

The color drained from my face. It *was* an emergency. We left Alexandrine with the gardener and hurried towards the parlor, where Prince Axel was apparently waiting.

Why the in-person visit? Did he find my father? I can't think of any other reason he'd come to see me.

"Lord Gabriel's mother is currently attending to him," said Nico.

"What's Gabriel doing?" I asked.

"When the lady shoved him away, it seems his glasses broke..."

"What in the world happened there?"

"I-I don't know. Lord Gabriel returned to his room to fetch a replacement pair of glasses."

Panting for breath, we arrived at the parlor. *I should catch my breath before going in.* I placed my hand on my chest and breathed in, then out.

"Oh, Lady Francette, you have leaves on your dress."

"Huh? Where?"

"Wibble will get them for you!"

The leaves were stuck to my back, shoulder, and waist. When had they gotten there?

The slime hopped to the floor and rebounded through the air, landing in the palm of Nico's hand.

"Thank you, Wibble," I said.

"No problem!"

Wibble held the leaves together in the shape of a fan. That was when I realized—I couldn't meet a man outside of my family without a fan to hide my mouth with when speaking or smiling.

"Fra, what's wrong?"

"Oh!" I remembered when the slime had disguised itself as a ribbon. I could just have it turn into a fan. "Wibble, can you do me a favor? Can you turn into a fan for a little while?"

"I can!"

Wibble twisted around in Nico's hand, transforming into a brightly colored fan in a matter of seconds. It was made of peacock feathers and sparkled in the light. It was a bit... No, it was *very* flashy. But I couldn't ask it to change into something else, not when I was the one who'd asked.

"Thank you, Wibble." I resigned myself and gripped the vibrant fan. Wibble had even recreated the soft texture of the feathers.

Having caught my breath, I knocked on the door. Constance opened it for me.

My eyes first landed on my mother-in-law, who was absolutely beaming. It wasn't a fake smile but a sincere smile from the heart. She seemed overjoyed that Prince Axel was here.

"Ah, Prince Axel, it appears that Miss Francette has arrived," she said.

It was only me, and yet Prince Axel stood up and turned to face me. "Lady Francette, I'm sorry for visiting unannounced."

"No, don't be." Okay, stay calm.

After Prince Axel sat back down, I took a seat next to my mother-in-law. It turned out that he had stopped by on his way back from a wyvern extermination mission. It wasn't about my father. *Thank goodness... Wait, should I really be thinking that?*

"Miss Francette, Prince Axel said he defeated ten wyverns all by himself," my mother-in-law said.

"Ten?!" I exclaimed. "By yourself?!"

The prince was sitting with a calm expression, his hair neat and tidy. He certainly didn't look like he was returning from a wyvern hunt.

"Um, did you get injured?" I asked.

"No," he said.

It was hard to believe he'd defeated ten wyverns without a scratch. They were some of the most ferocious monsters out there, and their large size made them difficult to take down. Every year, there were reports of people who had lost their lives to wyvern attacks. Even mercenaries, adventurers, and knights, who were accustomed to fighting monsters, had a difficult time with them.

It turned out that Prince Axel had received word that ten of these fearsome wyverns had been sighted at once, at the foot of a mountain in the northern part of the country. There had been knights stationed in the nearby town, and they had even hired mercenaries to help, but they hadn't been able to take down even one of the wyverns. If the situation had been left alone, there would have been casualties, so Prince Axel had personally made the trip there.

It would have taken a month by carriage to reach Triste from the place where the wyverns had appeared. How in the world had he gotten here?

"He said he soared across the sky on a dragon," my mother-in-law explained.

"A dragon? I guess that's the dragon duke for you."

"It took about five hours for him to get here from the northern area." It seemed that dragons could fly even faster than tamed wyverns. "He must have looked glorious riding on the back of a dragon."

Apparently not all of the previous dragon dukes had tamed dragons. When

Prince Axel was a child, he had found a baby dragon while hunting and tamed it.

My mother-in-law must have pried a lot of stories out of Prince Axel before my arrival. She was talking more than he was. When there was a break in the conversation, I finally asked the question that had been on my mind.

"Um, do you have business to take care of in Triste?"

"I only came here because my subordinates told me to rest for a while," he said.

Why...? Come to think of it, I vaguely recall him saying he'd visit me in Triste, back when we said our farewells in the capital. I never thought he'd actually do it.

"You came to see Miss Francette!" my mother-in-law exclaimed.

"Well, yes."

What am I supposed to do now that he's here? I unfolded the Wibble fan to hide my strained smile.

Just as I was sighing, the parlor door opened. Gabriel had arrived, wearing a monocle over his right eye. *Nico* did *mention his glasses had broken during a scuffle with his mother...*

Prince Axel posed the question before I could. "Lord Slime, have you changed your glasses?"

"My usual pair broke a little while ago," Gabriel said, glaring at his mother, who simply concealed half of her face with her fan and stared in the other direction. What a tough woman.

"Is your left eye fine without correction?" Prince Axel asked.

"Yes. It's only my right eye that needs it. When I was a child, I was attacked by a slime and it hit that eye. The slime fluid got inside, blurring my vision."

"Then why do you wear regular glasses instead of a monocle?"

"Well, you see—" Gabriel tried to push up the bridge of his glasses like usual, but since he was wearing a monocle, it was fixed in place over his nose. He seemed embarrassed at the realization. "My usual glasses have slime lenses,

which allow me to quickly detect slimes hiding in the wild."

"What an incredible invention. You must be a genius," Prince Axel said with a straight face.

Gabriel's eyes widened at the unexpected praise.

"How did you come up with the idea of slime lenses?"

"I found a shriveled-up slime on the road and picked it up. It was like a thick piece of glass—very transparent. When I looked through it, it suddenly started glowing. I was surprised, thinking it was still alive, but no, the slime was definitely dead. Why did it glow, then? I learned from one of my tamed slimes that it was to invite its fellow slimes to eat its dead body and absorb its mana."

Apparently, slimes instinctively consumed each other to extend their lives. Even after dying, they would signal their presence to other slimes to give them their residual mana.

"When I searched in the direction of the glow, I found a slime hiding away. I realized I could use this property of theirs to develop slime-detection glasses."

Gabriel had intercepted the wavelength the slimes used to communicate with each other and adjusted it so that the wearer of the glasses could sense slimes but not the other way around. The result was the glasses he always wore.

"I see," said Prince Axel. "Can those glasses be modified to work on other monsters?"

"I did consider that possibility," said Gabriel.

A fervent discussion had begun between the two magic users. My mother-inlaw and I were left out as we had no relevant knowledge.

"We'll leave you two young men to yourselves," my mother-in-law declared, leaving the parlor and bringing me with her.

We went to the living room, where tea was prepared for us. My mother-inlaw took a sip of the fragrant blend and sighed.

"That was nerve-racking," she said. "I can't believe Prince Axel is here in our home."

"Yes, indeed," I said.

"He said he came to see you, Miss Francette. There isn't some sort of unusual relationship between you two, is there?"

"What do you mean by 'unusual'?"

"I'm asking if you're secretly in love with each other."

"In love?! With Prince Axel?! No, no, absolutely not. It would be disrespectful of me to be in love with him," I said firmly.

My mother-in-law looked surprised. "Prince Axel had my heart the moment I met him. Are you saying that you haven't fallen for him?"

"I have not." Indeed, Prince Axel was handsomeness personified and a man of great character. Anyone would fall in love with him. But... "From the very beginning, I thought he was out of reach. It would take a perfect lady like my sister to be worthy of him."

"Oh my, are you not a perfect lady yourself, Miss Francette?"

"Me?"

"Yes. You're courteous, you treat everyone with respect, and you always have pride in yourself."

"Um, I think you're overestimating me."

"Goodness! Are you doubting my intuition?"

"No, that's not what I meant at all." I never thought my mother-in-law would speak so highly of me. I was happy but embarrassed. Even my own parents had never praised me that much.

"I'm an overly doting parent, so I thought highly of my son. But when he was next to Prince Axel, he seemed to fade away like Triste's morning fog. I was shocked."

"Th-That's not true. Gabriel is just as wonderful of a person as Prince Axel."

"Miss Francette...you must be the only lady in the world who would give my son such high praise after seeing him next to Prince Axel."

"I think that's an exaggeration."

My mother-in-law let out a long sigh. "To be honest, I was afraid Prince Axel would take you away."

"That would never happen."

"Do you mean to say that if—and I do mean *if*—Prince Axel wanted you, you would not reciprocate his feelings?"

"Exactly."

My mother-in-law looked at me, her eyes wider than ever before and her mouth agape. She was so surprised, she'd forgotten to cover her mouth with her fan.

"Miss Francette, you are the only lady who would choose my son over royalty, let alone a clearly upstanding royal like Prince Axel."

"You sound very sure of that."

"I am. I don't mean to offend when I ask this, but why did you choose my son?"

"Well..."

At first, it had partially been because I was more comfortable with a marriage of convenience that benefited both parties. If it had simply been an engagement based on pity, my heart might have remained cold. But Gabriel saw me as an equal, and that made me really happy.

My father had always told me to carry myself as a noblewoman should, which meant propping up my future husband and protecting the home. Taking the initiative to work would have been unthinkable. Naturally, he had stopped saying that after our family's downfall, but it had been clear that he hadn't liked the idea of my baking pastries to sell. He would give me money he'd received from his mistresses to cover my living expenses, but I had never once accepted it. I had wanted to support myself instead of having a stranger take care of me. Perhaps that lifestyle was why I didn't rely on Gabriel, even after we'd gotten engaged.

"Gabriel always supports me in what I do," I said. "Not just that, he even advises me on how I can do it better. He always watches over me with those

gentle eyes, and I lo—"

It was at this point that I suddenly realized that I loved Gabriel. I'd nearly confessed in front of his mother instead of the man himself. My face felt hot. There was probably sweat forming on my forehead. As I was wiping it with my handkerchief, my mother-in-law stood up abruptly, her eyes sparkling.

```
"Miss Francette...do you love Gabriel?"

"Huh?"

"You adore him from the bottom of your heart, don't you?!"

"Um...well, yes, I suppose."
```

My mother-in-law dashed towards me, knelt at my side, and tightly gripped my hands, which had been resting in my lap.

"I am truly grateful to you for loving my son," she said.

"O-Oh."

"I had a feeling that was the case."

"Wh-What gave you that impression?"

"I'd say it was the moment when my son got stuck in a muddy patch in the garden and fell over. You panicked and ran to him."

"Oh...that did happen."

The slime duke's household garden had several pools of mud that were like bottomless swamps. Gabriel had previously been turning a blind eye to them, but he had decided to fill them in for my sake. However, an unfortunate accident had occurred during the work. Gabriel had gotten his foot stuck in a muddy pool that had been covered by grass and fallen down.

"When I saw that, I burst out laughing at how clumsy he was," my mother-inlaw said. "But when I saw you truly concerned about him, I was convinced that it was love."

"I wasn't expecting that to be the decisive moment."

"Indeed." My mother-in-law had a distant look in her eyes as she continued, "Marriage between nobles has strong political implications. There is no love

involved. However, as husband and wife live together, they develop high expectations for each other. When those expectations aren't met, they feel disappointed, even though it's selfish to rely on someone without giving anything in return."

She explained that one day, she realized it was impossible to have your expectations met if you didn't trust and love your partner.

"I think that you and Gabriel are capable of building a relationship where you can meet each other's expectations."

"Yes...I hope so too."

Tears welled up in her eyes. The moment they began to spill, she hugged me. "Thank you for choosing my son," she whispered in my ear.

Her words made me so happy that tears came to my eyes as well. "Thank you too," I said, my voice trembling.

Gabriel and Prince Axel seemed to have completely opened up to each other. Even at the dinner table, they were still enthusiastically talking about work. Partway through the meal, Prince Axel noticed my mother-in-law's confused expression and changed the subject.

"We're thinking of fishing for frogs tomorrow. Would you like to join us?"

He made the invitation sound pleasant, but I doubted any noblewoman would want to accept it. Even my mother-in-law, who claimed to have fallen in love with him, was furrowing her brow. Cooked frogs were delicious, but living frogs were slimy and gross. That said, even in Triste, frogs were a delicacy. Summer was the best season for them because that was when they had the most fat.

My mother-in-law responded before I could. "I appreciate the offer, but I am afraid I must decline. This season brings periods of clear skies with it, and I fear I may get sunburned." She skillfully evaded the invitation with an excuse that wouldn't cause offense.

"What about you, Fran?" Gabriel asked, his eyes sparkling as if he were a young boy. He wasn't leaving much room for me to decline.

Wibble, who was sitting on my shoulder, threw me a lifeline.

"Fra, are you scared of getting sunburned too?"

"I'm...fine with it."

"Really?"

"Really. Thanks for being worried about me, Wibble." It must've realized that I couldn't say no when Gabriel was looking at me so expectantly. I patted the slime and it happily bounced on my shoulder. "I'll go frog fishing with you."

"Are you sure?" Gabriel asked. "There will be frogs involved. You don't have to force yourself to come."

"I'm sure. I used to eat them in the capital sometimes. I liked them."

"That's good, then."

The sight of Gabriel's beaming face made me glad that I hadn't refused to go. Actually, that childish smile of his isn't fair. How can he have that innocent grin when he usually looks so indifferent? Feeling my cheeks heat up, I pressed my fingertips against my face to cool it down. Wibble joined in, extending a tentacle to gently touch my cheek. It felt cool and pleasant.

The peaceful mood continued until dessert time.

Constance brought in the candied-violet cake I'd baked in the afternoon and sliced it. After serving Prince Axel his piece, she froze. "Excuse me," she said, hurrying out into the hallway.

Did she forget something? I tilted my head. Suddenly, I heard voices coming from outside.

"We heard that the dragon duke, Prince Axel, landed his dragon in Triste."

"Is he not behind that door?"

I'd heard those voices before. Gabriel and his mother seemed to recognize them too.

"You are a mere servant! You do not have the right to stop us!"

"Out of our way!"

"Please, stop!" Constance exclaimed. It was rare for her to raise her voice like that.

The door opened, and in barged Gabriel's second cousins, Diane and Liliane. They were wearing vivid dresses—one red, the other blue—that seemed rather out of place here, their chests adorned with large jewels that shone brightly. They were dressed so lavishly that I wanted to ask if they were on their way to a soiree. Their outfits would be fitting in a dimly lit party hall, but here, in our bright dining room, they looked garish.

The sisters must've jumped into action when they'd heard that Prince Axel was visiting the slime duke. They now went straight to him, gently lifted the skirts of their dresses, and curtsied. Gabriel and his mother furrowed their brows. They looked angry, but they probably couldn't scold the girls in front of Prince Axel. My mother-in-law's hand trembled as she held her fan.

Barging in during our meal was incredibly rude. However, Prince Axel stood up to acknowledge the girls and asked Gabriel to introduce them.

"They are my distant relatives," Gabriel said.

"We are not distant. We are your second cousins!" Diane objected.

"Cousin Gabriel, please introduce us properly!" Liliane complained.

"The older one is Diane, and the younger one is Liliane," Gabriel continued, keeping the information to the bare minimum. The sisters were giving him demonic looks of protest, but he pretended not to notice them.

Prince Axel maintained his gentlemanly stance, even in front of these rude sisters. He really was admirable. Unfortunately, the sisters took it to mean that they hadn't done anything wrong and boldly sat in the seats beside him.

"I don't recall inviting you two," said Gabriel.

"Why, is there a problem with us being here, cousin Gabriel?" asked Diane.

"Besides, you were already having dessert, were you not?" asked Liliane. "Oh my!" She grimaced at the sight of the candied-violet cake in front of Prince Axel.

Diane, also noticing the cake, asked in a dramatic manner, "Oh dear, is something the matter, Liliane?"

"Sister Diane, look! Prince Axel has been served a cake decorated with weeds!"

"Oh no, how could this be?! He must have mistakenly been given the dessert meant for the servants!"

They looked at me victoriously, convinced by the candied violets that I had baked the cake.

"Prince Axel, our house would never be so careless," said Diane.

"The people in this household can be rather inconsiderate," said Liliane.

They were even criticizing Gabriel and his mother. How awful. I wanted to speak up, but my mother-in-law interrupted me with her fan. Was she telling me not to say anything? A second later, I understood.

"Are these violets considered weeds here?" Prince Axel asked with a serious expression.

"Yes, they are!"

"They are worthless weeds that sprout up everywhere!"

"I see," Prince Axel said. "Well, I'm fond of them."

Diane and Liliane froze, realizing that they had called the candied violets that Prince Axel liked "worthless weeds." Their faces were stuck in mortified expressions.

"Diane, Liliane," Gabriel addressed them in an exasperated tone. "You criticized the sweet violets, but currently in the capital, perfumes and desserts made from them are popular among royals and nobles. Aren't you a bit too uninformed?"

The sisters were driven to a point where they couldn't say anything in response. Surprisingly, it was my mother-in-law who bailed them out.

"Gabriel, everyone makes mistakes," she said. "I feel sorry for the girls when you accuse them with that frightening glare of yours."

"But mother, our distant relatives just implied that Prince Axel has a taste for weeds."

"I'm sure it was a slip of the tongue."

Diane and Liliane nodded fervently.

"It doesn't bother me either," said Prince Axel. "Don't be too harsh on them."

The sisters were saved by the prince's generosity. But they weren't out of the woods yet.

"Oh, I know," said my mother-in-law. "Tomorrow, Prince Axel, Gabriel, and Miss Francette are going fishing. Why don't you join them?"

Diane and Liliane smiled and nodded.

Is that really okay? My mother-in-law only said it was "fishing," not that we were fishing for frogs. I hope they aren't too frightened...but then again, I'm "inconsiderate," so I won't warn them.

Gabriel, realizing what his mother was trying to do, looked away and smiled.

I guess the people in the slime duke's household really are inconsiderate.

Not wanting the sisters to offend Prince Axel further, Gabriel admonished them and ordered them to go home. They insisted on staying the night, but he didn't allow them to. They didn't put up too much resistance, though, since being able to tag along tomorrow was already a major victory in their eyes.

Gabriel let out a long, deep sigh. "The storm has passed."



Early in the morning, when even Alexandrine was still asleep, I stood alone in the kitchen, taking out a picnic basket and lining it with wax paper. I was going to make baguette sandwiches to bring for lunch during our frog-catching excursion. I hoped to eat them with Gabriel, since I still hadn't fulfilled my promise of cooking a meal for him. The household chef would take care of the others' lunches.

I had baked the baguette yesterday. When I tapped it against the counter, it went *knock*, *knock*, indicating that it was at the right level of hardness. Using a bread knife, I cut the baguette into quarters and sliced in slits to hold the ingredients.

First, I made a classic sandwich of cheese, ham, sliced tomatoes, and lettuce, garnished with basil. Add a sprinkle of olive oil, and it was done. The next sandwich was roast beef, which I had also made last night. I kept it simple, only seasoning it with mustard. I considered adding vegetables, but sometimes, you just wanted to taste the meat. For the third sandwich, I used deep-fried breaded trout with tartar sauce. I had been told that the trout had been locally cultivated in a lake. It was delicious, with no fishy smell at all. The last sandwich was berry jam and fresh cream, because there was no harm in having a sweet option.

I put the finished baguette sandwiches into the basket and filled the remaining space with berries and grape tomatoes. I thought I did a pretty good job. I was proud of my work, but I wondered if Gabriel would be happy. I couldn't wait to see his reaction.

When the morning sun began to peek out, Rico came to my room.

"Good morning, Rico," I said.

"Good morning, Lady Francette."

I was dressed by the most serious and stoic of the triplets. Alexandrine had already disappeared—apparently, Nico had taken her for a bath, and Wibble had gone with them.

"Today, I'll be changing your dress again after breakfast," said Rico.

"Oh? Why?"

"The lady of the house ordered me to show the branch family ladies that you're in a different league."

"A different league..."

Apparently, Diane and Liliane had insisted on coming first thing in the morning to have breakfast with us. Gabriel had said to turn them away, but after crying to my mother-in-law, they had been allowed inside.

"Such troublesome girls," I said.

"I completely agree."

I laughed at Rico's blunt response. If it were Nico or Coco, they would have

simply smiled awkwardly. I liked how Rico didn't hide her emotions.

"Lord Gabriel's mother will also be joining you on your excursion," she said.

"Oh my. She declined last night, though."

"She volunteered to keep an eye on Lady Diane and Lady Liliane."

"I see. That's an important job."

I'd caught glimpses of Diane and Liliane's ulterior motive of getting closer to Prince Axel. However, their family status made it impossible for them to marry him. Even my sister, who had come from a long-standing ducal family, had been told that she was not fit for Crown Prince Mael.

In most cases, royals married other royals. Their marriages held strong political connotations and were a means of strengthening ties with other countries. Why had Prince Mael been engaged to my sister, then? Because there were no suitable princesses for him in the other countries. Of course, there were princesses who were ten to fifteen years apart in age from him. However, since they were from countries that the Crown didn't need to force a connection with, my sister—who was the same age as him—had been selected instead. It had been a very surprising choice.

I'd heard that Prince Mael was trying to persuade the powers that be to let him take Victoria—a commoner and the daughter of a merchant—as his wife. I doubted the privy council would approve, though. Diane and Liliane had heard the rumors about Prince Mael and Victoria, so they must've thought they had a chance to marry Prince Axel.

The morning dress Rico selected for me was chrome green, the color of a forest in early summer. She applied a light layer of makeup and braided my hair to the side, tying a velvet ribbon over the cord. As a finishing touch, she inserted a freshly picked sweet violet into the braid. The gentle fragrance tickled my nose.

"Lady Francette, what do you think?" she asked.

"It feels so extravagant to have a fresh flower in my hair. It does smell nice, though."

"Sweet violets have a stronger scent when they're moistened with the morning dew."

"I see. So that's why."

It was almost time for breakfast. As I walked down the hallway towards the dining hall, I heard a distant scream.

"Wh-What is with this duck?!"

"How dreadful!"

Diane and Liliane sprinted past me at full speed. A few seconds later, Alexandrine came running with Nico in tow. Nico spotted me and bowed.

"Hey, Nico, why is Alexandrine chasing those girls?" I asked.

"U-Um, it's because they looked at Lady Alexandrine and said, 'That looks delicious. I want to eat it as a whole roast.'"

"I see. In that case, they reaped what they sowed."

Nico gave me a faint smile.

Diane and Liliane, who seemed slightly worn-out from being chased by Alexandrine, sat at the far end of the breakfast table. I sat next to my mother-in-law as usual. The sisters were glaring at me, but I pretended not to notice. They were whispering things like "She isn't even part of the family yet, but she's already so brazen. I'd like to see the people who raised her," but a loud "Watch your tongues!" from my mother-in-law was enough to silence them.

When Prince Axel and Gabriel arrived, the sisters' angry pouts turned into radiant smiles. I couldn't help but think they were strong. Perhaps you had to be able to switch gears that quickly in order to do well in high society. I certainly lacked their tenacity.

Freshly baked rolls were laid out on the breakfast table. Today, there was "pain au chocolat," a treat made of puff pastry with plenty of chocolate chips kneaded into it. I was so happy, I nearly voiced my joy out loud, but I closed my mouth right before the words flew out.

After calming down, I said to the server, "I see that there's chocolatine

today."

"Yes, it's very delicious."

What the capital called "pain au chocolat" was known as "chocolatine" in Triste. Apparently, chocolatine had come first—a baker had eaten it in Triste and recreated it in the capital, where its name was changed to "pain au chocolat." Triste locals lamented the renaming and looked sad whenever they heard the words "pain au chocolat."

"I think I'll have it," I said.

"Understood."

A square piece of chocolatine was placed on my porcelain plate. The rich aroma of chocolate and butter wafted through the air.

Even with this delicious breakfast in front of them, Diane and Liliane were gushing over Prince Axel. My mother-in-law cleared her throat and reminded them to be careful.

"By the way, cousin Gabriel, why is there a duck inside the castle?" Diane asked.

"It was very fierce," said Liliane. "It gave us a fright."

"You ought to drive it out."

Gabriel replied calmly, "The duck is part of our family. You have no right to complain."

"You consider poultry your family?!"

"You sure are strange, Gabriel."

"Is that so?" Prince Axel asked, tilting his head.

Diane and Liliane's expressions instantly froze.

"When I was young, I had a pet goose," said Prince Axel. "I thought of it as family and doted on it. I feel a sense of kinship with the slime duke now that I know he also has a bird in his family."

"I'm honored," said Gabriel.

Prince Axel went on to explain that his pet goose had been killed one day during Prince Mael's gun practice. It had been served for dinner, and Prince Axel hadn't been told it was his beloved pet until after he'd eaten it. What a horrible story.

"I was sad and angry, but the goose I'd raised with love was unbelievably delicious," said Prince Axel. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to start our day with a gruesome tale."

"Don't be," said Gabriel. "I will continue to say with pride that Alexandrine the duck is part of my family."

Thanks to Prince Axel's love for his pet goose, Alexandrine escaped vilification. I was relieved.

After breakfast, Nico, Rico, and Coco helped me get dressed again. Coco laid out several dresses on my bed and asked which one I wanted. I asked if the mauveine one would suit me.

Coco blushed and said, "Yes, it's a perfect match for your wisteria eyes, Lady Francette. It will look wonderful on you."

"Thank you. I'll go with this one, then."

After my morning makeup was removed, I put on the dress. Rico reapplied my makeup—a little bolder this time. She made sure to add sunscreen to protect my skin from the sun's rays. Nico carefully braided my hair into an updo.

"I was told that this barrette is a gift from Lord Gabriel," Nico said. She showed me a wooden box containing a silver barrette decorated with violets.

"Oh my, how lovely," I said.

"He said it was a reward for your daily hard work."

"I see."

I gently picked it up with my fingertips. The openwork was gorgeous. An impassioned sigh escaped my lips. Gabriel had recognized my efforts and was showing his appreciation with this. Nothing could make me happier. I felt warmth building in my chest.

"Nico, can you put this in my hair?" I asked.

"Of course!" She used a second mirror to show me how the barrette looked in my hair. "It's the best match in the entire world!"

"Thank you, Nico."

Rico and Coco praised the barrette as well. I'd have to thank Gabriel later.

"Wibble, look at— Oh?" I scanned the room, confused.

"Is something the matter, Lady Francette?" asked Nico.

"No, I just noticed that Wibble isn't here."

"Sir Wibble has work to do for Lord Gabriel, it seems."

"I see."

Apparently, Wibble wouldn't be coming on our fishing trip. Perhaps its work had piled up since I had been spending so much time with it. It was my fault. Before leaving, I'd have to go thank Gabriel for sacrificing the things he'd needed done—I was concerned about Wibble too.

I had Rico deliver a message card asking if he would mind if I went to his room before our departure. I received his reply immediately—it wasn't a problem. Since there wasn't much time left, I'd have to make it quick.

Gabriel was working in his office.

"I'm sorry to bother you when you're busy," I said.

"No, I don't mind."

Wibble was on his desk, gripping a stamp and, well, stamping away with it.

"Wibble looks busy too," I remarked.

"There's no need for concern. The slacker is simply doing the work it was supposed to be doing every day."

"It's my fault for taking up all of Wibble's time."

"No, Wibble was accompanying you of its own free will. Thus, it's reaping what it sowed."

The slime nodded awkwardly.

"It seems that Wibble enjoys being with you so much, it can't resist," Gabriel

added.

"Really?"

Wibble nodded firmly.

"I don't have a problem with it playing around as it wishes, but I can't say I'm pleased that it would do so at the risk of abandoning work that needs to be done."

"That's fair." I gently patted Wibble, who was looking at me with upturned eyes. "Do your best, Wibble."

"Yep, I will!"

Gabriel pushed the bridge of his glasses up, a stern look on his face. His glasses shone from the backlight. I quickly moved my hand away from Wibble.

"Oh, you fixed your glasses," I said.

"Yes. The frame was broken, but it was repairable using silver thread magic." It was a type of magic that allowed one to soften silver and manipulate it freely.

The mention of silver reminded me—"Oh, right. Thank you for the barrette, Gabriel. What do you think?" I turned around so that he could see it.

"It's lovely. I just knew it would go well with your fawn-colored hair."

"That's the first time anyone has called it fawn-colored. I always thought it was a boring brown."

"Is that so? Your hair is soft, silky, and beautiful. It's like a newborn fawn."

I suddenly remembered the day when Gabriel had touched my hair. Needless to say, the embarrassment came rushing back.

"I never expected you to give me a barrette," I said. "Thank you so much."

"I'm glad you like it."

"I want to give you something too."

"No, I couldn't possibly make you do such a thing!"

"But you've been working hard too, Gabriel."

"Your presence alone is the greatest reward I could ask for."

"Don't say that!" As I was wondering if there was anything I could do for him, I recalled the lunches I'd made this morning. "Oh, right! I made lunch for us this morning."

"You made it yourself?"

"Yes. When lunchtime comes around, let's eat it together."

"I'd love to. I can't wa—" Gabriel's grin suddenly turned into a frown. Was there something bothering him?

"Um, what's wrong?"

"Did you make lunch for Prince Axel too, by any chance?"

"Why would I do that?" The moment I asked that, I remembered my mistake of making cookies for both him and Prince Axel at the same time. "I only made enough for you today, Gabriel. I promised I'd make you a meal, didn't I?"

"Oh, now that you mention it, we did make that promise."

"Right. So I only made lunch for you."

"I'm glad."

I was relieved to see his smile return. Come to think of it, my mother-in-law had mentioned that Gabriel envied Prince Axel. I didn't want there to be any more misunderstandings, so I'd have to take this opportunity to explain my feelings properly.

"Um, speaking of Prince Axel..." I began.

"Did something happen to him?"

"I've always looked up to him like an older brother. He thinks of me as a clumsy younger sister too, which is why he worries about me so much."

"Is...that so?"

"Yes. I know it's impudent of me to think of him as an older brother when he's so far above me."

Gabriel shifted his glasses and covered his eyes with his hand.

"A-Are you all right?" I asked. "Do you feel dizzy?"

"Thank goodness!"

"Huh?"

"I'm so happy to hear you say those words so clearly."

"O-Oh." I recalled insisting before that I wasn't in love with Prince Axel, but apparently, Gabriel had been afraid that I secretly was. It was the right decision to explain my true feelings, even knowing that I didn't deserve to think of Prince Axel that way. "Was it bothering you the whole time?"

"It was. I even imagined a scenario where you and Prince Axel were in love with each other and meeting in secret to deepen your relationship."

"That would never happen."

Before I knew it, I was rushing up to Gabriel and hugging him from behind. My heart was pounding like crazy, even though it had been my own move. Gabriel could surely feel it.

Still, this was no time to be embarrassed. I told him my honest feelings: "You're the only one for me." My misleading action had caused him grief. I vowed to never do anything to make him sad again.

Upon breathing in Gabriel's scent, I realized how close we were—and that he wasn't moving at all. I quickly stepped away from him. His ears were bright red. I felt so bad.

"Oh...I-I'm sorry," I said. I couldn't just say I hugged him unconsciously. It was such an improper thing to do when we weren't even formally engaged yet.

"No, don't worry about it. We're going to be husband and wife eventually, so this level of interaction is nothing to be concerned about." Gabriel turned around, his face flushed. Mine was probably the same—it felt burning hot.

I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but I wasn't fully independent yet. I didn't want to confess my feelings until after I finished repaying the money that I'd borrowed from him and my father approved of our marriage. My current inability to achieve those must've been why my body had moved of its own accord. I was so ashamed of my lack of experience.

"Um, Fran, I think we're embarrassed because we rarely do this kind of thing,"

Gabriel said.

```
"Huh? Oh, well, yes, I suppose."

"Wouldn't it stop being embarrassing if we did it every day?"

"Huh?"

"We can turn embracing into a habit."

"I-Is that how it works?"

"I believe so."
```

Was he suggesting this so that I wouldn't feel ashamed of what I'd done? Certainly, if we hugged every day like it was a normal routine, it would probably stop feeling embarrassing.

```
"All right," I said. "Let's try it."
```

[&]quot;Starting tomorrow, then."



It was just about time to leave. The carriages we were taking to the lake were going to be separated by gender, which meant that I wouldn't be seeing Gabriel for a little while. I said goodbye to Wibble and left the office.

I got into the carriage with Diane, Liliane, and my mother-in-law. The men's carriage went ahead of ours, while the one for the servants—including Nico, Rico, and Coco—followed behind us.

As the carriage rattled and shook, I realized something. Isn't it crazy to hug once a day?! We aren't even properly engaged yet... I must've been flustered because I'd hugged him without thinking. Did he make that suggestion because he was flustered too? I don't know. If he thinks it's strange, I'm sure he'll cancel the arrangement. Yes, I'm sure he would. I desperately tried to reason with myself. There was no way I could question his idea when I was the one who'd hugged him in the first place.

As my mind rambled on and on, we arrived at the lake where we could catch frogs. Diane and Liliane peeked out the window and shrieked, "Eek! Wh-What is that?!" The lake was murky and shrouded in a deep fog.

"Listen, girls," my mother-in-law warned the terrified sisters. "When the gentlemen are absorbed in their fun, they will stop paying attention to their surroundings. There are fierce slimes in this area, so you must protect yourself."

"We have Prince Axel, the strongest man in the country, but he won't protect us?" Diane complained.

"Everyone knows that men don't like strong women," Liliane added.

"Stop whining and take out your self-defense weapons!" my mother-in-law exclaimed.

I picked up my self-defense umbrella that I had stuffed under the seat. It seemed that my mother-in-law's weapon had been strapped to the outside of the carriage. Rico had just removed it and handed it to her.

"M-Mother, what is that?" I asked.

She brandished her long, thin, spear-like weapon. "This is a flail!"

"A-A flail?!"

Apparently, it was a weapon designed for striking, with a club hanging from the end of the handle. It had been inspired by a farming tool used for threshing grain. My mother-in-law used it to deliver furious blows to slimes.

"Women typically fight slimes with umbrellas, but they're a little too delicate for my taste," she said. "A flail gives me all of the fighting power I need."

"I-I see."

She looked gallant wielding that flail, as was to be expected of a lady born and raised in Triste.

Diane and Liliane descended from the carriage, umbrellas in hand.

"Why did we come to such a creepy lake?" Diane asked.

"What are they going to fish for in a place like this?" Liliane asked.

"You'll find out when they catch them!" replied my mother-in-law. I nearly laughed out loud at the realization that she still hadn't told the sisters that the men were here to catch frogs.

The servants scattered holy water on the ground to keep monsters away and put up a large parasol with a mat laid out under it, creating a space where we could sit and relax. Gabriel and Prince Axel appeared to set up an antimonster magic circle by the lakeside. They then set down chairs and began attaching bait to their fishing rods.

Diane and Liliane gleefully struck up a conversation with them.

"Prince Axel, what are you using as bait?"

"Please tell us."

Prince Axel wordlessly held out an earthworm he'd dug out from the ground. The sisters screamed.

"Eek!"

"Wh-What is that thing?!"

My mother-in-law immediately scolded them. "How could you be so rude to Prince Axel?!"

"But there was a gross bug."

"It was squirming. Yuck!"

Who was it again who sent me a box full of those "gross" earthworms?

Diane and Liliane's screams marked the start of the frog-catching contest. Apparently, if a frog saw something small moving in front of it, it would assume it was food. One fished for them by casting the line into the lake and making fine movements with their wrist to attract them. Gabriel said that he had come here often as a child, while Prince Axel told us that every year, when hunting season came around, he would idly fish for frogs.

The fog surrounding the landscape meant that it was extremely humid. Diane and Liliane, who had arrived in dresses covered in lace and ribbons, were waving their fans like they were birds flapping their wings. My mother-in-law and I were wearing dresses made of light materials produced in Triste, so we only felt a little bit hot.

The sisters continued to pester Prince Axel with their incessant questions. My mother-in-law's scolding went in one ear and out the other.

"It's almost time for their punishment," my mother-in-law said.

"Yes," I said.

Since the two of us were "inconsiderate," we still hadn't explained the purpose of the trip to the sisters. We held our breath as we watched Prince Axel fish.

At last, the end of Prince Axel's fishing rod bent sharply. Diane and Liliane clapped their hands and cheered for him. And then the frog appeared above the surface. It was a fine specimen, even larger than Prince Axel's fist.

"Eeeeeeeeek!"

"What is thaaat?!"

The sisters screamed and tossed their fans and umbrellas away as they turned around and ran towards us, fear plastered on their faces.

"Oh, no no no no no!"

"It's disgusting! I hate it!"

They angrily sped towards us as if they wanted to complain. I stepped forward so that they wouldn't attack my mother-in-law and wondered what I should do if it became a physical scuffle. I *had* learned some self-defense techniques before making my debut in high society, but I probably wasn't supposed to use crotch kicks and eye gouges against women.

As I was going through my options, the most unexpected thing happened. Both Diane and Liliane caught their feet in a patch of mud at the same time, and the sisters both fell down.

```
"Hrk!"

"Dwuh!"
```

The ground was wet with rain and mist. The sisters stood up to find their dresses covered in mud.

```
"H-How awful!"

"Wh-What a nightmare!"

They looked at me as if it were all my fault.

"Francette, you are the root of all evil!"
```

"You're just like your father, seducing Prince Axel and trying to bring us down!"

My mother-in-law stood up to scold them, but I stopped her. She had been shouting at them all day, so her voice was hoarse. I couldn't burden her throat even further. Sensing my thoughts, she headed towards Prince Axel instead, presumably to explain the situation. At the rate things were going, Prince Axel probably would have come and offered the sisters a helping hand. My mother-in-law may have been trying to prevent that.

Even Diane and Liliane's faces were covered in mud, and their beautifully arranged hair had been ruined too. They were a tragic sight to behold.

They must have been trying to take out their frustration on me since I was right in front of them. As I faced their reproachful glares, I was suddenly reminded of when my sister's engagement had been renounced and everyone had distanced themselves from us at once. I remembered their accusing looks,

the sorrow, and the pain. At the time, I had hoped that someone—anyone—would give me a helping hand, but it must've been asking for too much. Everyone knew it was easier to side with the strong.

Diane and Liliane's angry accusations were misguided and false. However, it wouldn't be right to point that out with the same level of emotion. First, I offered each of them a handkerchief, since I had multiple on my person. They snatched them away from my hands. One handkerchief obviously wouldn't be enough, so I left them and went to ask Gabriel for help.

"Um, Gabriel, do you have a minute?" I asked.

"What's the matter?"

"Your second cousins fell down and got covered in mud. I was hoping you could have the slimes use their powers to clean them up."

"Why don't you just leave them alone? They got what they deserved."

"Don't be mean. Please?"

Gabriel put down his fishing rod and stood up to look at Diane and Liliane. He let out a long sigh. "Fran, you're too nice. Even if you help those sisters, I doubt they'll utter a single word of thanks."

"That's fine."

"What?"

"I'm not doing this because I want their gratitude."

"Why are you asking me to help them, then?"

"Because I've had something similar happen to me before." Society had treated me like a criminal when my sister had been banished from the country, her engagement renounced. "It felt like being covered in mud, and thinking back to that day makes me want to cry. But those girls really are covered in mud, so they probably feel even worse. Please, could you help them?"

"Fran..."

I glanced at the sisters. They had put so much effort into dressing up only for it to be ruined in the blink of an eye. They had acted strong at first, but now,

they looked like they were going to cry. To be honest, part of me did think, "Serves you right." But I couldn't turn a blind eye to their predicament either.

"I understand," Gabriel said. "I will help them out of respect for your kind heart."

"Thank you, Gabriel!"

Prince Axel, who had been speaking with my mother-in-law, seemed concerned about the sisters too. When I explained to him that Gabriel was going to help them, he looked relieved.

Diane and Liliane snapped at Gabriel when he arrived.

"Cousin Gabriel, have you come to laugh at us?!"

"You think we got our just deserts, don't you?"

"I did consider it for a second...but no. Fran entreated me to clean your dresses, so I had no choice but to come."

"They can be cleaned?"

"R-Really?"

"Yes, my tamed slimes are capable of making them clean again." Gabriel recited a summoning spell and three slimes appeared—red, green, and blue.

"Whoa, so muddy."

"Why? What happened?"

"They're as dirty as it gets."

"There's no need for commentary," Gabriel said. "Please make them clean."

"Got it."

"Okay."

"Will do."

First, the blue slime bounced on the spot, shooting water from its mouth.

"E-Eek!"

"Wh-What is going on?!"

"Stay still," said Gabriel. "It's washing the dirt off."

The mud fell from the sisters' faces and dresses in the blink of an eye. Next, the green slime blew a refreshing breeze from its mouth. It smelled nice, like being in the middle of a forest. Apparently it had a deodorizing effect, which was important in getting rid of the mud's distinctive smell. Lastly, the red slime blasted them with hot wind. Diane and Liliane complained about the stifling heat, but Gabriel ignored them and ordered the slime to continue. Finally, the sisters' attendants fixed their hair. They had been cleaned up in no time at all.

The fully recovered sisters quickly strode towards me. Gabriel tried to step in between us, but I held out my hand to stop him. A woman's enemy was her fellow woman. An outsider intervening would only make things worse. The sisters and I had to settle this dispute ourselves.

"You must feel good about helping us," said Diane.

"Shall we offer you some words of thanks?" asked Liliane.

Their reactions were exactly as I'd expected. No matter what happened to them, they weren't going to give me a humble apology.

"You don't need to thank me," I said.

"What? Why?" asked Diane.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Liliane.

"Because I don't need your gratitude. Instead, if you come across someone else in trouble, please help them." The wider the circle of kindness, the better. Once you've been thanked, the chain ends there. So I hoped they would help someone else and then tell them to do the same. That was my wish.

"You're strange," said Diane.

"Truly," said Liliane.

"I won't deny it," I said. After all, after my family's ruin, I had chosen to live in the old part of town instead of following my mother and sister, just because I hadn't wanted to go back to high society. Only a strange person would have done that.

Diane glared at me and declared in a low voice, "I don't think I'll ever like

you."

"Me too," said Liliane.

I didn't object. "That's fine. People are like that—once they hate someone, it's impossible for them to like them, no matter how hard they try. It would be wiser to spend your time with people you like rather than wasting it on people you hate." In other words, this conflict between us was a complete waste of time. "The birds in the sky can't be friends with the fish in the water. Each of us should live comfortably in a place where we can breathe easily."

Diane and Liliane wordlessly turned on their heels and left. From that point on, they sat quietly under the parasol. They didn't even pester Prince Axel.

Now that the commotion was over, it was back to frog fishing.

"Would you like to give it a try, Fran?" Gabriel asked. "I'll have the slimes catch the frog before it comes close to you."

"Yes, I think I'm up for the challenge," I said.

Gabriel attached the bait for me and taught me how to cast the line. I did as he said, releasing it into the lake and flexing my wrists to lure in frogs. The end of the rod bent down—I got a bite.

"Fran, now! Pull the rod back!"

"O-Okay!" I pulled on the fishing rod with all my might, but the frog put up a strong resistance. The rod was bending to the point where I was afraid it'd snap into two.

"Let me help, Fran."

"Th-Thank you."

Gabriel stood behind me and gripped the rod. Our positions made it seem like he was hugging me from behind, and even though our bodies weren't pressed together like they had been when we rode the horse together, it was still kind of embarrassing. Perhaps it was because his voice was so close to my ear.

Okay, this is no time to be flustered. I need to focus on catching the frog.

Even with both of us pulling, the frog wouldn't come ashore.

"Gabriel, it isn't a slime on the other end of the line, is it?" I asked.

"We covered the entire lake with a monster-warding spell, so it cannot possibly be a slime."

"O-Oh." I planted my feet firmly on the ground and pulled with all my strength. At this point, it was a battle of endurance with the frog.

After a five-minute struggle, the frog finally leaped up with a splash. It was huge—even bigger than my head.

"Now!" Gabriel commanded.

A light-blue slime jumped into the air, while a green slime extended its tentacles. They worked in tandem, the blue slime swallowing up the frog and the green slime pulling the blue slime in, letting it land safely on the ground.

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "We did it!"

"Indeed, we managed to catch it!"

Gabriel and I hugged each other in joy.



My mother-in-law, who had approached us without my realizing, mumbled, "Why, the two of you get along so well. It looks like it'll be a peaceful future for the slime duke household."

Her words brought me out of my daze—Gabriel too. We quickly let go of each other.

"I do believe it's time for lunch," my mother-in-law said. Gabriel and I nodded in unison.

Nico, Rico, and Coco had set up a separate parasol and mat for me and Gabriel. They had also prepared tea for us, which had been chilled in the magicite-powered cold storage.

I shared the baguette sandwiches I'd made in the morning with Gabriel. He started with the classic cheese and tomato one. I expected him to eat it in a refined manner, but instead, he took huge bites out of it. That was definitely the best way to eat a sandwich. As he gobbled down the sandwich, a smile came to his face.

"It's delicious," he said. "The basil adds a nice touch."

"I'm glad you like it."

It felt good to see him eat so fervently. He praised all of the sandwiches, which was a relief.

Our side was having fun, but Prince Axel's side was mostly silent. There was an awkward mood in the air. It made me realize that Diane and Liliane really were reflecting on their behavior.

Suddenly, Prince Axel spoke to us. "I see that the two of you are very close."

Gabriel nodded with a delighted smile, even though he was supposed to deny it because we weren't married yet. He seemed happy, though, so I couldn't help but let it slide.

After lunch, it was time to announce the results of the contest. The frogs we'd caught were laid out on the shore. My mother-in-law counted them one by one.

"Fifteen points for Prince Axel, twelve for Gabriel, and one for Miss Francette," she said. "Prince Axel is the victor."

"I lost in terms of size, though," Prince Axel insisted. "Why don't we call it Lady Francette's victory?"

"Indeed," said Gabriel.

How could I win over Prince Axel? Why was it a competition to begin with?

As everyone applauded for me, I couldn't help but wonder why things had turned out this way.

Apparently frogs were one of Prince Axel's favorite foods. Thus, the slime duke's household chef put a lot of effort into preparing them. Our dinner was a full course of extravagant frog dishes.

The amuse-bouche was a bite-size frog pie. The frog meat, simmered in cream sauce, was surprisingly soft. The sauce was rich and delicious as well.

Next, the hors d'oeuvre was frog soup hardened into gelatin and garnished with truffles. The elegant flavor was accompanied by the rich scent of Triste's truffles.

"I can't believe I get to taste such aromatic truffles at this time of year!" Prince Axel was shocked because truffles were only in season in autumn. Gabriel happily explained how they were preserved using magic and that Triste's environment made for an abundance of them.

Incidentally, Diane and Liliane remained quiet throughout the meal. My mother-in-law had a peaceful expression on her face as she ate the frog dishes.

The soup was made by thoroughly simmering frog and vegetables, giving it a rich, concentrated flavor.

Since there was no meat entrée, we were served two fish courses instead. The first was sautéed frog legs. The meat couldn't be fully removed from the bones with a knife and fork, so in Triste, it was customary to eat it with one's hands. The finger bowls we had been provided with had citrus slices floating in them.

After explaining that we could eat however we liked, Gabriel began eating the sautéed frog with his hands. Prince Axel looked surprised but followed his lead.

"When you eat it with your hands, you don't have to leave any meat behind," Prince Axel remarked.

"Exactly," said Gabriel. "I imagine Triste is the only place that eats it like this, though."

Diane and Liliane were fidgeting. They must've been too embarrassed to eat with their hands in front of Prince Axel. On the other hand, my mother-in-law was holding the frog's leg firmly in her hands and taking elegant bites out of it.

That must be how it's done. I copied my mother-in-law and took a bite. "Oh, it's delicious!" The sautéed frog meat was crispy, and the butter and herbs provided a wonderful explosion of flavor in my mouth. You could only eat a little bit of frog meat when using a knife and fork, but biting into it like this allowed you to enjoy it to the fullest.

The second fish course was braised frog thighs garnished with basil sauce. These were delicious too. When I bit into the meat, the juices overflowed from it.

And so, we enjoyed the frog feast. It was incredibly delicious because the frogs were in season, and Prince Axel looked satisfied too.

"Prince Axel, you are welcome to come frog fishing again next year, if you'd like," my mother-in-law said.

"Yes, I certainly will."

My mother-in-law beamed. Meanwhile, Gabriel gave her a skeptical look and said, "You're always saying things like that."

After dinner, Prince Axel summoned me and Gabriel, saying he wanted to speak with us.

"I caused you a lot of trouble with my sudden visit and multiday stay," he said.

"No, not at all," said Gabriel. "These past few days were very enjoyable."

"I'm happy to hear you say that."

Prince Axel explained that his subordinates and secretary had been adamant that he take a vacation, but he hadn't been able to decide where to go. He had

considered going frog fishing in his territory, but the thought of being surrounded by his people made him realize that he wouldn't be getting any rest if he did that.

"I know it's important to visit my territory, but that falls under work," he said.

"I was trying to think of a place where I could relax, and that was when I remembered that Lady Francette was in Triste. I think this is the first time I've ever experienced such peaceful and fun days."

"It's an honor to hear you say that, Prince Axel," said Gabriel.

"As I said earlier, I'd like to visit again if it's not too much trouble."

"You're always welcome here. I look forward to seeing you again."

Prince Axel explained that he would be returning to the capital tomorrow. He would be leaving early in the morning, so there was no need for us to send him off. I thought that would be the end of the conversation, but apparently not.

"Now, on to the important part," Prince Axel said.

What was he going to say? Gabriel and I looked at each other and tilted our heads.

"We haven't found Lady Francette's father, so you still aren't formally engaged. However, I could become her guardian and permit your engagement and marriage. What do you think?"

"That's—"

"I appreciate the thought, but wouldn't it be a burden for you?" I asked, interrupting Gabriel.

"It would not. Don't worry about it."

"In that case, I'd like to ask for your help."

Gabriel stopped me. "Marrying without her father's permission wouldn't be __"

"Think about it, Gabriel," I said. "He's the kind of father who would have his mistresses take care of him and then go missing. I think we would be much happier having an upstanding man like Prince Axel approve our marriage. I

always thought it would be painful to stay here like this forever, unable to get engaged."

"I...see. Very well, then."

Gabriel and I bowed to Prince Axel and asked him to issue the engagement and marriage authorizations.

"Understood," he said. "It'll take about a month, but I'll send you the documents as soon as they're ready."

"Thank you very much," we said.

It looked like our engagement and marriage issue was going to be taken care of. Prince Axel had my sincerest gratitude.

Chapter 4: The Fallen Noble Francette Finds Herself in an Unbelievable Predicament

Thanks to Prince Axel, it looked like we'd be able to get married without finding my father. Gabriel and I were currently rejoicing over it in his room.

"I'm so glad it's going to work out," I said.

"Yes...although I feel like we shouldn't speak openly of it." Gabriel still seemed concerned about marrying without my missing father's permission.

"Prince Axel is going to become my guardian and allow our marriage. I think that's much more impressive than if my father had permitted it."

"Is that so ...?"

"It definitely is."

I had the feeling that Gabriel was a conscientious man. I was happy that he showed so much consideration for not only me but my family as well.

"Thank you, Gabriel," I said.

"For what?"

"For taking me in as your wife."

Normally, marriage would be unthinkable for a fallen noble who couldn't pay a dowry. Noble marriages were political in nature, yet Gabriel had asked me to become his wife despite having nothing to gain from it. I couldn't ask for greater happiness than that.

"In that case, I must thank you as well." Gabriel looked in my eyes and gently squeezed my hands. "Thank you for remaining firm in your decision to marry me."

Joy welled up within me, but I couldn't express it in words, so I ended up merely nodding.

Gabriel smiled gently at me. "Fran, may I hug you?"

```
"Yes."
```

He hugged me close to his chest as if holding something precious to him. My heart was pounding faster than ever before.

```
"Um, Gabriel..." I said.

"What is it?"

"You said I'd get used to embracing if we did it more often, but..."

"But?"
```

"I'm not getting used to it at all." It made me feel nervous, fidgety, and restless. But it wasn't bad—it actually felt nice. That was what I thought every time we shared physical contact.

```
"Don't worry, Fran. It's the same for me."

"Really?"

"Really."
```

I stepped back for a second and peered into Gabriel's face. His cheeks and ears were slightly flushed. I was relieved to know it wasn't just me.

```
"Fran, once more—"
```

He reached towards me, but suddenly, we heard loud footsteps coming from the hallway. They stopped in front of his room and were replaced by a loud banging on the door.

"Cousin Gabriel!" shouted Diane. "What did Prince Axel summon you for?!"

"Does he want to marry one of us?" asked Liliane.

Gabriel and I exchanged awkward smiles. We'd lost our chance to practice hugging.

"Those girls must be very confident in themselves to think Prince Axel would choose them as his bride after all they've done," said Gabriel.

I completely agreed.

The next day, Prince Axel left while the sun was peeking over the horizon.

He'd said he didn't want a send-off, so I quietly went out to the garden and watched him fly away. His dragon soared through the sky, leaving a trail of light behind it like a shooting star.

I never would have expected Prince Axel to become my guardian and authorize my engagement and marriage. Life was truly unpredictable. I didn't have any noble thoughts of waiting for my father to be found. In fact, I would've gotten married right this moment if I could have. I wanted to become a member of the slime duke household as soon as possible. Diane and Liliane had accused me of acting high and mighty despite not being part of the family, and it had stung. The pain remained in my heart like a scar.

I let out a sigh. The geraniums in the garden were blooming beautifully. The sight was a salve for my irritated heart.

Nico will be going to my room soon. I have to head back.

The moment I turned around, I was startled to see that someone had been standing behind me. The gentleman appeared to be in his late seventies. He was in formal day dress and had a mustache and beard. He regarded me with an air of dignity.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Ah, to think we'd meet in a place like this." He lifted his silk hat slightly and introduced himself. "Clement de Griet, great-uncle of Grand Slime Duke Gabriel."

"Oh, you're..." I suddenly remembered what Gabriel had said.

"I also have some relatives who live far away, such as my great-uncle and my aunt. I rarely interact with them, but when we do meet, it's extremely unpleasant."

According to Gabriel, his great-uncle—who was the grandfather of Diane and Liliane—was one of the people I needed to be the most cautious of among his relatives. But why was he visiting the slime duke's castle at this hour?

Before I could ask, he began to explain. "I came to meet with Prince Axel and ask him to marry one of my granddaughters, but it seems I just missed him. Ah well, I'm sure they made an impression on him."

He seemed confident that the offer would come soon. How could he speak that way when he hadn't seen Prince Axel's reactions to his granddaughters' attitude?

"The two of them are in high demand, so they couldn't decide whom to marry, you see. We never thought Prince Axel would come all the way out here. It was a stroke of fortune."

He was talking a lot considering we'd never met before. I couldn't get a read on his intentions, so I didn't know what to say. If Gabriel were here, I could have understood why he was talking so much, but...

"I have a request for you," he said. "Would you be able to grant it for me?" "It depends on what it is."

"Of course, of course. It's not difficult at all." But then he said the unthinkable: "Could you back off?"

"Back off?"

"Yes, you heard me. I want to have either Diane or Liliane marry Prince Axel, and then the other can marry Gabriel."

"I'm afraid I—"

"I never said you wouldn't be compensated." He took a check for two hundred thousand geld out of his chest pocket and offered it to me. Then he explained that he had hired a detective to investigate me, and they'd found out that my father had eloped with Maxim Maillart's wife and was being charged for damages.

"Why did you have a detective investigate me?"

"I thought it was strange that Gabriel, being the cautious and nervous man that he is, would marry a woman from a fallen family." He shoved the check at me. "Now you can take back the engagement."

```
"I...don't want to."
```

[&]quot;What did you say?"

[&]quot;I refuse."

"Why? Are you interested in the slime duke's fortune?"

"No. I don't care about any of that." What I cared about was Gabriel, as well as my bonds with my mother-in-law, Wibble, the other tamed slimes, and everyone involved with the household. It wasn't something that could be obtained with money. "I love Gabriel with all of my heart. Even if he were to go bankrupt, I would never leave him."

"That's unfortunate. I'll have to use a different method, then."

"A different method?"

I felt a chill run down my spine. At the same time, I was grabbed from behind and a cloth was held over my mouth. It must have been drugged with something—the moment I breathed in, I felt faint. And as soon as I realized my feet were unsteady, I lost consciousness.

I awoke to a painful throb in my head unlike anything I had ever felt before. Any effort to get up was met with more debilitating pain. My body had lost all its strength—I couldn't even open my eyes. A thick musk in the air made my nose feel numb. I didn't recall anyone in the slime duke household using such a perfume.

Suddenly, I sensed someone's presence.

"Oh? Are you awake?"

It was a woman's voice, raspy from drinking too much alcohol. Naturally, I didn't recognize it. That woman was probably the source of the musky perfume, and I doubted she was one of our maids or attendants. I forced my eyes open, but the room was too dark for me to see her face. Someone was holding a magicite-powered lamp over my face, and the brightness made me close my eyes again.

"Look how pale you are," the woman said. "Perhaps they used too much of the drug."

"Drug...?"

"Mm-hmm. Lord Griet had his subordinate administer a drug to make you

```
more compliant."
```

"Lord Griet?"

"Clement de Griet."

That was the name of Gabriel's great-uncle. My hazy mind immediately turned lucid. Early in the morning, I had encountered Gabriel's great-uncle when I was watching Prince Axel leave. Then a man hiding in the garden had grabbed me and forced me to inhale the drug.

The flickering in my eyes had subsided, so I opened them to see a slim woman in her forties looking down at me. She wore heavy makeup and a flamboyant dress with a low neckline.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"This is Étoile, a popular brothel in Tempête's pleasure district."

"What?! Why am I in a pleasure district?!"

Tempête was a town located far beyond Triste's borders. It primarily provided lodging for merchants, and I'd heard that it wasn't a safe place.

I tried to get up, but my head throbbed again. I groaned and sunk back into the stiff bedding.

"You won't be able to work until the drug wears off," the woman mused.

"Work?!"

The middle-aged woman gave a satisfied smile as she held up the lamp. "Lord Gabriel sold you to us."

"What?!"

"I don't know what you did, but you'll have to accept your fate."

I was sold to a brothel?! But why?

I suddenly remembered what Gabriel's great-uncle had said. He wanted to marry Diane and Liliane to Gabriel and Prince Axel. Clearly, I was in the way of that plan. Rage welled up within me at the selfishness of his actions, but I pushed it aside in favor of more pressing matters.

"I was taken here against my will!" I pleaded. "Could you please contact the knights?"

"The knights? I'm not going to make trouble for myself."

"But I was never informed of being sold—"

"I don't care. We bought you from Lord Griet. Why would we do something that would only make us lose money?"

I was still processing the shock. How could I have been sold to a brothel...?

"You're excused from servicing customers today since the drug hasn't worn off, but you'll be working hard starting tomorrow. Now eat." She placed the magicite lamp and a bowl of milk gruel on a round table next to the bed. "And don't even think about escaping. Our guards will chase you to the ends of the earth. Keep that in mind."

The woman left the room. As soon as I could no longer hear her footsteps, I let out an enormous sigh.

"What am I supposed to do now?" I lamented. No one should have heard me, and yet I received a reply from the most unexpected of directions.

```
"Fra, are you okay?!"

"Hm?"

"Here! Down here!"
```

Wibble's voice was coming from a ribbon wrapped around my wrist. I picked up the lamp and illuminated it. The ribbon transformed into Wibble's familiar round shape.

```
"Wibble, it's you!"

"Yep!"

I hugged the slime bouncing on top of the blanket.

"I-I'm seeing things, right?!"

"Wibble is real!"

The anxiety gripping my heart faded away.
```

```
"Why are you here?"
```

"Wibble followed you when you went out to the garden."

Apparently it had been hiding behind a tree because it wanted to surprise me. However, upon witnessing my kidnapping, it had hurriedly transformed into a ribbon and wrapped itself around my wrist.

"Oh! If you're here, Gabriel must know where we are, right?"

Gabriel had told me before that his contract with Wibble allowed him to find it no matter where it was. Perhaps he could even come to save me before the day was over.

Wibble looked down apologetically.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Wibble's contract with Gabriel...was canceled yesterday."

"Huh? Why?!"

"We had a fight."

Wibble began to explain what had happened last night. It had all started with a late-night visit from Gabriel's great-uncle. When I had encountered him this morning, he had made it seem as though he had just arrived, but apparently, he had actually arrived yesterday.

"The old geezer was mean to Gabriel!"

"You mean his great-uncle."

"Nasty old geezer!"

"Oh, that's worse."

Unsurprisingly, Gabriel's great-uncle had told him to cancel his engagement with me and marry one of his granddaughters instead. Gabriel had refused at first but lost heart as the discussion progressed.

"The nasty old geezer said you'd be happier if you didn't marry Gabriel!"

Gabriel's great-uncle had made all sorts of accusations: that I was miserable living in a rural place like Triste, that someone who had grown up in the capital

would inevitably abandon the land eventually, and that I had married Gabriel for his fortune.

Shockingly, Gabriel's tea had been laced with a drug that had muddled his consciousness. Because of that, he had gradually stopped arguing back. By the time Wibble had noticed, it was too late. The drug had already taken effect, and Gabriel had even said that he would cancel our engagement. But according to Wibble, it wasn't only because of the drug.

"Gabriel was worried about marrying you. He always thought he wasn't good enough for you."

```
"He has no self-confidence."

"Gabriel is a fine man. Why would he be so harsh on himself?"
```

"His family never cared about his work."

"What?!"

"He thinks you only praised him 'cause you're nice."

He must have thought that Prince Axel had only said those things out of courtesy too. I should have praised his efforts more, to the point of being excessive. Gabriel was more pessimistic than I had thought.

"After that, we fought."

Apparently it had been a fierce brawl, no punches—or kicks—pulled.



"Wibble always lets Gabriel win. But not yesterday."

The fight had begun with Wibble's declaration that it would cancel their contract if Gabriel didn't marry me. Gabriel had lost, and Wibble had won. Thus, their contract—and friendship—had been severed.

The Wibble in front of me was no longer tamed. In other words, it was just a monster...but it still wasn't attacking humans. Also, there was a slime-warding barrier around the castle. How had Wibble been able to pass through it? Suddenly, I remembered something I had read in a book a long time ago. Goodnatured monsters that stayed tamed for a long period of time and received a lot of mana from their contractors became spirits. It was possible that Wibble had gone through that transformation, but only a spirit expert would be able to determine if it was true.

"Wibble knows. Gabriel was in love with you for a long, long time."

"How long?"

"Two years-ish."

"Wait, that long?!"

Apparently Gabriel and I had met before I first found Wibble. Come to think of it, he had mentioned something along those lines before. I knew I needed to remember when and where that meeting had been, but I really had no idea.

"Gabriel has to marry Fra no matter what!" Wibble began to cry. It was a heartbreaking sight.

"Of course," I said, holding Wibble's tentacle and nodding. Marrying Gabriel was the one thing I would never give up on.

"Fra, come with Wibble back to Gabriel's house."

"Yes, let's hurry back. Everyone must be worried."

Tears streamed from the corners of Wibble's eyes, and I found myself crying along with it. I was so glad to have Wibble here with me. If I had been alone, I would have lost all hope.

"Wibble, thank you for coming with me."

```
"It's no biggie."
```

First, we had to figure out how we were going to get out of here. I peered out the window. We were on the second floor of the building, and the sky was already pitch-black. Many people were walking by on the brightly lit street below. Tough-looking armed men were patrolling outside the brothel. They must've been the guards the woman had spoken of.

The window was sealed with wax so that it couldn't be opened. The door was also locked so that I couldn't go out to the hallway. The dress I'd worn this morning was gone, replaced with a thin, knee-length chemise that was not the one I had worn today. It was as if all of my clothes had been taken away, replaced with this flimsy undergarment as another escape deterrent.

"They took off my clothes, didn't they?"

"It was one of the women here who did it."

Wibble explained that it had desperately tried to keep its ribbon knot from coming undone. The woman had pulled on it for quite a long time, but in the end, Wibble's perseverance had paid off.

"I won't be able to escape dressed like this."

"Wibble can be your dress!"

Right. Wibble could disguise itself as various things. With this, we could discuss an escape plan.

"Wibble, instead of a dress, would you be able to turn into men's clothes?"

"Of course!"

Not only would a dress be harder to move around in, it would give away the fact that I was a noble lady on the run. Wearing men's clothing would make it less likely for me to be discovered.

"What kind of clothes?"

"Do you know the kind of work clothes worn by old gardeners?"

"Yep!"

"Let's go with that."

"Got it!"

Wibble leaped up and stuck itself to my shoulder. It then transformed into clothes in the blink of an eye. That took care of my outfit. Now the problem was *how* I was going to get out of here. I had two options: climb down from the window or find a way to unlock the door and go out through the hallway.

I examined the window first. Perhaps to prevent escapes, there were no trees or hedges outside. Iron bars with pointy tips protruded from the ground, and guards were coming and going. Since this was a pleasure district, the surrounding area was brightly lit. It'd probably stay this way all night. Escaping after everyone had gone to sleep had a high chance of failure.

"What should I do? I suppose it isn't a matter of which option is safer."

"Yup. Both are dangerous."

If someone discovered me, it was over. I had no idea what punishment I would receive. I needed to make my decision carefully.

I leaned against the door and listened. Based on the frequent voices and footsteps, it seemed to be a busy hallway. Listening carefully, I could make out what people were saying. It seemed to be workers talking amongst themselves, meaning that this floor was probably where the staff living quarters were. Since I was a stranger, they would surely stop me if I ran into them. Leaving through this hallway would be impossible.

I looked back to the window. It seemed that the guards were circling the brothel's perimeter, and there were around five of them in total. I didn't think I'd be able to find an opening in their patrol—assuming I even survived the drop. It was quite the distance from here to the ground.

Still, the third option—working here—was out of the question.

"Wibble, would you be able to unlock the door?"

"Yep, Wibble can!"

This slime was really too capable. If someone found me, perhaps I could pretend to be a boy who'd snuck in and they'd kick me out. No, that would never work. They'd realize it was me as soon as I was caught, and then I'd face

corporal punishment.

So it had to be the window. It was sealed shut with wax, so I had to melt it first before I could get anywhere. The lamp in the room was powered by several small shards of magicite rather than one big chunk. There were fireplace tongs sticking out of the hearth, so I took them, opened the lamp's lid, and used the tongs to take out a red-hot piece of magicite. I held it close to the window frame and the wax melted bit by bit. Since the magicite was so hot, it didn't take long at all.

Wibble turned into a key and unlocked the window for me. I gripped the frame and pulled.

"Nnnngh!"

The wax was fully melted as far as I could tell, but the window wouldn't open. I probably just wasn't strong enough. Wibble's tentacle extended from my sleeve and joined me in pulling on the frame. The window opened with a loud clatter. I quickly closed it and crouched down, covering my mouth with my hands. I was terrified that someone might have heard it.

No one came to check on me, so I assumed I was in the clear. It was time to think of a way to escape through the window. Could I tie the sheets and curtains together to make a rope? I'd once read a romance novel where the imprisoned protagonist had used that method.

I pulled the sheets off the bed, but they were surprisingly thin. I didn't think they'd be strong enough to support my weight. The curtains were made of unbelievably thin fabric too. Were these also an escape deterrent? I couldn't tell.

"Is there really no safer method?"

Think, Francette, think!

The only tools I had at my disposal were a lamp filled with lots of magicite shards, thin sheets and curtains, and iron fireplace tongs. Maybe the tongs could still be used for something. My only ally was Wibble.

"Wibble... Oh! That's it! Wibble!" There was a safe way to get out of here without anyone finding me.

```
"Hmm?"
```

I brought up my plan without hesitation. "Hey, Wibble, would it be possible for you to swallow me up and escape?" Wibble had once swallowed up something much larger than itself in order to carry it for me. I wondered if it could swallow me the same way.

```
"But?"

"Fra, aren't you scared?"

"Scared?"

"Wibble's not contracted with Gabriel anymore. Wibble's just a normal slime."

"I'm not scared. You're a brave slime who came to rescue me."
```

"Fra..." Wibble released its clothing transformation and bounced in front of me. "If you say it's okay, let's go with that plan."

"Yes, let's do it, Wibble."

"Wibble can do that. But..."

I had Wibble wait before executing the plan. I couldn't go outside looking like this, so I wrapped the sheets and curtains around myself in the vague shape of a dress. It wasn't very appealing, but it was better than walking around in an undergarment.

I brought the tongs with me to use as a weapon. I also borrowed the lamp as a light source. In the event that I was rescued, I would be sure to return everything.

```
"Fra, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Probably."

"Are you sure you're not scared?"

"To be honest, I am a little scared."

"Have faith in Wibble."

"Yes, I trust you. Let's go."
```

Wibble sucked in air and expanded. It then opened its mouth and swallowed

me up. The inside of its body was like a clean lake with fresh air. It was quite comfortable, and I could clearly see outside.

Wibble slipped out the window and took on the pattern of the wall as it crawled down. It was a very clever strategy. We would be able to escape without the guards noticing us.

You can do it, Wibble! I cheered in my heart.

We successfully reached the ground in less than a minute, but the feeling of relief only lasted a few seconds. The window we had come from swung open, and the woman's raspy voice rang through the air.

"The woman in this room escaped! She should still be nearby! Find her!"

Apparently they were going to periodically check to make sure I was still in the room. That had been close. If I had hesitated even a little longer, they would've caught me very obviously preparing to flee.

Wibble mimicked the stone paving and stayed perfectly still. The search began, with even the servants coming out to assist the guards. I wanted to get away from here somehow, but it would be best to avoid doing anything careless.

One of the guards stopped in his tracks. "Hmm?"

"What happened, rookie?" came a second voice.

"Uh, I'm picking up a faint monster presence."

"A monster presence? Huh, that's a nice device you've got there."

"I received it along with my medal."

"Ha ha ha! A decorated guard in the pleasure district? You're a weird one!"

I felt as if I recognized one of those voices, but no, there was no way he'd be in a place like this. More importantly, it seemed that Wibble's presence had been detected. We had to escape from here somehow.

"What'd you do to get a medal, anyway?" the second voice asked.

"Wait. The monster is nearby. We should be on our guard."

"Huh?"

I heard the sound of a sword sliding out of its sheath. "H-Hey, Wibble, maybe we should run."

```
"Wibble knows. But..."

"But?"

"Found it!"
```

The guard's sword stabbed right next to the stones Wibble was disguised as. Startled, Wibble dropped its camouflage.

"It's a slime!" the first guard declared.

"Hey, leave it alone. It's just a slime. They're always clogging up the sewers anyway."

"It's still dangerous! It's a monster!"

"Defeating a slime ain't gonna get you a single copper coin! Right now, we gotta follow the mistress's orders and find that runaway!"

The man ignored his colleague's objections and continued to brandish his sword at Wibble.

"Wah! Eek! Ahhhh!" Wibble panicked as the sword came right in front of its eyes. "Nooo! Wibble isn't a bad slime!!!"

I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes in fear. However, the attack never came. Instead, I heard the attacker's pained shriek. A third person had appeared out of nowhere and punched him.

"That slime is my best friend! I won't let you hurt it!"

That clear, crisp voice... It's Gabriel!

"G-Gabrieeel!!!" Wibble cried.

"I'm glad you're safe, Wibble."

"Y-Yeah."

"You left a mana trail behind, and I was able to follow it here."

"Yep, yep."

Apparently Wibble had given Gabriel a way to track us. Really, what a clever

slime.

```
"Wibble, is Fran inside this brothel?"

"Nope, she's in Wibble's mouth."

"What?"

"Wibble swallowed up Fra."

I was spat out in front of a stunned Gabriel.

"Francette!"
```

Gabriel helped me get up from the stone-paved path and draped his jacket over me. I couldn't help but tremble. Even though I knew I'd been saved, I was still overwhelmed with fear. Realizing this, Gabriel gently hugged me. The panic and anxiety gradually faded, and my chilly body grew warm.

```
"Fran, are you hurt?"

"No, I'm not. Wibble—and you—saved me."
```

"Let's get you back home so you can rest. I'll use teleportation magic. Do you think you can handle it?"

"Hold on a second."

"What is it?"

I looked at the man lying on the ground in front of me. It really was him.

"Gabriel, that unconscious man is my father."

"What?" He looked at the person whom he'd knocked out. "That thug-looking man is Duke Mercœur?"

My father had always maintained a clean appearance, but now, he had an unshaven face and disheveled hair. His clothes were also tattered and dirty. He looked like a completely different person, but from his hair that was the same shade of brown as mine, his unique voice, and the way he had spoken, I knew without a doubt that it was him.

"I punched him because he was pointing his sword at Wibble," said Gabriel.

"How brave of you to attack an armed man with your bare hands," I said. "Or

should I say reckless?"

"I was in no state to think rationally!" Gabriel ran up to my father. "I'll use healing magic on him."

"You don't need to do all of that. Just give him a slap on the cheek and he'll wake up."

"The thought pains my heart."

Gabriel cast Resurrection, one of the most powerful healing spells. My father's swollen cheek recovered at once.

"Urk!"

"Duke Mercœur!"

Gabriel eagerly provided care for my father, perhaps to make up for causing the injury in the first place. I could understand the healing magic, but did he really have to let him use his lap as a pillow too? I didn't know the answer, so all I could do was wait.

"Did I...fight a slime...and lose?" The punch seemed to have knocked out my father's memory in addition to his consciousness.

Gabriel could have just let him believe that, but instead, he corrected him. "No, I punched you."

"Y-You hit me?! Wait, why is someone who hit me taking care of me like this?!"

"I'm very sorry. I didn't know you were Duke Mercœur. That slime is my best friend, so in order to protect it, I attacked you without thinking."

"Do you have it tamed?"

"No, it's not tamed."

"Then it's the same as any other monster. Actually, wait, hmm. I guess it's my fault too for trying to slice your best friend in half. Allow me to apologize. I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

My father apologized while lying in Gabriel's lap, and Gabriel apologized back

for punching him.

"Let's just say we're both at fault and call it even," said my father.

"I thank you for your generosity," said Gabriel.

They shook hands. What an odd reconciliation.

"What's your name?" asked my father.

"Gabriel de Griet Slime."

"Does that mean you're the slime duke?"

"Yes, in fact."

"I see. You must consider all of the slimes in the world your friends, then."

"No, that's not true."

My father finally sat up—and noticed my presence. "Francette?! Why're you in a place like this?!"

"That's my question. Father, you disappeared without saying anything. Do you know how much trouble you caused for me?"

"Sorry about that. Claudine was in danger, and I didn't get the chance to explain before I had to leave the capital."

Claudine was the name of Maxim Maillart's missing wife. My father must have been very close with her if he was referring to her by her first name alone.

"Looks like we'll have to continue this later," he said.

"There she is!" came a voice from afar.

"Sorry, I'm working right now. I'll explain once I'm done with this."

"What are you talking about, father?" I asked.

"I'm supposed to be looking for a girl with brown hair and purple eyes who escaped from the brothel."

"That's me."

"What?!"

The brothel's guards had us surrounded in no time.

"Great work finding her!" one of them shouted.

What kind of place has my father been working at? My head hurt.

"C'mon, grab her already and toss her back in."

"The mistress said the one who catches her gets a reward."

"Turn her in so we can go drinking."

"W-Wait, no," said my father. "She's my daughter!"

"Huh? What the heck are you talking about?"

"Your daughter?"

"That's a pretty bad attempt at a joke."

"No, it's true," said my father. "Sorry, but I can't hand her over."

I breathed a sigh of relief at his flat refusal. However, I couldn't have been prepared for what happened next.

"We'll just have to defeat you and take her, then!"

"Brace yourself!"

The guards attacked. My father valiantly drew his blade, but I didn't know how he was going to fight more than ten guards at once.

"I'll back you up," said Gabriel.

"Sorry, slime duke. I appreciate it."

Gabriel asked Wibble to protect me.

"Wibble would've even if you hadn't asked," the slime said, standing in front of me and holding its tentacles up in a fighting pose.

Gabriel summoned five different-colored slimes and ordered them to defeat the guards. The blue slime shot out a powerful stream of water, the yellow slime shone brightly, the red slime spewed flames, and the black slime spat out ink. The green slime restrained the guards with vines.

"You can do it!" Wibble cheered on its friends, seeming self-assured.

Gabriel himself was also providing magical support. My father, who used to

practice swordsmanship once a week, defeated one guard after the other. I'd always thought he was lying about learning the blade—that he had actually been visiting one of his mistresses instead—but apparently he really had been training.

The two men made quick work of the guards and exchanged a passionate handshake afterwards. The knights rushed in at this point—it turned out that Gabriel had reported the incident before coming here.

For now, we were in the clear. It was finally safe to relax.

Thanks to the knights' arrival, the situation was soon brought under control. Mrs. Maillart—whom my father called Claudine—rushed over in a panic. She seemed to be worried about the injuries my father had sustained in battle. However, the knights quickly took her into custody, probably because her husband, Maxim Maillart, had requested a search for her. My father asked them to wait, but since he had *also* been reported missing, he was taken into custody as well.

And so Gabriel and I went with my father and Mrs. Maillart to the knights' station. My father was going to have to explain everything to the knights.

One of the female knights felt sorry for me and let me borrow her spare uniform and undergarments, for which I was sincerely grateful. After I finished getting dressed, my father's questioning began. Gabriel and I were allowed to be present as related parties.

My father began to tell his story, a distant look in his eyes.

The most serious crime involved in this whole situation turned out to be Maxim Maillart's illegal drug trade. He had been cultivating drugs in two locations, one underground and one deep in the mountains, and selling them to customers in foreign countries. Mrs. Maillart was aware of her husband's crimes and had resolved to divorce him, but he had refused to let her leave because she knew too much.

Mrs. Maillart had once tried to run away during the night, but her plan had failed—she had been discovered and taken back. After that, there had been several attempts on her life. The culprit was unknown, but she was convinced

that Maxim Maillart had been behind the assassination attempts. She had to do something or else she would be killed.

Her fear had led her to rely on my father, whom she had been involved with before her marriage. I never would have thought that Mrs. Maillart had been one of my father's mistresses. Apparently she had even been one of his favorites, so it had only taken a few tearful pleas to set his heart ablaze. His fortune and job had already been taken away from him, so he had nothing left to lose in this quest for justice.

And so, without explaining anything to his daughter, my father had fled from the capital with Mrs. Maillart. The two of them were living a quiet life in a faraway land, with Mrs. Maillart selling her body at a brothel and my father working as a guard. They rented a home in the slums, where they were poor but happy.

"So I really am sorry, Francette."

"Father, Maxim Maillart demanded two hundred thousand geld from me and I was attacked by thugs. What do you have to say about that?"

"I feel bad for what I did to you." My father lowered his head deeply, showing me the clockwise whorl in his hair.

I really didn't want to have to see a father apologizing so pathetically to his own daughter. Learning the truth had only made the gloomy feelings in my heart worse. Gabriel gently touched my shoulder, and I felt the haze dissipate a little.

The knights told my father that he would have to stay at the station as a material witness. After they left, he said to me in a shaky voice, "Francette, hit me until you're satisfied."

"Are you trying to solve this with violence?" I asked.

"No... Well, yes."

He was trying to escape his guilty conscience by letting me hit him. I absolutely was not going to let him have that luxury.

"I'm not going to sweep this under the carpet," I said. "I'm going to report it

to mother and send Adele an anonymous tip."

"Urk!"

"If the newspaper comes to interview me, I'll tell them every foolish thing you've done. If I'm invited to a salon, I'll tell everyone the story and cry about how unfair it was."

"Urrrk!"

Hitting him wouldn't undo what he had done. Trying to solve problems with violence was wrong in the first place.

"From now on, you're going to show me how devoted you can be," I declared.

"Yes... You're right, Francette. I'll spend as much time as it takes to make it up to you and our family."

A knight came to inform us that visiting hours were over. Gabriel and I trudged out of the station. Wibble peeked out from his coat pocket.

"Are you done talking?"

"Yes, it's done," I said.

"Then let's go home!"

"Yes, let's."

Going home would only take a second with teleportation magic.

Gabriel took both of my hands in his and lowered his head. "Can we discuss something before we go?"

"What is it?" I asked.

"My great-uncle has done something that cannot be taken back."

"Ah...you're right."

I thought the situation had been settled with my father's repentance, but that wasn't the case. Gabriel's great-uncle had kidnapped me and sold me to a brothel.

"How did you know your great-uncle was the culprit?" I asked. "And where he sold me to?"

"A slime that was eating grass in the garden was listening to his conversation with you. It wasn't as fluent as Wibble, so it couldn't convey the exact details, but I got the gist that my great-uncle had kidnapped you and Wibble had given chase."

Gabriel explained that he had then caught his great-uncle and restrained him. Knowing that he wasn't going to get anything out of questioning him, he had turned him over to the knights and followed the trail himself.

"The moment I reached Tempête, I had a hunch that you'd been handed over to a brothel," he said. "I'm glad I was able to find you before it was too late."

"Yes, thank you, Gabriel. I'm so happy you came for—" Tears spilled from my eyes. I had been acting calm, but in reality, I had been scared the whole time.

Gabriel hugged me tightly. "You're safe now," he whispered in my ear.

The bundle of anxiety in my heart unraveled and disappeared.

Gabriel teleported us to Triste. The moment I felt the humid air, I knew I was home. When we returned to the castle, Nico and Alexandrine ran up to us.

"Lady Franceeette! I'm so glad you made it back!" Nico cried with joy, tears cascading down her face like waterfalls.

Alexandrine was quacking excitedly too, and Rico and Coco arrived not long later.

"We're truly sorry," Rico said, bowing deeply. "We allowed this incident to happen when we should have been paying attention to you at all times."

"It happened early in the morning, outside of working hours," I said. "It's my fault for acting on my own, not yours."

"But—"

"I probably would've gotten kidnapped even if you were with me. If anything, I'm glad you girls weren't in danger."

Rico's eyes teared up. I gave her a few reassuring pats on the shoulder.

Coco joined her sisters in crying. "Lady Francette, I'll spend more time by your

side from now on."

"Oh my, but without your drawings, our business will fall apart."

"But...I can't let something like this happen again."

"In that case, draw when you're with me."

"U-Understood."

The triplets still seemed anxious, so I hugged them one by one and whispered, "I'm sorry for making you worry," in their ears. Unfortunately, it only made them cry more.

The steward, Constance, rushed over and took the triplets and Alexandrine away with her. I knew I could leave them in her capable hands.

Next, we went to find my mother-in-law. As soon as she saw me, she ran up to me and gave me a big hug, shouting, "Miss Francette!"

It was such a passionate embrace that even Gabriel was taken aback. "Mother, what do you think you're doing?!"

"I was so worried!"

Apparently she hadn't been able to eat or sleep properly while I was missing. Upon stepping back, I realized that there were dark circles under her eyes, and her complexion was paler than usual.

"I'm truly sorry for making you worry," I said.

"Please don't apologize, Miss Francette. You did nothing wrong. It's all Uncle Clement's—"

My mother-in-law stumbled as if she'd had a dizzy spell. Gabriel and I helped her up.

"Mother, you should sit down for now," said Gabriel.

"Perhaps you should drink some water," I added.

It turned out that my mother-in-law hadn't had a single glass of water in my absence.

"Mother, why would you do that to yourself?" Gabriel asked.

"What if Miss Francette wasn't in a state where she could eat or drink either? When I thought about that, I couldn't bring myself to put anything in my mouth," she said, her words mixed with sobs.

"Mother...!" I gently placed my hand on her trembling back.

"How can I ever apologize to you for my uncle's outrageous crime?"

"The crimes of others are not yours," I said. "Please don't apologize for him, mother."

"But... No, you're right."

I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't want her to worry too much about me, even if we were relatives.

My mother-in-law looked up with a determined expression and suggested something I never would have expected. "Miss Francette, would you like to go to the Empire, where your mother and sister are, to recover?"

"Huh?"

"You don't want to be here, do you? I think you should stay with your family and have a good rest. It will help your heart heal."

I was stunned. My mother-in-law, who welcomed my presence in Triste more than anyone else, was urging me to leave. She really must have felt responsible for the incident.

"I will handle the necessary preparations," she said.

"Mother, please wait."

"Wh-What is it?"

"My mother is right here."

"Huh?"

I squeezed her hand, and she looked at me in surprise. "I'm sure my dear mother in Triste will cheer me up, so I don't have to go to the Empire."

"Miss Francette...you...think of me as a real mother?!"

"Am I being too brazen?"

"N-No. I-I'm happy you feel that way. B-But I thought the incident would've made you h-hate it here."

"Not at all. The moment we came back to Triste, I felt relieved to be home again."

"Miss Francette!" She hugged me again, wailing like a child. I gently patted her back.

"Mother, you should be comforting Fran, not the other way around," Gabriel said in exasperation, pushing the bridge of his glasses up.

"B-But I was so afraid that the engagement would be called off."

"Everything is fine. Right, Fran?"

"Yes," I said.

Gabriel's eyes moistened slightly. Perhaps he had been worried as well. I'll have to give him a hug later too. Come to think of it, we haven't had our daily hug yet.

At any rate, the incident had been resolved. The knights could take care of the rest.



Gabriel and I were summoned to the knights' headquarters in the capital to answer questions about the kidnapping incident. Normally it would've been an awkward interrogation, but Prince Axel was the facilitator, and he showed us consideration throughout the whole process. I was so thankful to have him on our side.

Gabriel's great-uncle, Clement de Griet, had given a shocking testimony in detainment. Believe it or not, he was connected to Maxim Maillart. The wealthy merchant had drawn Prince Axel's attention when he demanded two hundred thousand geld from me, much to his chagrin. As revenge, he had proposed to Gabriel's great-uncle that I be sold to a brothel and that he'd be able to matchmake both of his granddaughters with me out of the picture. In other words, both men had something to gain from getting rid of me, be it political ties or the satisfaction of revenge.

Their perfect crime had been thwarted by an unlikely savior. They never would have anticipated that a slime hiding in the garden would rescue me. Maxim Maillart had fled the capital upon his involvement being revealed, but Prince Axel had tracked him down. He was now being detained in the same prison as Gabriel's great-uncle, where they would likely be sharing meals for a while.

Thanks to these incidents, Maxim Maillart's daughter, Victoria, had her relationship with Prince Mael severed. Prince Mael had intended to marry her, but the king had forced them apart. Apparently the Empire had issued a formal objection as well, stating that Prince Mael had humiliated soon-to-be-empress Adele de Blanchard in a public setting, damaging her reputation. It had even said that if they did not receive an apology from him, food exports would be suspended—without food supplies from the Empire, our country would descend into chaos. As such, the king had immediately ordered Prince Mael to separate from Victoria and send a letter of apology to the Empire. And the arrest of Victoria's father, Maxim Maillart, had been a hefty nail in the coffin.

It turned out that Maxim Maillart's motive for his offenses had been to make his daughter the crown princess. He had used the money to create connections that allowed his commoner daughter to approach Prince Mael. In other words, the couple's love had been brought about by his shameless crimes and money.

Rumor had it that Prince Mael was going to lose his status as crown prince. Apparently society did punish misdeeds after all.

Gabriel and I were summoned to the capital numerous times for questioning. We were frankly fed up with it, but we did receive some good news: Prince Axel had secured our engagement and marriage authorizations. He had humbly admitted that it might not be necessary anymore, but that wasn't true. My father was still in the knights' custody as a material witness, so he wasn't in a position to handle anything regarding my marriage.

And so my relationship with Gabriel had Prince Axel's blessing. Nothing could be a greater honor than that. I was now officially Gabriel's fiancée.



A month passed, and Gabriel and I were back to our peaceful lives...until the

storm returned. Gabriel's second cousins, Diane and Liliane, came visiting with their parents. Their family's assets had been seized because of Gabriel's greatuncle's arrest, and on top of that, the knights had ordered them to leave Triste.

The parents were going to be working as servants in the capital, but the sisters had been deemed incapable of manual labor, so they were going to be sent to a convent. Apparently this was news to the sisters, who angrily objected, their faces beet red.

"Father, why are you telling us to go to a convent?!" asked Diane.

"Weren't you going to bring us to the capital and find us marriage partners?!" asked Liliane.

"Diane, Liliane, it's impossible for you to marry now," said their father. "Your grandfather committed a crime."

The parents bowed deeply to me in apology. I didn't have any hard feelings towards them since they hadn't been involved, so there wasn't really anything to forgive. I insisted that they didn't need to apologize and made a bit of a risky suggestion.

"Lady Diane, Lady Liliane, have you considered helping us with our work?" I asked.

The sisters' eyes nearly popped out of their heads.

"D-Do you know what you are saying?!"

"Y-Yes, we have been so mean to you, Lady Francette."

The fact that they were admitting they'd done bad things was good enough for me. It was true that they had bullied me, but I had extended them the offer knowing that.

"We need as much help as we can get right now," I said. "I think it would be better than going to a convent." For the record, I had already discussed this with Gabriel and my mother-in-law. They had objected, but after many talks, I had been able to convince them.

"Wh-What is your objective?!"

"D-Do you mean to make us do your dirty work?!"

"No," I said. "I want you to promote our products at social functions." We would hold salons, distribute samples, and advertise to noblewomen. The sisters were beautiful and well-spoken, so they could easily become the center of attention.

"Why are you suddenly making this proposal?"

"Are you trying to put us in your debt?!"

Their parents tried to rein them in, but now that they'd gotten started, their tirade wouldn't stop. They still suspected me of plotting something.

"No, I'm not," I said. "I simply couldn't find anyone suitable for the job."

"Truly?"

"You aren't lying to us, are you?"

"I swear on God's name," I said.

That seemed to convince them. The sisters exchanged a look. Just when I thought they were finally going to accept, the elder sister, Diane, shook her head.

"We appreciate the offer, but we shall decline."

Their unexpected response surprised me. Diane explained that news of their grandfather's crime was already circulating in the capital, so they couldn't work there. But that wasn't the only issue.

"I always hated you and thought you were unsightly," she said. "I wished you would disappear."

However, the moment she'd heard that I really *had* disappeared, she had blamed herself for wishing for it. She had been deeply relieved to hear that I was safe and sound.

"I realized that I was the unsightly one. I harassed you because I was jealous of you. Someone like me should not be allowed to live carefree without punishment."

It seemed that her relative's arrest had caused a change of heart in her.

"I will go to the convent for a while to mend my ways."

She insisted that she wouldn't be able to live a peaceful life either way, that she might be more at ease at the convent anyway.

"Miss Francette, I still despise you. I will not involve myself with you ever again."

Her words remained spiteful until the very end, but I couldn't bring myself to hate her. I even found myself hoping that we would get along a bit better the next time we crossed paths.



Another three months went by, and peace had returned to Triste.

After my father was released, he was summoned to the Empire, where my mother and sister gave him a thorough scolding. Our family's seized fortune and estate were returned to him, but he wanted to live a modest life for a while, so he left the estate to a branch family and was now living in the old part of town. From what I heard, he had cut off all of his relationships with his mistresses and was working an honest job. My mother and sister really must have raked him over the coals.

The two hundred thousand geld that Maxim Maillart had extorted from Gabriel had been returned, thus clearing my debt. I was relieved to learn that my father had also prepared a dowry and reimbursement for my moving-related expenses.

Autumn was busy with catching and exporting snails. We also received many orders for truffles, which were gaining popularity in the capital as a Triste specialty. Tourism was on the rise, and Triste was only going to become even livelier.

One day during this dizzyingly hectic period, Gabriel asked me out on a date. He said that there was a meteor shower visible in Triste once a year and invited me to watch it with him. Naturally, I said I'd be happy to.

It was my first date ever. I asked Constance what I should wear, and she brought me a peacock-green dress with a low neckline. Just as I was wondering if it showed too much skin, Rico gave me a heavy mantle to wear over it. It

would be cold at night, so she wanted me to dress warmly. Coco wrapped a fur scarf around my neck, and lastly, Nico gave me Alexandrine, saying that I could keep her in my lap for extra warmth.

I went to Gabriel's room at the appointed time.

"Welcome, Fran," he said. "Please come in."

"O-Okay. Thank you."

A sofa and table had been brought out to his balcony, with a thick rug laid out underneath. It was a very elegant space. Refreshments had been provided as well, including hot soup, canapés and sandwiches, assorted fruits, desserts like berry pie, and hot wine. The preparations left nothing to be desired.

"How wonderful!" I exclaimed. "It's like being at a party."

"I prepared various things so that we can enjoy ourselves even if we can't see the meteor shower."

"Thank you so much."

Gabriel swiftly pushed the bridge of his glasses up. I'd recently realized that he did this whenever he was embarrassed, and I was actively trying to find more of his little habits.

"Well then, Gabriel, let us partake in our daily embrace."

"It sounds like a business correspondence when you put it that way."

"I don't really know how to make it romantic."

"It's very you, though. I think it's fine."

We had been keeping to our promise of hugging once a day. Gabriel had suggested it as a way to get accustomed to it, but it was still a fresh feeling for me, and I still felt shy every time. Needless to say, today's embrace made my heart pound as well.

"You took a bath earlier, didn't you?" I asked. "There's a bit of soap and shampoo mixed in with the usual scent."

"What is 'the usual scent'?"

"Your scent. Is it cologne?"

"No, I don't use cologne. I imagine it would be a mixture of various scents, like the lingering fragrance of detergent on my clothes—or perhaps just how I naturally smell."

"Perhaps, yes." Maybe it was the different scent that was making me so nervous.

"I didn't know I was being smelled. This is rather embarrassing."

"I'm sorry. It's just that...your scent makes me feel at ease."

"At ease... Well, I do know what you mean."

It turned out that Gabriel also thought my scent was soothing. Since the feeling was mutual, I didn't give him a hard time about it.

We sat side by side on the sofa. Alexandrine settled quietly in my lap. She'd stopped picking fights with Gabriel as of late. Perhaps she'd gotten used to him.

"Alexandrine seems to be dozing off," Gabriel remarked.

"I heard she had her thirty-seventh matchmaking meeting and got into a fight with the male duck."

The ferocious Alexandrine still lived up to her reputation. Despite Nico's attempts to find her a partner, she refused to accept any of them. Today she had nearly given the male duck a flying kick—it had taken Nico everything she had to stop her.

"Well, there's more to happiness than marriage," said Gabriel.

"I completely agree."

Gabriel gave me a look of dread. I thought back, wondering if I'd said something strange. I suspected he thought I was implying that I would be happy even if I didn't get married.

"I'm just saying that people in general can be happy with or without marriage," I clarified.

"Thank goodness. I was afraid you might cancel our engagement on the spot."

"You're overreacting."

"I haven't been able to show you anything good about myself," he said with a

distant look in his eyes.

"I don't think I've seen anything but your good sides."

"Like what?"

"When we first met, you gallantly appeared on the scene to save me."

"Gallantly? I seem to recall crawling through a gap in the hedge. Hardly dashing at all."

"Oh, that's right. I suppose my brain chose to remember it differently... Wait a second!" Thinking back to Gabriel appearing on all fours reminded me of yet another scene—I had witnessed him in that pose before. The exact memory came back to me immediately. "I met you on the night of my social debut!"

Gabriel spat out all of the wine in his mouth.

"Wait, are you all right?!" I exclaimed.

He coughed a few times before saying, "Ugh...I-I'm fine...or maybe not."

I rubbed his back and waited for him to calm down. When his breathing was normal again, I continued what I was saying about that fateful night.

"You were crouching in the hallway, weren't you?" I asked.

"Yes, I certainly was."

"Oh gosh. How did I forget about it until now?"

"I hoped you'd forget for the rest of your life."

"Why?"

"Well, it was a shameful display, wasn't it?"

"No, that's not true. Everyone feels ill sometimes."

Gabriel hunched over, clearly depressed. I quickly grabbed his hand.

"I remember now," I said. "When my sister was banished, everyone was looking at me with contempt...except for you. You were looking away, as if you were in pain." It came back to me—the memory of how it had been encouraging to know that someone sympathized with me. The trauma from that day had made me forget about it until now.

"I couldn't help you like Prince Axel did, Fran. I was so ashamed of myself for being a coward who couldn't even express his thanks."

"I'm sure it was for the best." If I had been saved back then, I probably would've become a dull woman who couldn't survive without relying on someone else. "I'm proud of the work I'm doing in Triste now, and I couldn't have come this far on my own. It's all thanks to you, Gabriel."

"Fran..." Gabriel squeezed my hand back.

Suddenly, Alexandrine, who had been behaving on my lap, looked up at the sky and let out a quack. Gabriel and I followed her gaze.

"Oh, the meteor shower!" I exclaimed. A shooting star streaked through the sky. It was gone in an instant, but others quickly followed. "They're so beautiful!"

"Indeed."

Legend had it that if you started wishing on a shooting star and finished before it disappeared, your wish would come true.

"What will you wish for, Fran?" Gabriel asked.

"Well..." I whispered in his ear, "I wish for a happy marriage with you."

We stared into each other's eyes for a while. Gabriel took off his glasses and stowed them in his chest pocket. Then, he gently placed his fingertips on my chin. I closed my eyes, and he kissed me tenderly. It was light, like a small bird pecking at a tree nut, but to me, it was extremely intense. I was unbelievably nervous. I prayed that Gabriel wouldn't notice because of how closely pressed together we were. With so many shooting stars passing by, surely my prayer would be heard.

"Fran, I will make you happy, even without the power of the shooting stars."

A kiss was a way to seal a sworn oath. We exchanged one again, and Gabriel looked at me, enraptured. Just when I thought he must've been able to maintain his composure because he was older, he tried to push the bridge of his glasses up again. Unfortunately, they weren't there.

"I've done something strange in front of you again," he lamented. To him, his

glasses were a part of his body, and there were times when he assumed he was wearing them even if he wasn't. "I want to show you my dashing side at all times, but it never works out."

"That's what I love about you, though."

"Really?"

"Yes. I'm not lying."

Just as I was about to ask what he liked about me, Gabriel leaned in and whispered into my ear, "Francette, I love you with all of my heart. I'll love you forever."

His words of affection were sealed with a kiss. Under the meteor shower, we pledged eternal love.

A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady: Volume 1—Fin



Extra: Wibble's Precious Friends

The man to whom Wibble was bound, Gabriel, was an eccentric. Not only had he saved Wibble from the brink of death and offered it a contract, but he had bestowed it with knowledge and human words.

Gabriel was the ruler of a land where slimes easily propagated, and he lamented how they interfered with his work. He didn't actively try to exterminate them, though—he only defeated slimes that attacked him first. Harmless ones were allowed to live. He didn't even treat Wibble, who was bound to him by contract, as something to control. Instead, he showed it something akin to respect. Wibble had thought this attitude would only be temporary, but years and years had passed, and Gabriel hadn't changed.

Gabriel was smart, resourceful, and a fast learner. But he was also socially awkward, and his efforts went unrecognized. He was always alone, but it wasn't because he liked it that way. He just struggled at communicating with people. There was no doubt that deep in his heart, he wanted his hard work to be noticed and, if possible, praised. Wibble had been there to see everything, but it knew a slime's praise wouldn't mean anything, so it kept quiet.

Even Gabriel's family labeled him an eccentric, to say nothing of his people. That was the kind of man he was, but one day, he discovered love. It was a new feeling for him, and he didn't know what to do.

Love changed him dramatically. He'd never tried to involve himself with others before, but after awakening to love, he no longer minded interacting with people. Wibble couldn't believe how much a human could change in such a short period of time.

Gabriel's crush was a noble lady named Francette, who had difficulty making ends meet. He supported her from behind the scenes, and Wibble thought it was frustratingly inefficient. Humans had a system called "marriage" that allowed them to be together with people outside their families. Wibble suggested using this system to help the girl, but Gabriel refused. He thought he

wasn't good enough for her. That was when Wibble realized that Gabriel himself didn't understand how amazing his achievements were.

The slime wondered how it could solve this problem. It didn't help that it was nearing the end of its life span. Slimes didn't live long in the first place—three days at worst, a year at best. That was why they were considered the weakest monsters. Wibble's contract with Gabriel allowed it to live longer than other slimes, but it was well aware that it didn't have much time left. What would happen to Gabriel after it was gone? The slime didn't even want to think about it. Wibble was the only one whom Gabriel muttered his complaints to. Without Wibble, Gabriel would fall apart.

Wibble needed Gabriel to get married so that he wouldn't be alone anymore. It tried many times to persuade him, but he refused to budge. They had a huge fight, and in the end, Wibble ran away. It went all the way to the capital, determined to bring Francette and Gabriel together. Unfortunately, the capital was farther away than Wibble had thought. By the time it reached the city, its body was completely dried out. It was probably doomed.

Just then, someone saved Wibble. It happened to be Francette, the subject of Gabriel's love. She was a gentle person, just as Gabriel had said. Gabriel would be so happy with her by his side.

Wibble knew it had to hold on to its connection to Francette. It continued to stay at her house, knowing that Gabriel would come for it. They were still bound by contract, after all.

The plan was a huge success. Gabriel appeared before Francette and they promised to marry each other.

Gabriel's environment changed after that. Francette showed understanding and sincere admiration for his research. She also communicated this to others using gentle language. The people realized that Gabriel's work over the years hadn't been sketchy experiments—he had been working to improve the land they lived in. Francette talked to all sorts of people, telling them how amazing Gabriel was.

Now, Gabriel was surrounded by people and smiles. Thanks to Francette, his long years of hard work had been rewarded. It was the happiest thing anyone

could ask for.

Wibble looked at Gabriel's joyful smile and tears streamed down its face. Gabriel would be fine without Wibble now. The slime watched its happy owner, ready for its life to come to an end. When it closed its eyes, a strange power welled up within it. Its body was overflowing with life energy. Wibble realized that it was undergoing a spirit transformation. After working so hard for Gabriel's sake, the spirit world had recognized its power.

Wibble didn't die. A miracle had occurred.

Bursting with joy, Wibble bounced towards Gabriel and Francette, ramming into Gabriel and sending the man flying in a clean arc through the air.

"Wibble!" Gabriel shouted. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"W-Wibble is excited!"

"Shoving someone is not how you express excitement!"

"Wibble didn't mean to. Sowwy."

"A 'sowwy' won't make up for the shock!"

"Wibble apologizes."

"It isn't a matter of phrasing!"

Francette was laughing. Noticing that, Gabriel began to smile too.

Wibble felt happy. It had won this outcome through its own efforts.

Extra: Baking Cranberry Scones

The wind, which had been warm all summer, now felt a little dry. Gabriel told me it was an indicator of autumn's arrival.

In Triste, autumn was the season for mushrooms and berries. The other day, I had taken the triplets berry harvesting. The cranberries had been especially large, and we'd harvested so many that we'd had to sun dry them to preserve them.

Today, I was going to bake scones with those dried cranberries. I sliced the butter into cubes and mixed in flour, baking powder, and salt using cutting motions. Then I added the dried cranberries. Next, I poured in a mixture of beaten eggs and milk and kneaded the dough until it came together. I lightly ran a rolling pin over the dough and pushed a scone cutter into it. This was the sugar-free scone recipe I'd learned from the Mercœur family's pastry chef.

After baking for twenty minutes in a preheated oven, the cranberry scones were complete. Just in time, at that—an attendant informed me of Gabriel's return. I went to the entrance to welcome him back and found him in the middle of taking off his jacket and passing it to a servant.

Constance saw me and gestured towards me, saying, "Lady Francette has come to greet you."

Gabriel was startled by my sudden arrival. His eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his head.

"Welcome back, Gabriel," I said.

"Thank you. Did something happen?"

"I just finished baking cranberry scones. Would you like to eat them together?"

"Yes, I'd love to."

And so Gabriel and I had afternoon tea. It happened to be the time of day

when warm sunrays were shining into the drawing room. It was my first time entering that room, and I discovered that it was an elegant space with a beautiful chalk mantelpiece, a sparkling crystal chandelier, a satinwood low table, and sofas with down-filled cushions.

Gabriel urged me to take the special seat in front of the mantelpiece. As I sat down, Rico and Nico brought the tea and scones in. I told them I would take care of the rest, and they left the room.

As I poured the tea into a cup, a refined aroma wafted through the air. I gave the cup to Gabriel, who took a sip and immediately seemed to relax. I watched him as I drank from my own cup. The tea Rico and Nico had brewed for us was delicious.

"You came back sooner than I expected," I said.

"Yes, I wanted to return earlier than usual."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did you have something to do?"

Gabriel's eyes darted around. He seemed to be hesitating to say something.

"I didn't know you were busy," I continued. "Sorry for taking up your time."

"No, I'm not busy at all. I just...wanted to come home early because you're here!"

"Huh?"

We hadn't made plans, yet Gabriel had wanted to come home to see me. His cheeks were slightly flushed in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You must find it creepy."

"No, not at all. I was happy when you came back too."

Gabriel smiled. At this point, I was probably blushing even more than he was.

"Let's eat the scones," I said. "I made them with the cranberries I picked in the forest the other day."

"Yes, let's."

Since there were cranberries in the scones, we ate them with only clotted cream—no jam. I split a scone in half with my hands and spread the clotted

cream on.

Gabriel took a bite first. "It's delicious! The moist filling goes well with the sweet and tart cranberries."

I was glad that the scones were to his taste. It meant that they had been worth making.

I tried my scone next. As soon as I bit into it, my mouth was filled with the sweet and sour taste of cranberries. They really did go well with the butter-rich dough.

Gabriel and I enjoyed our tea and scones as we chatted about everyday things. I found happiness in these little moments.

Afterword

Nice to meet you. I'm Mashimesa Emoto.

Thank you so much for picking up A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady.

This story is set in a world where there are nobles called "monster dukes," each corresponding to a different monster. One of the story's main characters is the slime duke. You'd normally want such a focal character to be accompanied by a cool dragon, but Gabriel tames slimes instead.

The other main character, Francette, is a lady who rejected Prince Axel's protection and chose to live independently in a rented house in the slums instead.

The story begins when the two meet. I hope you'll enjoy how Francette and Gabriel join hands and make up for each other's flaws.

A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady was originally a web serialization, and as the title says, the story ends with their engagement. I also wrote the novel version with the intention of the story being complete in one volume, but it turns out that a second volume will be released as well! It'll be a brand-new story that wasn't in the web version.

Volume 2 will revolve around the siren duke, who was mentioned briefly in this book. I received her gorgeous character design the other day, and I can't wait for volume 2's release. The manuscript is finished and is currently undergoing revisions. I'm going to work even harder to deliver a story that you'll enjoy. I hope you'll pick up a copy when it's out!

This time, Kasumi Nagi-sensei was in charge of the illustrations. I've known of Nagi-sensei since before their professional debut and always hoped to work with them one day. It's truly an honor to have them illustrate *Slime Duke*!

Francette looks pure and beautiful, and her graceful aura is wonderful. Gabriel is very dashing with his handsome features. Wibble and the other slimes are adorable. My heart was healed every time I received one of their designs. The dresses and accessories are also so detailed and beautiful. Whenever I received a new design, I was filled with happiness.

Thank you so much, Nagi-sensei! I look forward to working with you again.

Also, A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady has been greenlit for a manga adaptation. It will be handled by Niso Tanuda-sensei, who also did the adaptation for one of my previous works, "Ou no Saien" no Kishi to, "Yasai" no Ojousama (The Knight of the King's Vegetable Garden and the Lady of Vegetables).

I was saddened when I heard that *Ou no Saien* had reached its final chapter, but when I found out that Tanuda-sensei would be drawing *Slime Duke* as well, I danced with joy. I look forward to working with you again, Tanuda-sensei!

Getting back on track... The manga version of Francette is energetic and sweet, while Gabriel is slender and cool. The artwork brings out their charms even more. I hope you'll enjoy the manga adaptation alongside the novel.

The novelization of A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady was published with the help of many people. Thank you all!

Lastly, to all of my readers, I'm sincerely grateful that you picked up this book. Thank you so much. I hope to see you again in volume 2.

Bonus Short Stories

Flowers That Herald the Arrival of Spring

As usual, the view outside the window was shrouded in fog. However, today, I spotted something in the garden that normally wasn't there.

Gabriel called to me as I peered outside with rapt attention. "What's going on, Fran? Is Wibble in the garden?"

"No, it's not that. I'm curious about the flowers blooming near the greenhouse."

"Ah, the mimosas?"

"So they *are* mimosas!" The pretty yellow flowers surrounded the entire greenhouse. "Seeing mimosas makes me happy because it means spring is here."

"You like them, then."

"Yes, I love them!" I thought back to when I had lived with my family. My sister and I had had the pastry chef make mimosa cake for us and hold mimosa parties. "Oh! Gabriel, would you like to have a mimosa party with me?"

"What's that?"

"We'll eat mimosa cake while looking at the flowers. That's all it is."

"It sounds like fun."

"Let's do it, then!"

Gabriel said he was free in the afternoon, so I had until then to make the mimosa cake. On my way to the kitchen, I ran into Wibble.

"Fra, are you cooking something?"

"Yes, I'm baking a cake for my afternoon mimosa party with Gabriel."

"Wibble will help!"

```
"Thank you."
```

The talented slime made a fine assistant in the kitchen. I gathered the ingredients and got ready to begin.

"Wibble, can you crack the eggs and mix them for me?" I asked.

```
"Okaaay."
```

I measured out the granulated sugar and moved it to a bowl. Then I boiled water, put the bowl in it, and mixed the eggs into the granulated sugar. I had to be careful not to let the water get too hot, or else the eggs would harden.

"Wibble, can you whisk this until it turns whitish?"

```
"Got iiit."
```

I left the whisking to Wibble and got started on the next task, mixing lemon powder with milk. This was how I was going to reproduce the mimosas' yellow color.

```
"Fra, it's dooone."
```

"Thank you."

I took the batter from Wibble and added flour and the lemon mixture. After mixing thoroughly, I poured it into a square mold and put it into the oven.

Ten minutes later, I retrieved the baked cake. After letting it cool, I cut it into a circle and pressed the discarded corners through a sieve to make crumb topping. For the filling, I used both whipped cream and custard cream, sandwiching them between the cake layers. Finally, I made yellow frosting with lemon powder and cream, spread it around the cake, and sprinkled the crumb topping all over.

```
"Okay, it's done!"
```

"It's a mimosa cake!"

I was relieved that I'd finished in time for the party.

"Now I just have to bring it to the greenhouse and have tea prepa—"

```
"Nope, dress up first!"
```

Rico happened to be passing by, so Wibble asked her to take the mimosa cake and a tea set to the greenhouse, all while pushing me towards my dressing room.

"Fra, do you have a mimosa dress?"

"I think so, but..." It was probably too bright for me to wear. As I was wondering if a different one would be better, Wibble brought out the mimosacolored dress.

```
"Here, Fra!"
"Th-Thank you."
```

Since Wibble had already brought me it, I decided to try it on. I'd probably never have a chance to wear it otherwise. Just as I was about to call Nico to help me, the slime stopped me.

```
"Wibble can help put on your dress!"

"Really?!"
```

Apparently it had learned from watching Nico, Rico, and Coco. I slipped my arms through the sleeves and Wibble extended its tentacles, buttoning the dress up in no time at all.

```
"Y-You're very dexterous."

"Tee hee."
```

Wibble arranged my hair for me as well, braiding it like a crown around my head. It then told me to take a look in the full-length mirror.

```
"Fra, what do you think?"

"It's very pretty. Thank you, Wibble."

"Anytime."
```

The thought crossed my mind that I was probably too dressed up for a three o'clock tea break. There was no harm in showing off to Gabriel every now and then, though.

```
"Have fun, Fraaa!"
```

"Thanks, I will."

I went to the greenhouse and saw that Gabriel was already there.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Gabriel," I said.

"It's fi—" He looked startled when he saw me. "You look lovely, Fran. I thought I was looking at a mimosa fairy for a second."

"Th-Thank you." Not expecting that much praise, I blushed.

Gabriel led me to a chair and sat facing me. Rico came, poured us some fresh, piping hot tea, then bowed and stepped back.

I took the dome-shaped cover off of the cake. "This is the mimosa cake, Gabriel."

"It's beautiful. It looks as if it were made with real mimosas."

I cut the cake and we ate it together.

The moment Gabriel tasted it, he smiled fondly. "It's delicious. I like the fresh lemon scent."

"I'm glad you like it."

Mimosa cakes were usually colored with saffron, but since that gave off a distinctive scent, our home recipe used lemon powder instead. Thankfully, it was to Gabriel's taste as well.

"It's as if this greenhouse were built for looking at mimosas," I remarked. The flowers were everywhere I looked. And since it would never get cold in here, one could admire them for as long as they liked.

"My late grandmother loved mimosas, so my grandfather planted them for her."

"I see. That's so romantic."

"I'm sure they'd both be ecstatic to know that you like it here too."

"Let's have another mimosa party next year," I suggested.

Gabriel smiled and nodded. I hadn't been expecting to make plans here, but now I had something new to look forward to.

Francette's Birthday

"Hmm..."

Gabriel had never struggled so much with a decision before. For the first time in his life, he asked his mother for advice.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" his mother asked.

"I need your help. It's Fran's birthday next month, and I don't know what to give her." It was a gift for the most special person in the world to him, Francette. He wanted it to be something that would delight her.

His mother's advice was very specific. "Gabriel, buy jewelry. Make it an entire set."

"Understood. What type of gemstone would be best?"

"Figure that out yourself."

A new challenge had presented itself. Perhaps amethyst, which was similar to Francette's eyes? But no amethyst could ever compare to their beauty. What about emerald, then, to match his own eyes? It was said that there was no such thing as a perfect emerald—richly colored emeralds with a high degree of transparency simply didn't exist. In that sense, the gem was similar to himself. But would it be creepy to give her jewelry based on his own image?

He deliberated over the matter for three days before Wibble got fed up with him.

"Gabriel, if you don't know, just ask Fra!"

"Oh!"

Gabriel immediately acted on Wibble's advice, inviting Francette for tea. His kind fiancée gladly accepted, and they now sat around her homemade cookies, sipping tea. It was supreme bliss.

He was relishing in his time with Francette, but after a while, Wibble gestured for him to hurry up and ask the question. He gathered his courage and waited for a natural time to bring it up.

"Oh, um, what kinds of gemstones do you like, Fran?"

"Gemstones? I've never really paid attention to them."

That's what I was afraid of. Francette usually only wore the bare minimum of accessories. Apparently it was because she didn't want to drop them while moving around.

"When my family had its assets seized, they also took all of our jewelry, but I didn't miss any of it."

"I see."

The conversation ended there. Gabriel was disappointed that he hadn't gotten the answer he was looking for, but at the same time, it had been made clear that a gift of jewelry wouldn't make her happy. *Now what?*

As he was racking his brain, Francette asked an unexpected question.

"Come to think of it, is it possible to make gemstones out of slimes?"

"Gemstones from slimes?"

"Yes, when I look at Wibble, I can't help but think it's pretty."

Wibble wrapped itself around Francette's neck and transformed into the shape of a jewel.

"What do you think? Is Wibble pretty?"

"Yes, very pretty."

The moment Gabriel saw this, he exclaimed, "That's it!"

"Um, what's what?"

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

He now knew exactly what to give Francette for her birthday. All he had to do was make jewelry out of slimes. With that decided, it was time to get started.

After finishing his teatime with Francette, Gabriel headed to his basement laboratory, where he kept piles of slime-related research materials. For the slime jewelry, he was going to use the technique he'd used to make crystals in the past, which involved flash freezing defeated slimes and crystallizing them. After extracting their mana and polishing them up, they became crystals. The plan had been to call them "slime crystals" and sell them as souvenirs, but it

had been put on hold out of fear that tourists would find them creepy.

The slime crystals in storage were slightly dull. Since he had only made them as an experiment, they hadn't been perfectly refined. He started the crystal creation process anew. However, no matter how many he made, he couldn't achieve full transparency.

Perhaps slime crystals are like emeralds in that they can never be perfect.

The moment the thought crossed his mind, an idea dawned upon him. Could he lessen the dull impression by adding color? He quickly got to work, grinding emeralds and mixing them with the slime. The result was slime crystals that looked like real emeralds, with both transparency and plenty of saturation. They had come out even better than he had expected.

Gabriel took the slime crystals to a craftsman who made them into a necklace, earrings, and a bracelet. He would give them to Francette on her birthday.

"Happy birthday, Fran. Please accept this gift from me."

"Thank you. I wonder what it is?" Francette opened the box and her eyes widened in surprise. "Are these emeralds? No, emeralds would never be so clear." As one would expect from a duke's daughter, she had a discerning eye. "They aren't peridots either, nor are they tourmalines or beryls."

"Fran, those are gemstones made from slimes."

"They're slimes?! Did you make them?"

"Yes, I did."

"What an amazing invention! I've never seen such beautiful gemstones before."

Francette was overjoyed. All that work was worth it, Gabriel thought.

The slime crystals would later become another of Triste's specialties and bring the land great wealth, but Gabriel and Francette had no way of knowing that yet.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady: Volume 1

by Mashimesa Emoto

Translated by Minna Lin Edited by Lyn Hall

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Mashimesa Emoto Illustrations by Kasumi Nagi

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: May 2024