

1

story by
Mashimesa Emoto

illustrations by
Masami

I Don't Want to Be the
DRAGON
DUKE'S
Maid!

Serving My
Ex-Fiancé
from My
Past Life

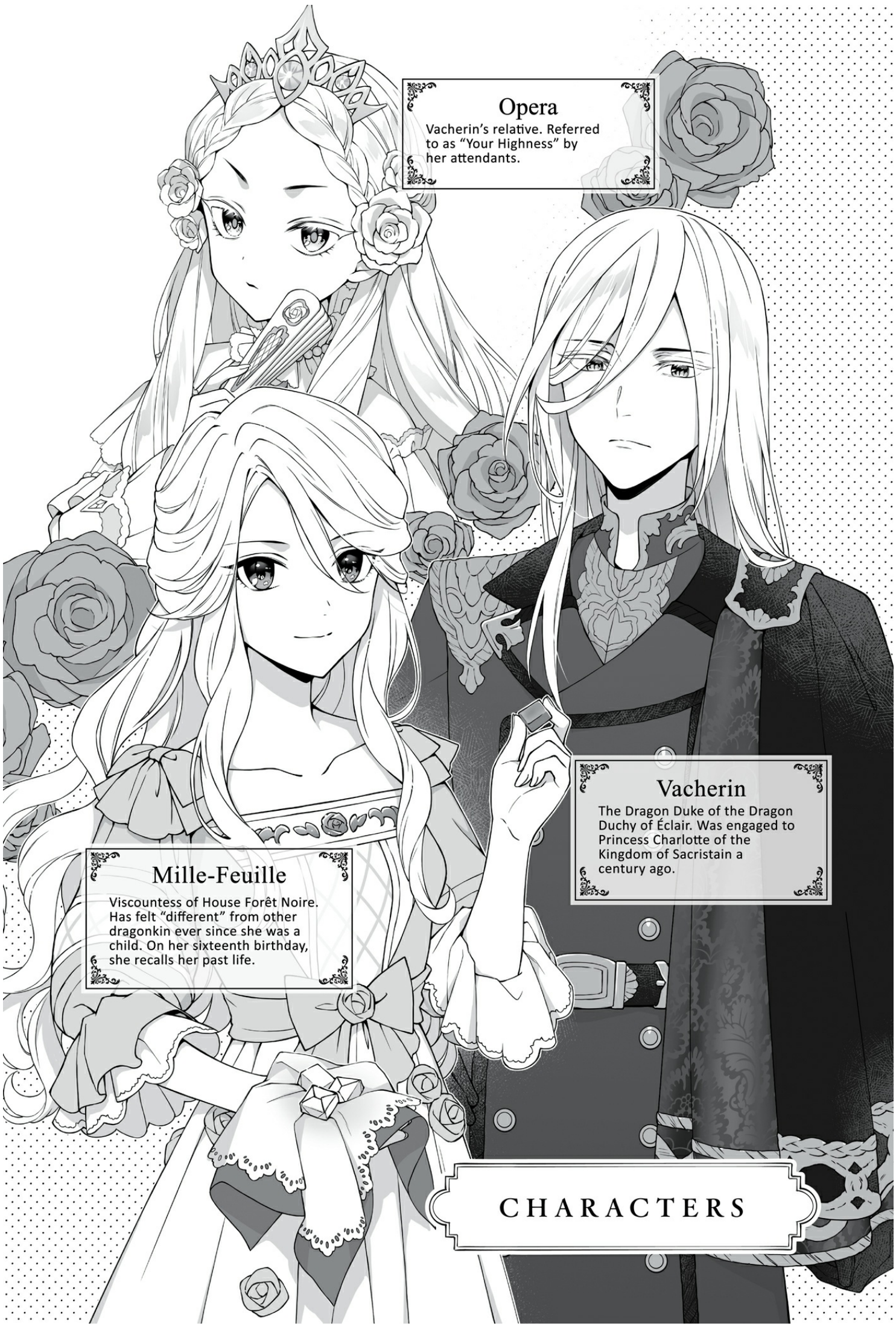


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Opera

Vacherin's relative. Referred to as "Your Highness" by her attendants.

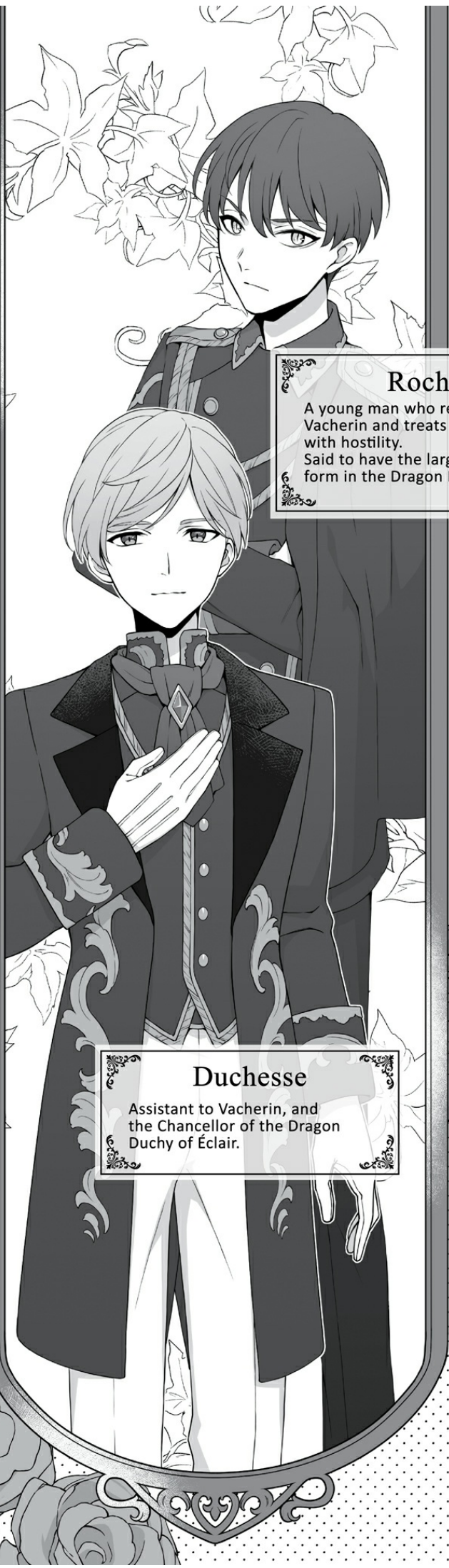
Mille-Feuille

Viscountess of House Forêt Noire. Has felt "different" from other dragonkin ever since she was a child. On her sixteenth birthday, she recalls her past life.

Vacherin

The Dragon Duke of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. Was engaged to Princess Charlotte of the Kingdom of Sacristain a century ago.

CHARACTERS



Roche
A young man who reveres Vacherin and treats Mille-Feuille with hostility. Said to have the largest dragon form in the Dragon Duchy.

Duchesse
Assistant to Vacherin, and the Chancellor of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair.



Madeleine
Fiancée of Glacé, Mille-Feuille's older brother. Good friends with Mille-Feuille as they are close in age.

Parfeil
Mille-Feuille's rabbitkin attendant. Formerly a mercenary and is much stronger than her looks suggest.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[Chapter 1: Huh?! I Was a Tragic Princess in My Past Life?!](#)

[Chapter 2: An Unexpected Reunion](#)

[Chapter 3: Who Is the Witch Herbalist?!](#)

[Chapter 4: A Summons from the Dragon Duke](#)

[Chapter 5: Who Killed Charlotte?](#)

[Chapter 6: A Bridge to Peace](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: Huh?! I Was a Tragic Princess in My Past Life?!

Father turned around and looked at me. “Mille-Feuille, stay close to Parfeil at all times,” he reminded me as we made our way through the crowd.

“I know, father,” I replied. Accompanied by my rabbit-eared female attendant Parfeil, I moved forward through the waves of people, nearly getting smothered along the way. My parents led the way, and Parfeil and I followed behind them. My older brother brought up the rear of our group.

“Mille-Feuille. We’ll leave you if you fall behind,” father threatened.

“Father, you fiend!” I cried.

My father often said: “Be aware that you are a noble, and act as such.” My same father, ignoring his own advice, now appeared to be very excited—elated, even—as we approached the festivities before us. My mother was strict and stern, but today, she opted not to chide my father for joking around and was smiling and enjoying herself. This joyful energy was not limited only to my parents—the crowd around us was ecstatic.

Suddenly, I tripped over a small bump on the stone path.

“Mille-Feuille, look out!” My brother Glacé, who was five years my senior, had been walking beside me and managed to catch me so I didn’t fall.

“Thank you, Glacé,” I said to him.

“Mille-Feuille, be mindful of where you’re walking,” he chided me.

“Yes, you’re right.” I had been overwhelmed by the crowd’s enthusiasm and wasn’t focusing on my surroundings. I needed to be more careful.

After a long walk, we finally reached the palace courtyard. However, the balcony was still a long way ahead. I would strain my neck if I tried to look up to see it.

“Mille-Feuille, do you see the balcony up there?”

“I see it quite clearly, mother.”

Of course, I couldn't *actually* see it, but I replied as if I did. As for why I committed such an act, it's because I simply had no interest in the events about to unfold.

This massive crowd was gathered here for one reason: to witness the majestic face of this country's ruler, the Dragon Duke. For the last hundred years, the Dragon Duke hadn't shown himself in public, not even once, and all were kept in the dark about him and his royal family. Yet today, for the first time in a century, the Dragon Duke would appear before his subjects from the palace balcony. Therefore, each and every dragonkin had gathered in this courtyard, which had been opened to the public for the occasion.

My family, too, was no exception. Even though today was my sixteenth birthday, my parents were more excited to get a glimpse of the Dragon Duke than to celebrate me.

This was the Dragon Duchy of Éclair, a state ruled by the world's most powerful being: the Dragon Duke. Despite being a small nation, this land drew the attention of neighboring states by virtue of its inhabitants' unique ability to transform into dragons. All its citizens held the Dragon Duke in high esteem—and even getting a fleeting glance of his royal visage inspired great enthusiasm in everyone.

My parents were ecstatic at the thought.

“Incredible... To think that we'd get to see the Dragon Duke himself!” father exclaimed.

“Indeed. What an event!” mother replied.

It seemed that not even my parents had ever seen the Dragon Duke. My brother, normally a quiet person of few words, was gazing at the balcony with tears of joy in his eyes.

We dragonkin live very long lives, with the oldest living up to a thousand years. The Dragon Duke was said to be very young; he had yet to reach two hundred years of age.

Parfeil had been gazing at the balcony all smiles, and I decided to ask her about this.

“Hey, Parfeil.”

“Yes, milady?”

“Have you ever seen the Dragon Duke?”

Parfeil, who hailed from a similarly long-lived race like the dragonkin, was 205 years old. Even so, in appearance she was much younger than me—and much smaller too. Her cute, childlike appearance belied the fact that she was older than the Dragon Duke himself.

“Hmm... I think I might have seen him before, but he was smaller than a tiny bean, so I don’t remember what he looks like,” Parfeil replied with a big smile. Her long rabbit ears swayed left and right as she did.

“Unfortunately, I think he’ll be smaller than a bean today too,” I said.

“N-No way!” Parfeil replied, disappointed, though she still seemed to be enjoying herself.

As for myself, my birthday only came once a year, and I couldn’t help but feel that it’d been canceled by the Dragon Duke’s public appearance. How could I possibly enjoy any of this?

All dragonkin held a deep reverence for the Dragon Duke, so much so that one might think that this devotion was carved deep into our souls. But, somehow, I felt none of that same awe the Dragon Duke supposedly inspired. My parents kept telling me that I’d understand when I grew up, but for as long as I could remember, I’d been aware that I was different from everyone else.

Suddenly, the crowd erupted in celebration. A shock wave that could have shaken the very earth swept across the venue. The Dragon Duke had finally shown himself on the balcony.

Father shouted in wild excitement while mother bowed her head to the Dragon Duke, tears pouring from her eyes. Glacé trembled in awe.

“Wow! Lady Mille-Feuille, look! It’s the Dragon Duke!”

“I can’t see a thing.”

“The lady accompanying the Dragon Duke is gorgeous too!” Parfeil remarked.

Everyone raised their fists and waved their hands in the air. In an instant, the balcony disappeared completely from my view, and I could only see the heads and backs of the crowd in front of me.

“Shall I carry you on my shoulders then, Lady Mille-Feuille?”

“Huh? No, you don’t have to go that far,” I said. “I’d just be a burden to you.”

“No need to be shy! The Dragon Duke showing up is a once-in-a-century event! You might get some kind of blessing if you see him!”

“He’s not some kind of lucky object, you know...”

I couldn’t care any less if I saw the Dragon Duke or not, but Parfeil used her supernatural strength—quite incongruous with her appearance—and lifted me up high. And just like that, I was able to see the events unfolding on the balcony.

The Dragon Duke’s long, silver hair and cool gaze caught my eye. He was a dashing man and looked rather young, as if he were only in his twenties. He was also clad all in black like he was mourning the loss of someone.

The moment I laid eyes on him, I felt my heart leap, but not out of excitement. *Why is my heart beating so quickly?*

“Lady Mille-Feuille, what do you think?” asked Parfeil.

“Put me down right now!”

“Gotcha, milady!”

I calmed down as soon as I felt my feet touch the ground. The uneasy feeling disappeared, perhaps because I couldn’t see the Dragon Duke anymore. Was it out of fear of his overwhelming power? I couldn’t be sure.

“I think he’s trying to say something,” Parfeil told me. She twitched her ears, trying to pick up the Dragon Duke’s words. The hearing of a rabbitkin like her was many times more sensitive than that of a dragonkin.

“Hmm, let’s see here... ‘Why must I be reduced to a public exhibit on the day I parted with my dear Charlotte?’”

“Charlotte...?” I repeated.

The words from Parfeil’s mouth pierced my chest like a hot knife. At that moment, a stranger’s memories began flooding into my head. I could see a scene of a strange night with the moon shining brightly, despite a heavy downpour.

“Charlotte...! Charlotte...!”

That wail of grief must have been louder than the raging storm.

Long ago, I had once lost my life in the arms of my beloved.

“I’ll find you... No matter where you’re reborn, I promise that I’ll find you!”

They were words powerful enough to be carved into my very soul.

My field of vision went white. For a moment, I heard Parfeil’s earsplitting scream, but I couldn’t figure out what was happening.

My consciousness faded right then.

My memories had returned. I was once Princess Charlotte—the beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed princess of the Kingdom of Sacristain, and I had lived without a single worry in my life.

And on my sixteenth birthday, I had fallen in love.

“Oh, who is that gentleman over there?”

“That is the chief of a minority group, the dragonkin. His name is Lord Vacherin.”

“Lord Vacherin... What a wonderful man.”

We had been drawn to each other the moment our eyes met. And by the time we’d held each other’s hands, we were already in love. We kept our romance a secret until one day, when we were finally allowed to marry. My days had been filled with happiness...until I’d been murdered. And I couldn’t remember who had killed me or how. Despite all that, I could clearly remember Vacherin’s wrath as I lay dying.

Lady Mille-Feuille...! Lady Mille-Feuille...!

"I am no mere lady. I am a royal princess!"

"P-Princess?"

A bewildered voice woke me up from my slumber. When I opened my eyes, a teary-eyed Parfeil was there before me.

"Lady Mille-Feuille...! Oh, sorry, Princess Mille-Feuille!" Parfeil said, correcting herself.

"P-Princess?" I stammered.

"You just told me to call you that."

"Forget about that. You can call me what you always have."

"All righty."

My head was throbbing in pain, quite understandably so. It was hard to believe, but my memories from a past life had come back to me. It sounded like a fairy tale, but it was the only explanation I could think of. My past life was that of the Kingdom of Sacristain's princess, Charlotte, a beautiful maiden with long, wavy, golden locks and eyes as blue as the deep ocean...or so it seemed.

"Parfeil, bring me a mirror," I said.

"Got it."

As ordered, Parfeil brought me one. The face reflected on its surface was completely different from that of Charlotte when she was alive. I had my mother's milk tea-colored hair and my father's spring-green eyes. I had been told once or twice that my almond-shaped eyes suggested a "strong-willed" personality. It appeared that being reborn didn't mean that I retained my old appearance.

My memories from a past life, huh...

"Lady Mille-Feuille, are you all right?" Parfeil asked. "Should I call the doctor?"

"No need, I'm fine. I was just a little dizzy. Could you bring me some water?"

"Got it."

I tried to organize my thoughts while drinking the water from Parfeil.

When a person died, by divine providence, their soul returned to a blank slate before being reborn in a new body. This cycle was known as “reincarnation,” or so said a book I’d read somewhere. A case like mine, where I suddenly remembered my past life, must’ve been rare. It had probably happened because I’d seen the Dragon Duke—someone I was connected to in my past life—and because he’d mentioned the name “Charlotte” on top of that. Of course, this was all just conjecture.

The Dragon Duke Vacherin... He was Charlotte’s lover during her life and they had even been engaged. And people said that he hadn’t shown himself in public for the last one hundred years...

I turned to my attendant. “Parfeil, what year is it in the Aela Calendar?”

The Aela Calendar counted the years since the creation of the world. It wasn’t used by dragonkin, so I hadn’t been keeping track in this lifetime. If Charlotte had died in the year 3200 of the Aela Calendar, how many years had it been since then?

Parfeil took out her pocket watch and opened it to confirm the date. “It’s the year 3300 in the Aela Calendar.”

“Year 3300?!”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Parfeil pointed to the window on the watch that showed the year. There was no doubt about it—this was the year 3300 of the Aela Calendar. In other words, it was exactly one hundred years since Charlotte’s death.

I remembered the Dragon Duke’s words from earlier. *“Why must I be reduced to a public exhibit on the day I parted with my dear Charlotte?”*

To think that he still remembered his fiancée Charlotte, a hundred years after her death...!

“Parfeil, is the Dragon Duke married?” I asked.

“I don’t know. For the last hundred years, there’s hardly been any information about the Dragon Duke’s royal family. There was talk of him getting married a

century back, but it seems his fiancée passed away young. There hasn't been any news since then."

"I see."

The talk about him getting married over a hundred years ago must've been referring to Charlotte. Since there hadn't been any other public information about the royal family over the last century, it was impossible to know if he was still single or if he'd gotten married since.

"Speaking of which, I heard that there was a woman among the Dragon Duke's royal family. What about her?" I asked.

"Who knows? Like I said, nobody knows anything about the Dragon Duke or his royal family."

What if she was his consort...?

I felt a sharp pain in my heart as that thought crossed my mind. It must've been due to Charlotte's memories that lingered in me. There was just no way I would feel that much shock from hearing about the marriage of a man I'd never even met. I pressed my hands to my heart, trying to suppress the pain. I had to hold back my tears.

"Lady Mille-Feuille, are you really all right? I really think we should call the doctor..." Parfeil said, concerned.

"I'm fine. No need to worry about me."

"Got it. Please tell me if you start feeling sick again, okay?"

"Of course."

It seemed like I had passed out in the royal courtyard from the shock of remembering my previous life. I had been out cold for three hours.

"Parfeil, I would like to be alone for a while," I said. "Could you please tell father, mother, and my brother that I'm fine now?"

"All right," Parfeil replied, and once she left the room, I let out a sigh.

To think that my previous self was Princess Charlotte of Sacristain and that her fiancé was the Dragon Duke... That wasn't something I could just

immediately accept. Even though I had her memories, I was still *me*. It wasn't like I had become Charlotte all of a sudden.

When it came to Charlotte, I just couldn't see her as being me. Despite now having her memories, it wasn't like her will was overpowering mine or anything. In fact, her personality was the complete opposite of mine. She was a pure and innocent princess, almost childlike, and I couldn't imagine her being averse to other people.

On the other hand, my personality was cool and calm, even as a child, to the point that grown-ups knew me to be quite composed for my age. I didn't need to study much to remember my lessons. When I learned how to curtsy—the noblewoman's greeting—from my etiquette tutor, it didn't take much practice for me to do it perfectly. I was sure that Charlotte had learned all those noble customs over years and years of effort.

It made me feel like I hadn't worked hard enough to get where I was. Thinking about it made a mixture of frustration and embarrassment well up inside me.

"Can you believe all this?" I absentmindedly started talking to a fish in the aquarium atop my bedside table.

The fish paid me no heed and kept swimming along its merry way.

I felt like all my confidence had crumbled away. I needed to put in more effort and not be haughty about my achievements.

I let out another sigh—I had completely lost count of how many times I'd sighed today.

Previous life or not, even though I wanted to live my life as usual, memories of Charlotte spending her days with the Dragon Duke had returned to me.

Despite the barriers between humans and dragonkin, they had seemed to be a completely normal couple. They'd held hands in the garden, enjoyed talking to each other, and exchanged warm smiles.

The Dragon Duke had seemed to be a kind man back then. I could hardly believe that the Dragon Duke I'd seen today was the same person. Was society so harsh to him that he became dejected over the last century?

A couple tragically separated only to reunite after a hundred years was the stuff of fairy tales. In fact, I bore no romantic feelings for the Dragon Duke at all.

But what about the man in question? I suddenly remembered the last words he'd uttered by Charlotte's side as she died...

"No matter where you're reborn, I promise that I'll find you!"

Shivers ran down my entire body as I recalled his words. His wail had been mixed with pure hatred. Despite the memories I now had, I didn't know what could have happened to make him scream like that. Had Charlotte done something to make him angry? In fact, what if it had been the Dragon Duke who'd killed her in the first place? If so, then I couldn't afford to let anyone know about my past life. Thankfully, despite having my past life's memories, it wasn't like that person had started taking over my entire personality. Charlotte's memories just happened to reside within me.

"I really wish I didn't remember my past life..."

If the Dragon Duke found out about this, it would mean nothing but trouble for me. I just had to keep quiet about it and take the secret of being Charlotte in my past life to my grave. I wanted to live a calm and peaceful life, without needing to experience someone trying to kill me.

And with that, I swore to never get involved with the Dragon Duke in any way.

Once the memories of my past life returned, I became curious about various things. In particular, the Kingdom of Sacristain—my birthplace in my previous life—caught my attention. Today, the Kingdom of Sacristain was a vassal state to the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. The royal family had been exiled to the countryside, and it seemed that they were unable to enter the capital. How had the dragonkin managed to defeat the Sacristain Army a hundred years ago?

I began working on deciphering the histories of the two countries.

A hundred years ago, the Dragon Duchy of Éclair didn't exist. There was only a border region reserved for dragonkin in the Kingdom of Sacristain.

As I turned the page of the book I was reading, Parfeil called out to me in a

reserved tone.

“Um... Lady Mille-Feuille, you seem to be reading a lot lately.”

“Yes, you’re right.” *Ever since remembering my past life, I’ve become curious about a lot of things*—but I couldn’t exactly tell her that outright. “I became curious about the history of the Dragon Duchy and its vassal states after having the honor of witnessing the Dragon Duke himself the other day,” I said.

“How diligent of you!” Parfeil remarked. She prepared some tea and biscuits and told me to take a bit of a breather.

“Thank you, Parfeil.”

“You’re welcome, milady,” Parfeil replied.

After taking a quick break, I returned my attention to the tome on the history of the Kingdom of Sacristain and the dragonkin.

Whenever the Kingdom of Sacristain became involved in a war, they poured a huge amount of funds into making the dragonkin fight for them. The dragonkin had returned the favor by leading the Sacristain Army to victory many times over. Thus, the dragonkin had been treated hospitably and honored by the Kingdom.

And yet, one day, this relationship had fallen apart. After the death of Charlotte, the dragonkin had rebelled against the Kingdom of Sacristain...and won. As for the casus belli, nothing had been written about it except that the Kingdom of Sacristain had “insulted the dragonkin.”

There’d been no more than a hundred dragonkin soldiers, and the Kingdom of Sacristain must have thought they could exterminate them with a battalion twenty thousand soldiers strong. That plan had fallen apart when a cohort of thirty dragonkin soldiers had managed to drive that same battalion to the brink of complete annihilation. The Kingdom had tried to regroup the army in haste, but it had been too late. The soldiers of the Sacristain Army could not hope to win against the dragonkin.

Why were dragonkin soldiers so strong? There were reasons, of course. Male dragonkin were able to fully transform into dragons. Once they took off into the air, none of the enemy soldiers’ attacks—not even their arrows—would be able

to hit them. From there, a powerful breath attack could easily entrap a human soldier. Because of all that, a small number of dragonkin had been able to defeat the Kingdom of Sacristain.

“A powerful breath attack...”

Though the dragonkin had been few in number, they must have earned the attention of the neighboring nations because of the records of this battle.

Back then, the Dragon Duke had intended to kill the king of Sacristain but stopped at the last minute. He elected not to replace the king of Sacristain but to establish a new state: the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. The Kingdom of Sacristain’s capital city had then become the capital of the new state. After having taken over the country, its subjects, and its royal palace, the Dragon Duke had reigned for the last hundred years.

When I’d visited the royal palace and cathedral, it hadn’t felt like it was my first time being there. That must’ve been because I’d walked around those places several times in my previous life. The fact that I was oddly cool and composed all the time must’ve been because those memories had been etched into my soul.

I had mixed feelings about this situation, but I had no choice but to accept it.

Was my curiosity over the Kingdom of Sacristain, now a mere vassal state to the Dragon Duchy, also because I had Charlotte’s memories now?

There wasn’t any detailed information in any of the history books about the spark that had caused the war between the Kingdom and the dragonkin. Things about the event must have been censored, so there was a limit to what I could find out on my own.

I’m sure there’s something in the Dragon Duke’s library, but only members of his family and household can enter there. Perhaps, if I could become one of the Dragon Duke’s handmaidens, I’d have a chance to visit...

“No way, not a chance!”

A lowly maidservant? Sure. But one of his handmaidens? Impossible. A handmaiden was a woman who would serve as her master’s arms and legs. A woman chosen to be one had to be married and have a great deal of experience

in life. An unmarried, lowly, under-twenty noble like myself could only become a maidservant. And even if I happened to become one, it would be a massive incident if I were found sneaking into the royal library. The best-case scenario would be my family falling from grace. The worst? My entire family could be executed. Just the thought of it gave me the shivers.

As I closed the book in my hands, I heard a knock on the door.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, it’s almost time to leave for the magic academy!” Parfeil informed me from behind the door.

“Yes, I’m getting ready.”

Young dragonkin ladies attended the magic academy four times a week. This was important to the Dragon Duchy of Éclair for a certain reason.

I put on the academy’s uniform and my hooded mantle, laced with protective magic.

“Parfeil, let’s go.”

“All right.”

We rode the carriage heading toward the girls’ magic academy. As the term suggested, it was a school that taught magic to students. It was attended by not just dragonkin but also ladies from the Kingdom of Sacristain. While students still formed cliques, they mostly stuck with others of the same social standing. The school grounds were more peaceful than one would expect.

The academy’s campus was surrounded by walls of red brick. The carriage made its way around the wall, and we eventually reached the academy gate. We were immediately greeted by the sight of the school plaza’s rotunda, where students would often climb into or out of their carriages.

“Oh dear, just getting into school is such a hassle again today,” Parfeil complained.

“Yes, indeed.”

As the students started arriving at the school, a long line of carriages from near and far formed along the school gate. Every morning, it took about half an hour to get through this line.

After a long wait, I was finally able to leave the carriage. Parfeil wasn't allowed to go any farther onto the premises, so I waved her farewell. It was forbidden to bring maidservants and handmaidens into the school itself; it was apparently the headmaster's idea in order to encourage students' independence. Was it really all right for them to encourage young ladies like that? It was a pretty big question, but this was still a girls' school. All the staff here were women, so there was no need to worry about the students getting involved with men either.

The walk from the rotunda to the school grounds usually took about ten minutes. It was actually possible to take the carriage all the way to the school grounds, but I elected to walk every day. I just didn't like crowded places.

As I walked, I heard a voice call from behind me.

"Millefie, good morning!"

I turned around to see Madeleine, my brother's fiancée. She always called me "Millefie" as a nickname. At seventeen years old, Madeleine was one year older than me. Since we were close in age, I was pretty friendly with my future sister-in-law. She'd enrolled in the magic academy the same term as I had—she had prioritized learning useful household skills, so her enrollment had been one year late.

"Millefie, did you do the homework for Suppression?"

"Yes, I did."

"I'm not very confident in my work. Could you please take a look at mine before I submit it?"

"Of course," I replied.

Madeleine hailed from the family of a count. In truth, my brother—who was bound to inherit the title of viscount—was a poor match for her family's rank. Why did this engagement work out for them, then? It wasn't anything as romantic as love at first sight. Simply put, it was because their mana was highly compatible.

In marriages between dragonkin, mana compatibility was an important factor. The role of dragonkin women was to suppress their family's draconic

transformations with magic. Male dragonkin, upon transforming into dragons, could go into a berserk state when agitated. While it was a very useful state to be in during battle, it became a curse when trying to return to human form. The men could lose control of themselves and become unable to revert. The only thing that could suppress this berserk state was the Suppression Magic that female dragonkin used, and it was most effective when coming from a dragon's spouse or family members. Thus, while dragonkin women were unable to transform themselves, they had the important role of suppressing transformed dragonkin men.

As for the berserk state, its nature differed with each individual. The general rule was that the stronger one's dragon form was, the more violent it became. Our family's dragons didn't have a particularly violent berserk state, so our transformations were relatively calm. Therefore, even someone with a low mana pool like Madeleine could suppress them. That was what made their engagement possible.

"Yesterday, I tried using Suppression Magic, but it affected my skin..." Madeleine lamented, pointing to the pimple on her cheek. Suppression Magic put a huge strain on dragonkin women. Of course, a mere pimple was a pretty minor symptom, but some women suffered obviously terrible side effects—they could fall unconscious or become bedridden for a whole week. As a result, dragonkin men bowed to the women with respect.



“Millefie, did you know Count Deuce’s heir went on a Bridal Quest?”
Madeleine asked.

“Huh.”

Normally, marriages between dragonkin were negotiated by the parents, and the couple would arrange a meeting later. After that, the decision was made on whether to push through based on the compatibility of their mana.

A Bridal Quest, on the other hand, was a very forceful method. It involved the man in question transforming into a dragon in front of a crowd, and women in that crowd would need to try to suppress the transformation. Regardless of their family’s social standing, challengers would step up to try their hand.

“But no one was able to suppress him, and a Sealing Enforcer had to step in and seal him on the spot for a whole month.”

“What a horrible thing to happen.”

“Truly,” Madeleine agreed.

If a dragon’s berserk state wasn’t suppressed, they’d go insane and become a monster. Once someone got to that point, they became known as a Corrupt Dragon, feared as a threat to everyone. All sorts of problems would arise if a family produced a Corrupt Dragon. To avoid this, Sealing Enforcers were entrusted with sealing berserk dragons on the spot until they could be suppressed.

“The thought of being married to someone like Count Deuce’s heir terrifies me,” Madeleine said, shivering.

“That will never happen to my brother,” I said, reassuring her. “He always says that he doesn’t want to transform into a dragon anyway.”

“That’s a relief to hear.”

While there were hotheaded dragons like Count Deuce’s heir, there were also ones who hated confrontation like my brother. It really depended on the individual. A dragonkin’s noble rank was determined by the strength of their draconic transformations. As we were low-ranking nobles, one could easily guess just how strong our dragon transformations were.

Madeleine was quite reserved and not the ambitious type. I could tell that she cared about my brother a lot. She truly was the perfect partner for him.

We arrived at the classroom. The students were split up into smaller groups of friends, all engaged in lively conversation. The main topic of today was none other than the first public appearance of the Dragon Duke in the last hundred years.

“What a wonderful event that was!”

“Nobody knows if he’s married or still single, right?”

“As long as we don’t know yet, I can keep dreaming!”

“He should do a Bridal Quest like Count Deuce’s heir!”

“Are you planning to try your hand at the Quest if he does?”

“Of course! What about you?”

“Hmm, I don’t know yet...”

The bride of the lord of the dragonkin would absolutely need to have a massive pool of mana. Trying to suppress him even once would likely burn away your entire life. Charlotte, my previous incarnation, had known about the berserk state and the dangers that came with it. A normal human like her would be completely unable to use Suppression Magic. And yet, with teary eyes, she’d insisted that she would stay by his side nonetheless. The Dragon Duke had been greatly moved by that, and he’d sworn to make her his bride. In retrospect, if the engagement had proceeded, there was no doubt that only doom would’ve awaited the two of them.

Madeleine whispered to me. “Mille-Feuille, did you ever think about becoming the Dragon Duke’s bride?”

“Absolutely not,” I said, shooting down the idea. Getting involved with that man had gotten my previous incarnation killed. Thankfully, I felt no lingering regrets regarding that, and I refused to be the plaything of love and romance in this life. I would rather be married to someone like my brother or father—dragons whose berserk states didn’t require that much energy to subdue. The Dragon Duke was not one of those dragons.

That said, was I getting these strong feelings toward him because of Charlotte's memories? If so, how deplorable! I tried to shove these thoughts into a far corner of my mind.

I checked on Madeleine, and she stared at me, trying to glean my thoughts. Did *she* want her future sister-in-law to marry the Dragon Duke?

"Madeleine, did you think I was so ambitious that I wanted to marry him?"

"N-No, I wouldn't say that! If you married the Dragon Duke, you would be so distant from us. I want you to stay close to me and Lord Glacé, okay?"

What she'd said was so adorable that I just had to give her a big hug.

The bell rang and class began. The teacher came into the room with massive bags under her eyes. Her complexion was also paler than usual.

"I apologize for showing up to class in this state," the teacher started. "Last night, my husband transformed, and I had to keep suppressing him until dawn."

The teacher's husband was a royal guard to the Dragon Duke. The class began murmuring to each other in worried voices, inquiring if something serious had happened.

"It's nothing serious. He just got drunk and transformed," she said, reassuring us. Relieved voices echoed throughout the room.

There were different situations in which one could transform. It could happen voluntarily, or because of emotional agitation, or one could be forced to do so from a threat to one's life. It could also happen if one was exposed to mana or for myriad other reasons.

The stronger a dragon was, the more difficult he was to suppress and the bigger the burden it would be on the family member doing the suppressing. To address this, polygamy was allowed in dragonkin culture, but the majority of dragonkin men preferred to be faithful to one wife and disliked having several. Truly polygamous households were a rarity.

The teacher's husband was strong enough to be assigned to the Dragon Duke's royal guard, and therefore his dragon form was as powerful as one would expect. He was strong enough to require multiple wives to suppress him,

yet she did it by herself. As a result, the teacher looked as if she were on the brink of death as she stood on the lecture podium.

Isn't it practically abuse to force the task of suppressing a dragon transformation onto one woman? That thought bubbled into my head—one that had never even crossed my mind before. It must have been from the memories of Charlotte—someone who had been able to question things that were otherwise completely ordinary to dragonkin.

I looked at my classmates around the room. All of them expressed sympathy for our teacher's plight, but none of them felt angry about this situation. It had been drilled deeply into us that it was the responsibility of women to suppress the transformations of the men.

Only women who'd had enough training were allowed to practice Suppression Magic. Once I graduated, I would have to suppress my brother, and perhaps my father too. Even just using this power in class ate away at us. Some young women developed skin problems, some became pale and sickly, some lost the shine in their hair, and some even started to develop eczema. If I tried to write down all the side effects, there'd be no end to the list.

Why did the dragonkin just accept this as fact? Even if the men lost their minds while transforming, was there really nothing they could do about it on their own?

My irritation just kept on growing, and as a result, I didn't retain anything from the lecture.

During break time, Madeleine called out to me.

"Mille-Feuille, are you all right? You look pale."

"I'm fine, Madeleine."

Having memories of my past life was such a huge pain. I hadn't been thinking about it until now, but inside me were my thoughts as a dragonkin woman *and* the thoughts of Charlotte. From her point of view, things that the Dragon Duchy of Éclair found commonplace seemed strange and unusual.

Madeleine looked worried about me as she fiddled with the pimple on her chin.

“Madeleine, don’t touch your blemish. It will get worse if you do,” I warned her.

“Oh, um, you’re right. I did it without thinking.”

Moonlight was said to heal conditions caused by using Suppression Magic, like pimples or a bad complexion. The moon could be said to be a large magicstone—a gigantic pool of magic. The moonlight that fell onto the land was infused with mana. Bathing in it helped people to replenish their mana and to restore their skin. However, recovering from mana depletion required bathing in the moonlight for an entire night. It could even take three full nights to fully recover. In any case, lost mana was not easy to restore.

“Oh, but wait a minute. What if we get ointment, let it sit in moonlight a few nights, and then use it on your pimple? That could make it heal quite quickly,” I suggested.

One could absorb and store moonlight with magic. Normally it was used on people, but it wasn’t particularly effective. The composition of mana differed from person to person, and a person could not absorb all of the rays of mana from the moon at once.

But what if I used that magic on an object instead of a person? If I reconstituted the mana into a form that most people could absorb, it might have some effect.

“Mille-Feuille, I’m not quite following what you mean. Use an ointment bathed in moonlight on my pimple? Where could we buy such a thing?” Madeleine asked, confused.

“It’s not sold anywhere yet. I was thinking that we should make one ourselves,” I explained.

Charlotte’s interests had included creating ointments and potions for cosmetic use. Thanks to her knowledge, I had just come up with this idea.

“But we can’t just make one,” I continued. “We have to let it absorb mana and store the mana in it with magic.”

“Can you use Enchant, Millefie?”

“Just a bit.”

Enchant was a spell taught to us in class, but most students weren’t able to successfully cast it due to its difficulty. Madeleine wasn’t able to use it either.

“I’m not sure if it’ll work out, but do you want to try it?” I asked her.

“Yes, that sounds fun! Please, let me help you out,” Madeleine replied.

“Of course! Let’s make it together and get rid of that pimple!”

“Okay!” And with that, we decided to take on the challenge of making a magic ointment for healing pimples.

After school, I rode in one of our family’s carriages with Madeleine and one of her attendants. We met up with Parfeil and headed for the nobles’ pharmacy in the city center. There, we began buying the ingredients for our ointment.

Inside the shop, glass jars and wooden boxes filled with herbs and medicines were lined up tightly on the shelves. On the glass countertops, expensive-looking fragrant wood pieces were on display. With such a selection of items, it would be difficult to find exactly what we needed. Thankfully, there was an apothecary in charge, so I went and asked.

“Could we have some lavender oil, rose apple oil, giant hyssop oil, marigold oil, and some beeswax?” I listed off the ingredients we needed.

“Of course. Please wait a moment.” The apothecary gathered the items from around the shop without missing a beat.

“Is this everything?” the apothecary inquired.

As a child, my mother had given me some Evaluation Glasses so I could avoid buying poor-quality goods. They were infused with the Evaluation spell and allowed me to ascertain the condition and quality of an item. I examined the items the apothecary had brought with them. The lavender oil, rose apple oil, giant hyssop oil, marigold oil, and beeswax were all of medium quality. Only alchemists were able to produce high-quality oils, and even though these were only of medium quality, they were pretty good compared to other pharmacies in town. Some shops sold inferior items, so it was important to evaluate things

when purchasing something.

“All right, we shall take these.”

“Understood.”

Madeleine wandered around the shop with curious eyes. Her attendant didn't seem to know how to navigate the place either. Parfeil, with her 205 years of life experience, looked pretty calm in comparison.

“Mille-Feuille, I didn't know that you frequented this shop,” Madeleine remarked.

“Not at all. It's my first time here,” I replied.

“Oh, but you look like you're quite used to coming here.”

“It's not that different from buying stationery at the academy shops,” I said.

“R-Really?” she asked, surprised.

Nobles did not go to shops to purchase items, as they had merchants come to their homes, bringing their wares. This was Madeleine's first time entering a store, so it must have been a fresh experience for her.

It was also my first time visiting an outside shop in this life. I must have known my way around because of my experiences in my previous incarnation. Charlotte had sneaked out of the castle to buy materials for her cosmetics. She must have been quite a rambunctious princess to wander around the marketplace.

“Mille-Feuille, look! Apparently, this is medicinal honey. I didn't know that honey could be used as medicine.”

“Indeed, honey is used for cleansing and disinfecting. In the past, it was used as an ointment for wounds,” I explained.

“I see...”

The item in Madeleine's hands was ranked as “low quality” by the glasses. High-quality honey was probably used as food.

I asked Parfeil to pay for the items. I could have charged them to the house, but I didn't want my father to find out about my purchases.

“Mille-Feuille, are there other uses for this honey?” Madeleine inquired.

“Hmm... Some people suffer from a sore throat from casting too many spells, so maybe we could make candies out of it. Honey can help a sore throat.”

“I see! Mother’s throat hasn’t been in the best condition lately, so I’d love to make some.” Madeleine consulted her attendant and decided to purchase some honey. “Do you think mother would like it?”

“Of course she would,” I reassured her.

Tonight was a full moon, and more mana would be pouring onto the land during this time. If we made the ointment and candy tonight, they would absorb quite a large amount of mana.

We left the pharmacy and waited for a carriage. Madeleine was more cheerful than usual.

“If your medicine becomes a success, it will be quite the discovery,” she chirped.

“I don’t know if it’s going to be a success yet— Look out!”

“Ahhh!”

A man walked around the corner and bumped into Madeleine. He was tall and well-built, while Madeleine was small in comparison. Though it was only a minor collision, she fell over.

“Madeleine!”

I rushed over and helped her up. Parfeil and Madeleine’s attendant also helped out.

The man with a black mantle glared at us. The emblem of a different magic academy was emblazoned on his chest. He must have been a student at the academy on the city’s outskirts. The magic school for young men was located far from the city to prevent its citizens from getting caught in the chaos resulting from dragon transformation incidents.

The man’s head was covered with a hood, so I couldn’t tell who he was. But he didn’t even bother to help Madeleine, nor did he show any sign of worrying about her. I found this beyond insulting.

Four other men were with him. Two of them got in between me and the stranger, and I couldn't make out their faces because they wore the same hooded mantles.

In any case, this was horrible. A group of men was openly guarding him against a small woman like me. It wasn't like I was going to protest straight in the man's face. Still, I wasn't about to let any of this slide.

"Hey, why don't you apologize to her?" I demanded.

One of the hooded men immediately reacted to my demand. "What for? Didn't she fall down because she wasn't paying attention?"

"Madeleine was just standing here. You lot bumped into her while your group was walking. This was entirely *your* fault!" I snapped back.

One of the men moved forward.

Inside, I was terrified. If I were how I'd been before, I never would've spoken out against a man like this. I could only do this because I had Charlotte's memories of the place where she lived—a country where men and women were of equal standing.

"You insolent little—"

"Stand down." One of the other men held back the agitated man and then addressed me. "Young lady, I apologize for our actions. It was completely our fault."

Madeleine grabbed my sleeve and whispered to me in a small voice. "I'm okay now."

Even so, I wasn't satisfied with this apology. The one who had bumped into her still hadn't apologized.

"I don't want an apology from *you*. I want that man—that rude man who bumped into her—to apologize."

"Mille-Feuille, it's okay..."

"No, it's not!" I cried. "Apologies have to be sincere!"

The culprit hesitated for a moment, but he eventually stepped forward and

bowed his head. “I apologize for my failure to pay attention to my surroundings.”

In a trembling voice, Madeleine said, “I-It’s no problem. Please, don’t mind me.”

“Are you hurt?” the man asked.

“No, I’m not.”

“I see. If there’s anything...” The man who first apologized stepped forward and began to say something, but he stopped and pulled down his hood to meet my gaze. He was a bespectacled young man about my age. “If there’s anything you need, please contact our house. House Langue de Chat.”

House Langue de Chat was known as the family of wisdom. They were a noble family just below the Four Great Noble Families in rank. That must’ve meant that the man this group was following was the scion of some high-ranking household.

“I’m Va—” the man in question started.

“Va?”

“His name is Van Citron,” the bespectacled man said, cutting off the other man.

“Citron?” I had never heard of that name before. Perhaps they were one of those upstart noble families. With this many men following him, they must have been part of a powerful dragonkin family.

Madeleine hid behind me. I couldn’t blame her for doing so, so I introduced her in her stead.

“She is Madeleine Bâton-Maréchaux.”

“And you?” one of the men then asked.

His haughty tone irritated me. It surely wasn’t the kind of tone one would use to ask someone’s name. But since I didn’t want to cause any more trouble, I let it slide.

“I’m Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire.” I was about to add “*and you should just forget*

about me,” but I managed to swallow those words.

Van bowed to Madeleine and left. It seemed that the storm had passed at last. I breathed a sigh of relief. There had been a cloud of irritation hanging over my head, but it had cleared up.

As we entered the carriage, Madeleine admonished me.

“Mille-Feuille! I can’t believe you would cause a ruckus with those academy boys!”

“That was not a *ruckus*. I was trying to protect your honor!” I retorted.

“Jeez! My honor doesn’t matter!”

“Yes, it does! You’ll remember the feeling of being insulted for the rest of your life!”

“W-Well, you may have a point...” It seemed she had some memories to pull from. She dropped her shoulders, dejected.

“Just what have you been through?” I asked, prying.

“Oh, just a lot of small things over the years...”

I felt bad for Madeleine, and I gently patted her back to assuage her.

“You’re right, Mille-Feuille,” she said. “I need to say what I feel outright, or else I’ll end up regretting it for my whole life.”

“Indeed. But it’s also not right to just say things without thinking. You’ll end up endangering yourself if you retort without anything to back it up.”

“To me, *your* actions looked like you were saying things without thinking them through,” countered Madeleine.

“The boys earlier were magic academy students. If they were mere scoundrels from downtown, I would not have paid them any heed.”

“I see...”

Normally, an attendant was supposed to protect the honor of their charge. However, Madeleine’s attendant was a young woman, only about fifteen or sixteen years of age. It seemed that Madeleine’s family did not want to spend too much money on their daughter, because otherwise, they wouldn’t have

picked such an inexperienced young lady to be her attendant.

“Mille-Feuille, what would you have done if that confrontation had turned into an actual fight?” Madeleine asked.

“We would’ve been fine,” I said. “Parfeil would’ve fought for us.”

Parfeil’s ears perked up at that, and she raised her fist to show us. The big smile on her face gave no hint of the strength she possessed.

“She might not look like it, but Parfeil is really strong. I bet dragonkin men wouldn’t stand a chance against her unless they transformed.”

“O-Oh,” Madeleine said, flustered. “I see...”

Parfeil’s appearance was deceiving, but she’d been training every single day in order to protect me.

“Madeleine, it’s most effective when you save your words for times like these. If you spout out your thoughts all the time, people will think you are a shallow person,” I advised.

“Defending one’s honor sure is a difficult matter,” Madeleine opined.

“Truly.”

It would’ve been disastrous if I had made a misstep while dealing with the conflict earlier. I needed to be more careful in picking my battles.

Upon heading home, Madeleine and I immediately rushed to the room in the basement reserved for magic use. An esteemed dragonkin household would always have a large room underground like this. If a family member suddenly went berserk, they would be sealed away in that room. Supposedly, it was to prevent them from receiving mana from moonlight. The women of dragonkin households would lock themselves up in these large rooms and continuously practice Suppression Magic on their family members who had gone berserk. Occasionally, there were times when people had to spend tens of hours underground, so kitchen equipment, baths, and even beds were commonly available in these rooms.

We were going to first make the ointment and then the candy in this

underground room. I put on a frilly apron—the same kind a maid would wear—over my dress.

“First, we’ll place the marigold oil and the beeswax in a bowl and heat it over some boiling water.” I poured water into a pot, took a fire magicstone and traced the spell carved on it with my finger, and placed that into the pot as well. Upon doing so, the water immediately started to boil.

I poured the boiling water into another large bowl. I then took the bowl with all of the ingredients inside and placed it over the one with the water. After that, I mixed the ingredients together until they appeared creamy. Once the cream turned white, I poured in the other essential oils—lavender, rose apple, and giant hyssop—and mixed it up well. To finish up, we cast a spell to make the ointment absorb as much mana from the moon as possible.

Madeleine also tried to cast Enchant, but she didn’t succeed.

“I can’t do it,” Madeleine said, dejected.

“I’m sure it’ll be easier once you get the hang of it,” I reassured her. She just needed more practice.

I poured the ointment into a jar and finished up the process by sucking the air out of the vessel.

“This was a lot faster than I expected,” Madeleine remarked.

“Right?”

Next, we’d make the honey candy. The process to do that was also rather simple.

“We’ll use honey, sanontou sugar, and citrus and ginger extracts,” I explained. The extracts were prepared by straining some crushed ginger and citrus, which Parfeil and Madeleine’s attendant had done while we were busy with the ointment.

“We just put all the ingredients in and boil them together.” I placed a pot on the magicstone stove and lit a fire. Once the sugar melted and the color darkened, I removed it from the heat.

“Then we just scoop the mixture up with a spoon and drip it onto this wax

paper.”

The syrup hardened after drying it for a bit. I also cast Enchant to make them absorb mana. Finally, I cut the wax paper into squares and wrapped them around the candies.

“Now we just let them bathe in the moonlight for about three days. I think they’ll be finished by the day after tomorrow or so.”

We looked for a safe place to let the items absorb moonlight and settled on the balcony in my room. I covered them with a net to ward off insects and left them out.

“And we’re done!”

“I’m looking forward to seeing the results in three days!” Madeleine said, delighted.

“Indeed.”

By this time, it was almost sunset. I invited Madeleine to stay for dinner, but she said she’d head home.

“Millefie, see you tomorrow. I hope you have a good evening.”

“I hope you have a good evening too, Madeleine,” I responded.

The day was almost over, but the earlier incident with the boys’ academy students was still troubling me. I didn’t regret confronting them to protect Madeleine’s honor, but for some reason, there was an uneasy feeling lingering in my heart.

I thought that maybe drinking some hot milk with honey would help me calm down. I ordered Parfeil to make me some after dinner.

Only Glacé and I were around for dinner. Father had gone out with a couple of gentlemen, and my mother was at a banquet with some acquaintances.

As we were eating the main course of duck confit, Glacé started a conversation.

“Mille-Feuille, I heard that Madeleine came over today.”

“Yes, she did,” I replied.

“She went home without seeing me?”

“It appears that she loves me more than she loves you.”

“I’m green with envy,” he responded.

Does he actually feel that way? My brother had always been nonchalant about things, so I couldn’t tell what he actually thought.

Marriages between dragonkin were not conducted out of love. Instead, they were a method for ensuring the bloodline’s continuation. A more detached relationship tended to be more favorable to both parties. This was true for my parents as well. They didn’t act lovey-dovey for most of the year and they only acted like a couple when an occasion called for it. Being so absorbed and involved in a burning, passionate love—like my previous incarnation had been—would only serve to cause trouble for everyone around them.

Ever since I had remembered Charlotte’s memories, numerous questions and doubts just kept popping into my head. I asked my brother about one thing that had been gnawing at me.

“Glacé, what do you think of the burden that draconic transformations put on dragonkin women?”

“That’s quite a question to ask.”

I had actually never seen my brother or my father transform into a dragon. It had always been peaceful at home since I was born, and we never came close to any place where there were monsters. However, men who never transformed, like my brother and father, were a rarity. There were men who transformed into dragons simply to go from place to place, and there were also men who transformed whenever they got too drunk and lost control.

“The burden that transformations put on dragonkin women is too big,” he said. “I think that there’s no need to transform, but I also understand that we dragonkin would be eradicated if we didn’t do so.”

“By the Kingdom of Sacristain?” I asked.

“Well, yes.”

In other words, my brother was saying that transforming into dragons was a way to display our power and to keep the Dragon Duchy of Éclair's sovereignty.

"This situation demands the continued sacrifice of our women. Of course, I feel terrible that it has to be this way... Mille-Feuille, what I'm about to say is a secret, okay?"

My brother placed his index finger on his lips and lowered his voice. "Married dragonkin are entrusted with the task of transforming in public as a display of power."

"Does that mean that some transformations that look like accidents are actually done on purpose?"

Glacé nodded gravely in affirmation. "We only have to do it once or twice a month. It's not much, but it happens."

"You mean mother and father have to do that as well?"

"Yes, that's right."

It wasn't like Glacé was seeing my parents' faces every single day, so he didn't know when they would do that.

"Mille-Feuille, if you get married, you will also be entrusted with that duty."

"I know." It was something I had already been prepared for and was the entire reason I was going to the magic academy, after all. "Why did you decide to tell me about all this?"

"It seemed like you had a lot of questions about the sacrifice of dragonkin women, so I wanted you to know about it."

Apparently, once a man had settled on a partner, the usual practice was to inform the woman about this obligation on the eve of their wedding day.

"I don't think you'd be very amused if you were only informed then," he added.

"You're right—that wouldn't be very amusing at all," I replied.

"Then I made the right decision to tell you."

"You sure know me well, Glacé."

“Of course,” he said. “I’ve been your older brother for sixteen years, after all.”

My brother might’ve seemed absent-minded, but he was actually very sharp. One might actually need to be wary of him.

“What about you, Mille-Feuille? What do you think about the burden that dragonkin women carry?” Glacé threw my question back at me.

“I think that the men need to learn how to clean up after their own messes,” I answered.

Glacé looked like he was taken aback by my response at first...but then he started trembling and held his belly in mirthful laughter.

“Glacé, did I say something strange?” I asked.

“No, no, you’re absolutely right. It would be great if there were something we men could do about our draconic transformations.”

Transforming used a massive amount of mana, leaving the man exhausted. To remedy this, Suppression Magic was used to transfer a woman’s mana to a man, and then the woman would suffer from mana depletion in the man’s place. It was absurd and unfair, but this was the reality for us dragonkin.

“What do you want to do about it, Mille-Feuille? How do you think we dragonkin should handle ourselves?” Glacé asked.

“I’d like it if dragonkin women could live more comfortable lives, at least.”

“I see.”

“What about you, Glacé?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea what we even *could* do about it...”

For a moment, I considered telling Glacé about the ointment and the candy I had made, but I had no guarantee that what Glacé was saying was truly how he felt. I decided against mentioning them—I had no idea if I had even succeeded in making either of them in the first place.

“Mille-Feuille, you sure seem different lately,” Glacé remarked.

“Really?”

“It feels like you’ve matured somewhat.”

“I don’t know about that...” I said.

I knew it was only because I now had the memories of my previous life within me. It was like I had fused with Charlotte’s memories, and he must have sensed that as a change in me. But of course, I had no plans of disclosing anything about that to Glacé.

“Would you talk to me again if you have any more thoughts like these?” he asked me.

“If I feel like it.”

“You’re so cold to me.”

“We’re not close siblings, you know,” I retorted.

“There’s only two of us, so we should get along more,” Glacé said in a half-hearted comeback. He then returned to eating his dessert.

I wanted to turn in early, so I took a bath and went to my room.

Parfeil brought me the hot milk I had requested. Its sweet scent helped calm my nerves.

“Thank you, Parfeil. You may leave.”

“All right, milady. Good night!”

“Good night to you too,” I said in return.

I confirmed that the door was closed and went out to the balcony. Tonight was a full moon, so the ointment and candies we had made this afternoon were both bathing in plenty of moonlight.

I noticed the faint reflection of the moon in my cup of hot milk. I cast Enchant on the milk to let it absorb some mana as well. I drank the enchanted milk and felt the mana flowing inside my body. I recovered the mana I had used up in class and while making the ointment and candies in an instant. The unease I had been feeling also vanished.

“Huh... This might be more effective than I thought...”

The milk had only stayed in the moonlight for a bit, but my mana had recovered by a significant amount. I hadn’t expected it to be so potent. Had no

one thought about absorbing mana from the moon via the food they consumed?

I had the idea that it was fine to take the ointment and candies inside too. I'd originally believed that they would take a while, but they were already ready to use.

I used the Evaluation Glasses on the concoctions. The pimple ointment was evaluated as "low quality (slight mana recovery; reduces pimple inflammation)." Meanwhile, the candies were said to be "low quality (slight mana recovery; reduces inflammation)." For something I had made for the first time, even reaching an evaluation of "low quality" felt like a success.

Now what should I do with the hot milk? I had already recovered plenty of mana with just one sip, so I knew I probably shouldn't drink any more. Absorbing too much mana was bad for the body as well. However, I didn't want the mana-infused milk to go to waste.

As soon as the idea struck me, I had to act. I hid from the eyes of the attendants and headed to the underground kitchen. I checked inside the cooler and confirmed that the ingredients were all there. After that, I took out some butter, honey, and sugar and mixed them all with the milk in a pot. Then, I lit a fire and heated the mixture up until it was sticky. Once it had cooled down, I poured it onto some wax paper. I used an ice magicstone to cool it down completely and then cut it into bite-size pieces.

I examined the finished caramel candy I'd made with the Evaluation Glasses. The evaluation read, "low-quality caramel candy (slight mana recovery; delicious)."

"'Delicious'...?"

In any case, all was well as long as the milk hadn't gone to waste. I wrapped wax paper around the candies and stuffed them into a jar. I was sure Madeleine would love it if I shared some with her.

Upon returning to my room, I heard some noises from the hallway. My mother and father must have returned already. I quickly turned off the lights and tucked myself into bed.

I felt like I'd had quite a satisfying day. While I was having trouble reconciling with the fact that I was recalling things that had happened in my past life, it wasn't all bad. Would there ever come a day when I would be thankful for these memories?

Only the heavens knew what was in store for me.

Chapter 2: An Unexpected Reunion

The next day, Madeleine had no energy. Her face was pale, and her lips were bluish. Apparently, her father had transformed that night, and Madeleine had to join in on suppressing him. Normally, inexperienced women were not allowed to participate in a Suppression, but in emergencies, that restriction was lifted.

“Mother collapsed midway...” Madeleine explained. It looked like it took all the energy she had to even walk.

“Why didn’t you take the day off and get some rest?”

“I thought that my symptoms were light compared to mother’s...”

“You shouldn’t be comparing your condition to anyone else’s,” I said, scolding her.

“Indeed, you might be right about that...”

I took Madeleine to the rose greenhouse, where there was no one around. I decided to get her to rest until classes started. The greenhouse was full of roses in bloom to be used in classes, and the air was filled with a strong fragrance.

Madeleine loved roses. Upon smelling them, the wrinkles in her brow began to ease up. But it wasn’t as if the fragrance completely healed her discomfort.

“Madeleine, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“Millefie, I have so many pimples on my face. Don’t I look awful?”

Bad skin was the enemy of women everywhere, but this wasn’t the time to worry about that. I wanted her to focus on recovering her energy.

“Are you okay? Do you feel dizzy?”

“No. I only joined toward the end, so I don’t feel any dizziness,” Madeleine explained. Still, she was exhausted from using up too much mana.

I handed her the pimple ointment, the honey candy, and the caramel candy

from the previous day.

Madeleine was puzzled. "Millefie, I thought these were going to take a while to finish," she said inquiringly.

"They ended up being ready after just a few hours. It was a full moon yesterday, so there must have been a lot of mana pouring onto the earth."

"I see."

I told her that the caramel candy was made with milk that I'd drunk some of. "If you don't want that, just throw it away."

"It's all right. I'll have it later, okay?" Madeleine muttered. She said that she wanted to take care of the blemish on her face first.

I rubbed the ointment on it.

"Whoa?!"

A small magic circle floated on top of the blemish. It shone with a faint light before dispersing. In the next moment, the pimple on Madeleine's face had completely disappeared.

"Millefie, I think my pimple is gone," Madeleine said, astonished.

"Y-Yes, you're right."

"I don't feel as exhausted as I did earlier either."

It seemed that the pimple ointment had worked. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Millefie, you're a genius! This is amazing!" Madeleine grabbed my hands and started jumping up and down in excitement. "With this, I'm sure mother will feel better in no time too!"

"Madeleine, I have a request."

"What is it?"

"I don't have a problem with you handing the candy to your mother, but could you not tell her that I made it?"

"How come?" Madeleine inquired.

"So the knowledge doesn't fall into the wrong hands," I replied.

“Oh... Oh, you’re quite right.”

I was glad that she’d understood what I meant by that. No one else had yet thought of enchanting medicine and sweets with moonlight. Enchantment wasn’t something that anyone could just pull off either. It would be trouble if someone who didn’t know the proper procedures tried to replicate these and caused an accident.

It’s probably best to hide my involvement in this for now.

“What should I tell mother if she asks?”

“Hmm, that’s difficult to answer...”

Madeleine and I tried to think of ideas. The infirmary, a friend, a teacher... However, all of those lies were too easy to pick apart if someone tried to dig deeper.

Suddenly, Madeleine slammed her clenched hand onto her palm. It seemed like she had come up with an idea.

“Oh, I know! You’ve heard the rumors about the hidden alchemy shop downtown, haven’t you? How about we copy that and say we got it from a witch herbalist at the town proper?”

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” I said.

There were rumors of a mysterious alchemist downtown. Apparently, they sold potions that could heal any kind of malady, magic scrolls that could transport you anywhere, and various tools and medicines made using high-level magic. Nobody knew the whereabouts of the shop, but it was said that fulfilling certain conditions gave one access to its location. A person could only ever visit the shop once. There were no shopkeepers, and it was said that the items you needed would just appear atop a table before you, without needing to speak to anyone.

Whoever was managing that shop was a complete mystery. Even now, nobody knew exactly how the place functioned.

In the same manner, Madeleine and I came up with the idea of an enigmatic witch herbalist.

"I think we should be all set with this story," Madeleine said.

"I agree. How are you feeling? Are you able to move around now?" I wanted to check on her condition.

"I'm all better now! It's all thanks to you," she replied, full of energy.

"I'm glad you've recovered. Shall we head to class?"

"Yes, of course!"

The bell rang and I took Madeleine's hand. We rushed to the classroom and made it there just in time.

The next day, Madeleine and I headed to the rose garden to continue our secret conversation from yesterday. There, Madeleine thanked me.

"Millefie, mother recovered! She had been bedridden, and even the doctors had given up on treating her. Thank you so much!"

"I'm so glad to hear that!"

Apparently Madeleine had given all five pieces of caramel to her mother, and she had eaten all of it.

"All of it? Is she all right?"

"She's doing well. Mother had exhausted almost all of her mana trying to suppress father's transformation, but the caramel candy restored about a third of it."

"A *third*?"

Mana depletion to that degree was definitely life-threatening. It seemed that Madeleine's mother had recovered enough to be able to get up again, but it was far from a full recovery. She would still need to rest.

"Madeleine, I'll make more of the caramel candy," I told her.

"Thank you, Millefie, but is that all right? Wouldn't it be a burden to you?"

"No need to worry about me," I reassured her.

"Then I'll leave it to you."

Madeleine's mother appeared to believe the story about the witch herbalist.

She had also promised not to tell anyone about it. For now, I could rest easy.

“Um, Millefie, I would love to help out in making more caramel candy, but I have a banquet to attend tonight, so I won’t be able to. I’m sorry,” Madeleine said apologetically.

“It’s all right. I’ll just have Parfeil help me out this time.”

“I’m really sorry about this.”

“Don’t be,” I said.

This time, I wanted to make caramel that was a step up in quality. To make medium-quality candy, I needed to acquire better ingredients. For one, I wanted to procure honey from a shop that sold exclusively to nobles.

As I was thinking that, the bell rang. This was no time for me to be spacing out. Once again, Madeleine and I rushed to the classroom.

After school, Parfeil and I headed to the merchant district that catered to nobles. The streets had few people as nobles usually just invited merchants to their homes. It was rare that they would come all the way here to buy items.

“I brought your personal wallet today, milady!” Parfeil informed me.

“Did you take out the amount I borrowed from you the other day?”

“Oh, I forgot.”

“That’s not good,” I said, chiding her. “You should pay more attention to the money you lend out.”

“You’re right! How clumsy of me!”

I paid Parfeil back for what I had borrowed from her, and she humbly accepted it.

The carriage we were riding stopped. We disembarked and headed for the shop that sold honey. Since the road to the merchant district was too narrow for carriages to fit, we had to walk.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, there’s a sweet smell in the air!” Parfeil exclaimed.

“It looks like there’s a confiserie three stores ahead. Let’s stop in on the way

home. I'll buy you a few sweets."

"Hooray! Thank you so much, milady!" Parfeil loved sweets, especially sugary confections, so I would get her some to show my appreciation every now and then.

The roads were covered with fallen leaves. As autumn deepened, the approaching winter began to make its presence felt.

"Hmm?" Parfeil suddenly made a noise, and her ears started twitching.

"Is something the matter?" I asked her.

"Hm? Oh, it's nothing. I just thought I heard a familiar voice from the confiserie."

"Who is it?"

"Hmm, there's no way it's who I'm thinking of, but..."

Parfeil was being rather vague, so I peered into the shop to check for myself.

"I cannot give you the merchandise if you don't have the money for it!" one voice cried.

"I *said* I'll pay for it later."

A tall student from the boys' magic academy was arguing with the shopkeeper.

"That's only for regular customers!"

"Just whom do you think you're talking to?"

"Who *am* I talking to?!"

"Well, that's—"

As Parfeil had said, I *did* find the man's voice to be familiar.

"Van Citron?"

The moment I called out to him, Van Citron turned around with great speed. As before, his hood covered his face, so I couldn't see him very well.

"You're—"

“Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire,” I replied. “I’m sure you’ve already forgotten, though.”

“No, I remember you clearly.”

As soon as the shopkeeper identified me as the man’s acquaintance, he shifted his gaze to me, motioning for help. As far as I could tell from their argument, Van did not have a single coin on him. He was the scion of a noble household after all, so that was to be expected.

“You *do* know that you could just charge it to your household if you don’t have money, right?” I suggested.

“I know.”

“Then why don’t you tell him the name of your household?” I asked.

“I can’t do that,” Van replied.

“Why not?”

Van did not reply to my question. It appeared that he had a reason he couldn’t rely on his house for help.

This confiserie only sold sweets and sugary snacks, and there were no valuable items in the shop... But then, I realized something.

“Could it be that you don’t want your household to know that you wanted to buy some sweets?”

“Absolutely not!!!”

Van denied it with such a loud voice that my ears hurt. He had been so haughty the last time I saw him, and I’d found him hard to approach. But now, talking to him one-on-one like this, he felt more like a regular student.

“Oh yes, your bodyguards—or rather, your friends. I don’t see them today. Where are they?” I asked him.

“They were annoying, so I shooed them away.”

“My, I feel bad for them.”

“You would be annoyed too if they were glued to you all day,” he explained, irritated.

“I see.”

“Speaking of friends, umm, er... Your, uh, friend. The brunette,” Van said, stuttering.

“You mean Madeleine?”

“Yes, her. Is she all right?”

“She’s fine. She wasn’t injured or anything, so no need to worry about her,” I told him.

“I see.” Under his breath, barely audible to me, he muttered, “I’m glad.”

Perhaps he wasn’t as bad as I’d thought he was.

Right then, the shopkeeper cleared his throat. I realized that this might be a good chance to get Van to owe me a favor.

“Parfeil, please pay for this man’s purchases,” I said.

“Understood, milady!”

“H-Hey!” protested Van. “I didn’t ask for you to pay for my things!”

“I’m not *just* paying for your things. You owe me a favor for this,” I told Van.

He said nothing more. He must have *really* wanted those sweets.

I bought confections for Parfeil as well, along with some caramel candies that were on sale. Upon checking them with the Evaluation Glasses, I found that the candies were of medium quality.

It seemed that I had accomplished everything that I’d come here for and it was about time to part ways with Van. We were about to leave with a smile, but he stopped us.

“I-I would like to thank you properly,” he said. “Um, tomorrow, I shall send you a letter.”

“There’s no need for you to rush. You can do that anytime,” I told him. I didn’t want to get involved with him too deeply, so I told him to just give it to me whenever we saw each other again.

“I don’t want to remain indebted to you.”

“All right, then. Do as you please.”

The shopkeeper sent us off with a relieved look on his face. Outside the store, the bright sunlight shone down on us.

“Guh...”

Suddenly, Van floundered. There was no way I could support his weight, so I motioned to Parfeil. She acted quickly and caught him with one hand. We sat him down on the spot.

“I’m fine,” Van insisted.

“You don’t look fine to me,” I said.

Was it anemia? I glanced at his hand—the only exposed part of his body. It was shockingly pale and convulsing slightly. From that, I guessed his mana must have been depleted.

If a dragon transformation wasn’t suppressed properly, it was possible that the man would suffer from mana depletion as well. It seemed that Van was trying to cover up his mana depletion by eating sweets. All objects in this world contained some mana, but the amount one could get from eating food was far from satisfactory. It was hardly better than a placebo. If this situation continued, it was very likely that Van would collapse again.

I couldn’t ignore this. I had some of the enchanted caramel candies in my pocket, so I unwrapped one and shoved it into Van’s mouth.

“Mmmgh?! Wh-What are you doing?!”

“Swallow that once it’s melted in your mouth a bit.”

“Wh-What is this...?!”

I heard voices calling for Van from a distance—his friends had finally found him. I figured that there wouldn’t be any more problems, and in fact, it seemed that I didn’t even need to help him out.

“What did you just feed me?” he asked.

“It’s just some caramel candy from that shop,” I replied.

In truth, it was the caramel candy that I’d made with the leftover milk. It was

an emergency, so he would have to forgive me for this one. Of course, I wasn't about to tell him any of that.

Van's friends surrounded him.

"Just what are you doing walking around on your own?!"

"We've been looking for you all over!"

"Please refrain from sneaking away from your bodyguards!"

"What would you have done if any danger had befallen you?!"

Among his bodyguards, I heard a deep voice that was clearly from a man who was at least in his forties. While all of them were wearing student uniforms from the magic academy, at least one of them was actually a middle-aged man.

What's going on...?

I found the situation curious, but I had no time to waste. While the bodyguards fussed over Van, Parfeil and I hurriedly left the scene, with Parfeil looking elated at her bag of confectioneries.

I'd handed over the enchanted caramel candies to Madeleine's mother, confident that she'd be able to make a good recovery with them. As I breathed a sigh of relief, a maid approached me, saying that an item from Van had arrived.

A silver platter was brought to me, which had a wooden box sitting on top of it. There was a letter placed beside it, as if it were just a side piece.

Just what in the world is he giving me?

I opened the wooden box, and within it sat a golden bracelet.

"Wow, milady! This is wonderful!" Parfeil exclaimed.

"No, it's not."

Just what was he thinking, giving me such an expensive present? I couldn't understand him at all. I had thought that this was repayment for the sweets I'd bought him, but the letter had said that he would return the money at a later date.

“What is all this for?” I asked, confused.

“Could this be thanks for the caramel candy you gave him?” Parfeil suggested.

The candy had certainly helped him recover from mana depletion. Was all of this his way of saying thanks?

“He didn’t have to go this far.”

“But if he had kept on like that, I think it would have been life-threatening,” Parfeil said.

“His friends had rushed in to help him right after, so I didn’t even need to give him a hand,” I replied.

“Still, at the time, they had no way of recovering his mana by that much. Lady Mille-Feuille, I think that he may feel indebted to you as his savior.”

“That hadn’t been my intention at all...”

In the letter, Van asked if we could meet at a café somewhere. I decided to write a letter back, saying that his feelings of gratitude were more than enough. I was also going to return the bracelet to him along with the reply letter.

“Milady, are you sure you want to return it?” Parfeil asked.

“I can’t take such an expensive item.”

The bracelet had diamonds embedded all around it along with an exquisite engraving of an iris flower. Even if he felt that he owed me his life, he didn’t need to thank me to *this* degree.

“I don’t want to see him ever again,” I told Parfeil.

I thought that Parfeil would disagree, but it seemed that she felt the same way.

“I see. That may be a wise decision,” she remarked. “That is no ordinary man.”

“Indeed. The men following him around weren’t merely his friends; they were his bodyguards. He must be the scion of some wealthy family.”

“I agree.”

I finished writing the letter and handed it to Parfeil.

With this, I've cut him completely out of my life... Or so I thought.

Madeleine bowed her head to me first thing in the morning.

"Millefie, I'm so sorry!"

While we were in the rose greenhouse, Madeleine apologized. When I asked her what for, she handed me a scroll made of vellum. I opened it, but it was blank.

"Is this a letter written in magic ink?" I asked, and she nodded.

Magic ink was a rare item that could be used to write letters that were invisible or in a coded language. It was used to send secret correspondences. It sounded like a convenient thing to have, but using it consumed mana. Thus, dragonkin women were told to avoid using it.

The use of magic ink was regulated in the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. Men didn't seem to think well of women writing invisible correspondences to each other. At the same time, the men also would be in trouble if women did not have enough mana to perform Suppression Magic.

In other words, regulations on the use of magic ink were simply for the convenience of men.

"Madeleine, are you okay with decoding this?"

"Yes. I have this, so I don't have to spend mana to read the note." Madeleine took out some holy water used for warding off monsters.

"We just need to soak the letter in this," she explained.

She placed the vellum scroll on the ground and poured the holy water over it. As she did, letters began to appear on the surface.

"Wow, that's amazing!" I exclaimed.

"I hear that writing with magic ink is becoming more popular at our magic academy," Madeleine told me.

"I see."

It seemed that the students had been writing secret letters to each other in magic ink. *That's one way to throw away money*, I thought. Holy water was a very expensive item.

That aside, the correspondence on the vellum was regarding the caramel candy. Madeleine's mother had apparently handed over some of the caramel candy to her little sister—Madeleine's aunt. She had used Suppression Magic as well, and as a result, Madeleine's aunt had been bedridden for a whole week. The other day, the doctor had pronounced her to be in critical condition, and Madeleine's mother had given her some of the caramel candy in haste. Thanks to the candy, it seemed that her aunt's life was now safe.

As the holy water dried, the text vanished.

"U-Um... I'm so sorry," Madeleine apologized.

"That's great news!" I said. "Your aunt got better because of the caramel candy."

Her aunt's condition had become stable, and yet Madeleine looked dejected.

"Madeleine, what's wrong?" I then asked.

"You're not mad at me?"

"Why would I be?"

"I broke my promise to you and the caramel ended up in someone else's hands," Madeleine explained.

"It would've been a problem if you had been saying things to random strangers, but this time, it was given to someone whose life was in danger. I'm happy that my caramel candy saved someone's life."

"Th-Thank you so much!" Madeleine gave me a big hug.

I patted her back to soothe her trembling body. "I'm glad your aunt is safe."

"Yes!"

Madeleine had adored her aunt since her childhood. Ever since her aunt had married into the household of a powerful dragon, she'd been mostly bedridden. In fact, Madeleine hadn't seen her in a long time.

“The burden of Suppression Magic on women truly is quite heavy,” lamented Madeleine.

“Indeed...” Year after year, there were stories of women falling ill from the overuse of magic.

“Oh, I’ve been studying the use of Enchant, and...”

Madeleine told me what she’d learned from the teacher’s lecture yesterday. Apparently, the use of Enchant was incredibly difficult—only a third of dragonkin women were able to cast it properly.

“Since it wasn’t proving to be particularly effective, the school hadn’t been bothering to teach it to students as much.”

“I see.”

In order to change the target of Enchant from oneself to a different object, one needed incredible control over their own magic. Taking that into consideration, there were very, very few people who could *master* Enchant.

“I can’t save all the dragonkin women on my own,” I said.

“Indeed.”

“That’s why we need to keep this information a secret.”

“You’re right,” Madeleine agreed.

I’d just given Van the caramel candy the other day, but I couldn’t afford to do something like that again.

After classes ended, Parfeil and I were riding in the carriage. I shared some of the cookies I had received from Madeleine with her, and her ears swayed left and right from happiness.

“Oh, I’m so happy I’m serving you, milady!”

“I’d love to be as happy as you are when receiving some cookies, Parfeil.”

“I live a fulfilling life every day thanks to you, milady!”

Parfeil was all smiles as she stuffed cookies into her apron pocket, but all of a sudden, her expression turned serious. Her ears perked up and a sense of

urgency showed on her face.

“Parfeil, what’s wrong?” I asked her.

“There’s a carriage following us.”

“What?!”

According to Parfeil, another carriage had been matching our movements for a little while. It had been veering to the right whenever we veered right and to the left whenever we leaned left, following our every turn. Parfeil’s acute sense of hearing could pick out the sound of the other carriage’s wheels trailing behind us.

Parfeil opened the window connecting to the front box and called to the driver. “We’re being chased! Lose them!”

Then, she closed the carriage windows and handed me a cushion.

“Protect your head with that,” she ordered.

“A-All right,” I stammered.

“Also, grit your teeth so you don’t bite your tongue.”

“Okay.”

Parfeil stuffed cushions to the left and right sides of my head as well, presumably to soften any impact. She then took out a knife with a large blade from within her skirt and glared at the carriage trailing us out of the back window of our ride.

I heard the snap of a whip and the subsequent neighing of the horses in front of us. Our carriage accelerated, swaying left and right.

Just who is chasing us? Did someone find out about the caramel candy that can restore mana?

There was a loud clang, and our carriage lurched to the side. I fell toward the door, but thanks to the cushions, I didn’t collide with anything.

The curtains swayed for a bit, long enough for me to notice that the scenery outside the carriage was different from what I was used to. We had been following a different route today than usual.

“Hmm?” *What’s going on?*

It seemed that Parfeil was able to confirm something, and she went to give orders to the driver.

“You may slow down now. If there’s a place we can stop, please park the carriage there.”

The carriage slowed to its usual speed and eventually came to a halt.

“Parfeil, what was that about?” I asked at last.

“Milady, it seems that it was one of your acquaintances,” she replied.

“An acquaintance?”

Parfeil motioned to the other carriage through the back window. At that same moment, the passengers of the other carriage stepped out.

I spotted someone with the familiar mantled uniform of a magic academy. I couldn’t see his face as it was covered by a hood, but I knew exactly who it was.

“Is that...Van Citron?”

“Looks like it,” Parfeil affirmed.

Van Citron’s friends followed after him. Apparently, they had raised a white flag midway through their pursuit, and right after that, they’d raised a different flag with the emblem of House Langue de Chat. It seemed that they were attempting to show us that they were not suspicious.

“Wh-What could they want from us?”

“Who knows? They’re coming over.”

“I don’t have anything to talk about with them, though.”

Van Citron walked toward us with confident strides while his friends followed suit. Was he upset that I had returned the bracelet?

I wanted to order the driver to take us out of here. But even if I got away now, I was sure that Van Citron would take aggressive steps to contact me, just like he was doing now.

I let out a long, deep sigh. As I did, I heard a tentative knock on our carriage

door.

“Who might it be?” Parfeil inquired.

The reply was immediate. “It’s Van Citron. I would like to, um, talk to Lady Mille-Feuille.”

I crossed my arms as I thought of what to do.

“Milady, how about we invite just him into the carriage?” Parfeil suggested.

“That sounds like it’s for the best.”

Van Citron’s posse seemed to have some hostility toward me. If they were in here with him, there was no way I’d have a proper conversation with him.

Parfeil stepped out of the carriage to negotiate with Van Citron. I heard a bit of arguing outside, but eventually, he entered the carriage alone. I kept hugging the cushions close to my chest, and Parfeil came back in and sat right beside me.

“Hello, and good day.” He greeted us with a tone that showed an awareness that he had done something wrong. He sat down, but had an awkward expression on his face.

“I apologize that we ended up chasing after you. Really, I am so sorry.” Van bowed his head deeply and apologized to us.

I hadn’t expected him to be this sincere.

“Please don’t do that ever again,” I said, chiding him.

“I won’t,” Van replied.

An awkward silence hung over the carriage. Van’s gaze swam left and right as he said nothing else.

“Well?” I asked. “What do you want from me?”

“U-Um, yes. Well... I was just wondering why you returned the bracelet,” Van stuttered out.

“I had no reason to accept such an expensive gift. That’s all.”

“But I owe my life to you.”

“I don’t know anything about having saved your life.”

“Perhaps you had recognized what was happening then, in the back of your mind. When we last met, you fed me some caramel, but that was not the candy the confiserie was selling. Was that something that you already had on you?” Van asked, interrogating me. He followed that with a big sigh, perhaps because I hadn’t been answering to his satisfaction. “Did you cast some kind of magic on it?”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like magic to infuse and retain mana. A high-level spell that changes the composition of mana to allow us dragonkin to absorb it better. Am I right?”

Van shared his very detailed analysis—maybe he wasn’t just a spoiled child with a big posse.

“Just what in the world was that?” he asked.

“I don’t really want to say too much, but...”

I placed a finger on my lips, signifying that I wanted this conversation to be a secret. Van leaned in so he could listen better.

“That was some caramel candy I’d obtained from a witch herbalist downtown,” I explained in a low voice.

“A witch...herbalist?”

“Yes. She’s an ally of dragonkin women. Nobody knows where she works, but she’s said to appear whenever a dragonkin woman is in trouble.”

“This is the first time I’m hearing of this,” Van said.

“I’m sure it is. I was told not to spread word of her,” I explained.

“Then why did you tell me?”

“Because you would hound me until I told you everything. Right?”

“Th-That’s not...”

“*Right?*” I repeated.

Van went quiet and let out a sigh. “How did you know I’d been suffering from

mana depletion that day?” he asked.

“Your hand looked very pale. People in that condition have pale skin like that. Also, your hand was convulsing,” I explained. I also told him that this was all basic knowledge I’d learned at the magic academy.

It seemed that he was satisfied by my explanation as he didn’t pursue the matter any further.

“Is that all? My parents will worry if I don’t come home soon.”

I was lying—both of my parents were busy with social commitments. They were still preparing for them right now, so I was sure they wouldn’t have even realized if I had come home or not.

I motioned to the carriage door, but Van didn’t budge. Instead, he unexpectedly extended an invitation to me.

“I want to have a less hectic conversation with you some other time. Is that all right with you?”

“I really don’t have anything more to say about the caramel candy,” I said.

“No, I don’t want to talk about that. Um, I want to have a more personal conversation with you.”

“A more personal conversation...?” I echoed.

“You know, like your interests.”

“Why would you want to hear about those?”

“I’d like to send you a present again,” he said.

“Then, how about you send me a bouquet of milk vetch?”

“Milk...vetch?” he repeated.

“That’s right.”

Van sounded as if he didn’t know what that was.

“I want you to find it on your own,” I added. “And if you manage to find it, I want you to tell me.”

“Find it? So it’s not a flower sold in any shops?” he then asked.

“Correct. No flower shops sell it,” I told him.

“I see. I understand. Milk vetch, right? I’ll go look for some.”

“I look forward to it, then.”

Van nodded deeply to me and left my carriage. Upon confirming that he was gone, I ordered the driver to move on.

The carriage fell silent after that.

Parfeil spoke up first. “Hey, Lady Mille-Feuille, you asked him to bring you milk vetch flowers? Isn’t that a bit mean?”

“Was it too much of a challenge?”

“Those flowers aren’t even in season!”

It was true—milk vetch flowers bloomed in the spring. They were planted to act as fertilizer, and fields covered with them were a sight to behold.

Of course, it was currently just the start of autumn, so there was no way he would find any.

“Oh, and I was on the edge of my seat listening to that conversation about the candy!” Parfeil added.

“I’m so glad Madeleine and I came up with that story about the witch herbalist.”

“Indeed!”

We had come up with that idea to help Madeleine out, but it’d ended up saving me instead. I needed to thank her the next time I saw her.

“Still, you can be so *mean* sometimes, milady. If you don’t want to see him again, you should just tell him outright!”

“He just didn’t seem like the type who’d give up even with a straightforward rejection,” I said.

“I know that, but, milady, being mean tends to come back to bite you back later on!” Parfeil warned.

“Then I’ll just have to pray that it doesn’t.”

That was a wish that the heavens didn't grant me.

One day, Madeleine and I were sitting in the garden, drinking tea that we had made with white clover flowers that we'd picked. I had completely forgotten about my challenge to Van Citron at that point.

Normally, weeds were thrown out upon being pulled from gardens, but I felt that it was a waste. White clovers had a calming effect on the mind, and they were relaxing to drink as tea.

Preparing the white clover tea was simple. After we'd picked some white clover flowers, we'd dried them in the sun, and I'd then let the dried flowers soak up some moonlight at night. The resulting tea had a simple and slightly sweet taste.

"Oh, I just remembered. The coed ball is coming soon," Madeleine mentioned.

The coed ball was an event where the two magic academies came together to socialize with a ballroom dance. However, a majority of the students were already engaged, so it was necessary to avoid it becoming a place to find a partner. Therefore, the organizers required attendees to wear masks and wigs. Additionally, it was forbidden to identify yourself by using your real name.

"Millefie, what dress will you be wearing to the ball?" she asked me.

"I won't be going."

"Huh? Wh-Why not?!"

"It's optional, isn't it? I don't really like such fancy events," I replied.

"Yes, it's optional, but it's not every day we can attend a coed ball! Millefie, would you *please* go to the event with me?" Madeleine asked.

"Even if I go, I'll just embarrass myself by not having a dance partner."

"That's not true! You can dance with me! I'm sure we'll have a lot of fun!"

"Dance with you?"

"Of course! I'll practice doing the man's part," Madeleine offered.

“Really now?” I said, incredulous. I laughed at her silly suggestion, but even so, I was sure that Madeleine had been looking forward to going to the ball with me. I had to give in. “If you insist, then I will go to the ball with you.”

“Really?!”

“Of course.”

Madeleine brought her hands together in joy. Seeing her happy like this made me glad that I had agreed to go.

“Oh, and you don’t have to practice the male part anymore,” I added.

“Are you going to dance the male part?” Madeleine asked.

“Yes. That sounds like a lot more fun,” I replied.

“Oh, then why don’t you wear the men’s attire as well?” Madeleine suggested.

“Me? Cross-dress?”

“Yes! You’re tall enough, so I’m sure you would look dashing! Doesn’t that sound more fun too?”

“Indeed it does,” I said, agreeing with her.

“All right, that settles it, then!”

I could just borrow one of my brother’s suits that he had worn when he’d been a student. It would only need a few modifications.

“All of a sudden, I’m looking forward to it,” I commented.

I’ll plan to wear a suit for the first half and a dress for the second half. Seems like I’ll be quite busy during the event.

Madeleine’s expression suddenly turned serious. “Oh, by the way...”

“Madeleine, is something wrong?”

“Oh, not exactly... You know how my aunt recovered from her critical condition recently? She heard the story about the witch herbalist from my mother. She’s been sending people out to investigate it,” Madeleine explained.

“I see.”

No matter how much they searched, there was no witch herbalist in the city proper. Like the downtown alchemist, we had told people that they would have trouble finding her, but it didn't seem like they were satisfied with leaving this as it was.

"Madeleine, there's no need to worry," I said, trying to reassure her. "The witch herbalist doesn't exist, so there's nothing to be exposed."

"Y-Yes, you're right."

"We'll be fine." I patted the anxious Madeleine's back to soothe her, and she calmed down after a while.

"I feel like I've been such a burden to you lately, Millefie," Madeleine lamented.

"That's not true! I've been having so much fun being with you!"

"Really?"

"Really."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Similarly, I felt relieved now that Madeleine's smile had returned. I sent Madeleine off, and my day was about to end, but Parfeil soon showed up with an awkward expression on her face.

"Um..." she began.

"Parfeil, what is it?"

"Milady, you have a visitor."

"At this hour?" It was almost sunset, so anyone arriving now was certainly not someone I had invited over.

"Who is it?"

"It's Lord Van Citron," Parfeil replied.

"What is he here for?"

"He's here to give you a bouquet of milk vetch flowers."

"He's *what*?!"

Parfeil's words jogged my memory. I certainly had told him a month ago that he could see me if he brought a bouquet of milk vetch flowers.

It's almost winter, and he's bringing me the flowers now?

"Um... What should I do with him?" Parfeil asked.

"I don't have any choice but to see him, do I?"

I needed to take responsibility for my words. I certainly would've preferred it if I had never needed to see him again, but now that he'd fulfilled the challenge, I had to grant him the meeting.

I suddenly remembered Parfeil's words.

"Milady, being mean tends to come back to bite you back later on!"

It was playing out exactly as she had said. I needed to reflect on my actions.

I let out a deep sigh and turned to Parfeil. "Let him into the visitors' lounge."

"As you wish."

Five minutes later, I headed to the visitors' lounge myself. As I opened the door, I saw Van there in his usual magic academy mantle. And sure enough, there was a bouquet of milk vetch flowers in his hands.

"Lady Mille-Feuille!"

Upon seeing me, Van approached with long strides, reminding me of a large dog who had just spotted its owner.

"'Mille-Feuille' is fine. I'll call you 'Van' in return."

"All right. Um, well, Mille-Feuille, I brought you these milk vetch flowers. Please take them." He handed me a bouquet of lovely blossoms with white petals dyed with a slight pinkish hue. They were, unmistakably, milk vetch flowers.

"Where in the world did you find these?" I asked him.

"I got seeds from a farmer and raised them in a greenhouse."

"In a *greenhouse*?!"

"Yes. I was informed that they weren't in season."

I couldn't believe he'd gone so far as to grow the flowers in a greenhouse. He had managed to find milk vetch seeds on his own and had taken care of them until they'd bloomed.

Dumbfounded, I took the bouquet from him. As I stared at the beautiful flowers, I found this entire thing to be ridiculous. I let out a hearty laugh.

"Wh-What's so funny?"

"I mean, you took milk vetch, a common plant that grows all over, and went out of your way to raise some in a greenhouse. You're probably the first person in the *world* who would grow milk vetch that way!"

"I had no choice! It doesn't bloom in winter!"

Perhaps it was because I didn't laugh very often, but once I found something funny, I couldn't help myself. I felt like it was rude to him, but I couldn't stop. I laughed for about five minutes straight after hearing Van's troubles.

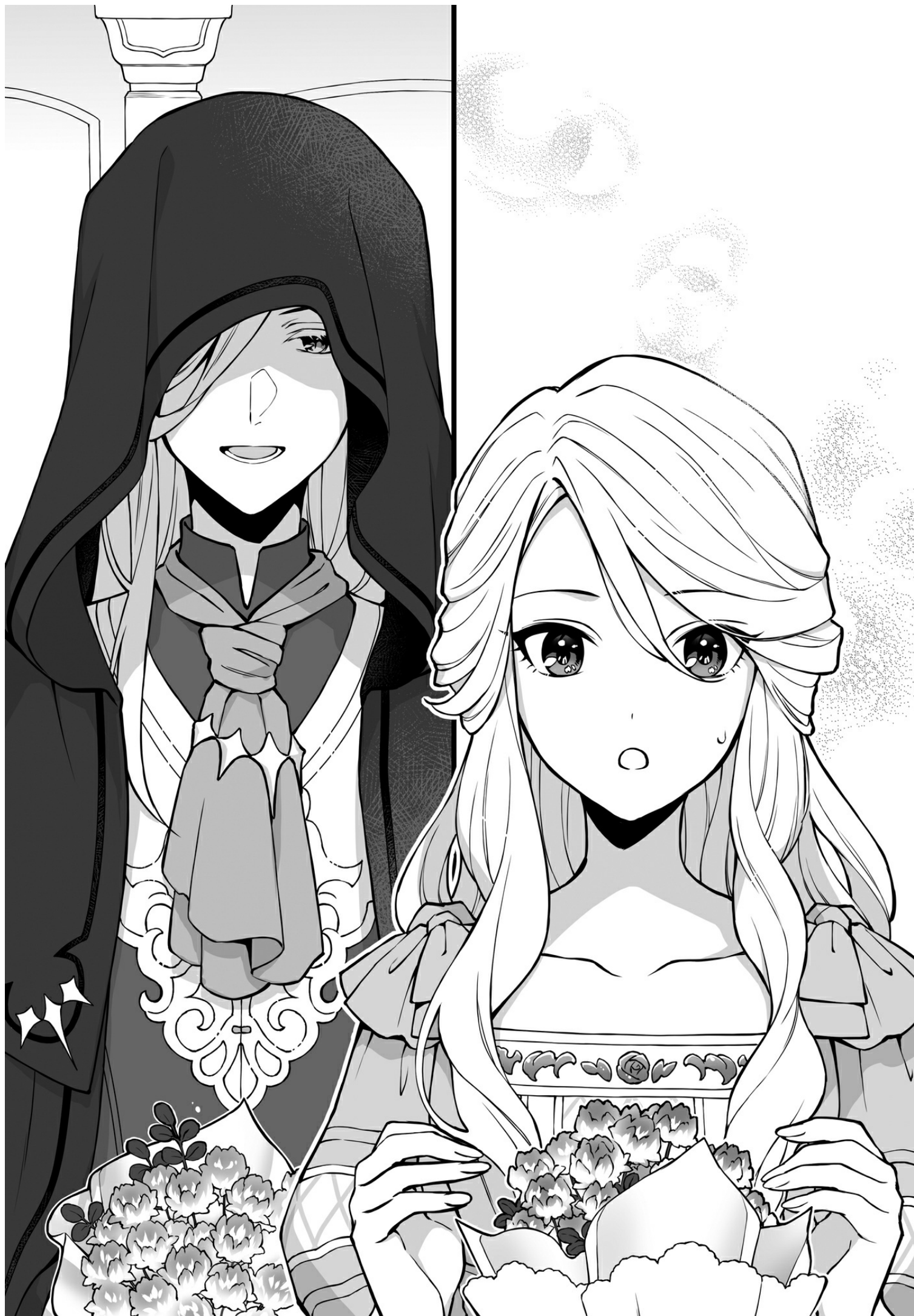
I finally settled down after drinking the tea that Parfeil had brought.

"I'm so sorry about laughing so much," I said.

"No, it's fine. You've always been either cold or angry, so seeing you laugh makes you a hundred times cu—uh, a hundred times more acceptable!"

"Acceptable?"

Even in someone else's household, Van keeps a haughty and proud demeanor. Which high-ranking noble's household is he from? Since he always keeps his hood on, it's a mystery to me.



“Oh, yes, you said you wanted to have a personal conversation with me,” I said to him. “I must remind you: I have nothing more to say about the caramel candy.”

“I’m not here to ask you about that,” Van replied.

“Then what are you here for?”

“I just wanted to talk. That’s all.”

“You just want to talk with me?”

“That’s right.”

But why? I tried to recall my actions around him. Our first meeting had been terrible. I had pointed out what he did wrong and admonished him until he’d apologized.

The next time was at the confiserie. I had indebted him to me by paying for his purchases while he had no money on hand. On top of that, I’d given him the caramel candy that restored his mana.

Our third meeting had been when he followed us in the carriage. It had seemed like he’d just wanted to ask me about the candy, but we’d mistaken him for a rogue pursuing us. It had been a terrifying experience. And after all that, I had given him the practically impossible task of getting me a bouquet of milk vetch flowers.

Looking back, was I *really* someone to chase down for a chat? I know I had been talking about myself there, but if I were in his shoes, I would avoid me.

“Why do you want to talk to me?” I asked Van.

“You’re different from other women,” he replied.

“My word!”

This situation suddenly reminded me of a romance novel I had borrowed from Madeleine. In it, there was a young nobleman who was always surrounded by well-mannered, high-class ladies. He then met a rude, rambunctious, and fearless young woman. He found her to be a breath of fresh air and was intrigued by her.

In other words, I was an *interesting woman* to Van.

I had no desire to be seen that way. Besides, Van's posse did not seem to think well of me interacting with him at all. It had been the same in the novel. Having picked a woman who had no class or manners, the nobleman had been shunned as an outcast by high society. Still, they had lived true to themselves, and eventually, they were able to leave the country, freed from the shackles that had been foisted upon them by society.

This might have seemed like a happy ending, but I didn't think so. People from noble households were raised in a bountiful environment and received a good education, but this was merely an investment in protecting the country and its citizens. The substantial wealth they had came with an equally heavy duty. Abandoning home and country was an unthinkable act.

However, among dragonkin women who lacked many freedoms, this novel was a huge hit.

I felt terrible about potentially lowering Van's standing in society just by associating with him. If I had to cut him off, I had to do it swiftly.

"You're better off not associating with a woman like me," I warned him.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You find me intriguing and unique because I'm blunt and crass toward you, don't you? It'll only be interesting in the beginning."

"That's not true," he said.

"Yes, it is. Besides, your friends don't even like it when I interact with you."

"That's only because they don't know you yet!"

"And neither do you!" I shot back. "You know absolutely nothing about me."

Is Van upset? I felt heavy tension hanging in the air.

I then continued. "Unlike other dragonkin women, I am upset that women have to bear the burden of suppressing dragons going berserk. I think that the power of dragon transformation, which is always piling suffering on our women, should just go away."

I couldn't see Van's eyes under his hood, but I did my best to stare straight at him as I continued my tirade. Perhaps he found it arrogant or impudent. But now that I felt that there was something wrong with the state of things, I couldn't bear to just sit there and do nothing about it.

"I just... I just want to know more about dragonkin women. What they think, and what they feel about their daily lives," Van said solemnly.

"Huh?"

"But all the women who approach me either are overly submissive or come to offer their hand in marriage. I just want a normal conversation, but I can't even have that."

That didn't surprise me at all. After all, his friends had been selective about the women who were allowed to talk to him.

"I'm glad that I got to hear about the plight of dragonkin women from you today," he said. "Nobody else wants to talk about it. I want to think more about what to do about it, but it's going to be difficult to do anything on my own. Would you be all right with talking about it with me more?"

Van's words seeped deep into my heart. The dragonkin men I knew would have never approached the women about their burdens, but here was Van, wanting to cooperate with me about the troubles of dragonkin women. I just couldn't refuse him.

"If you don't mind that it's me," I replied.

"Thank you."

I couldn't see Van's face, but I sensed a great wave of tranquility coming from him. I felt like this was the first time I was seeing Van smile. Perhaps, together, we could change the status quo for dragonkin women. Excitement stirred in my chest—it must have been coming from that hope.

"Oh, I just remembered. Mille-Feuille, will you be at the coed ball?" Van asked.

"I will. My friend was pretty insistent."

"I see."

“What about you?” I threw his question back at him.

“I wasn’t planning on attending, but I will go if you’re going.”

“There’s nothing interesting about it, you know.”

“You’ll be there, so I’m sure there’s going to be something,” Van quipped.

“Don’t expect too much from me.”

And then, Van dropped an invitation I didn’t expect.

“Mille-Feuille, would you like to dance with me at the ball?”

“Dance...with you?”

“Yes.”

I wouldn’t mind—or so I was about to say before remembering that I would be in men’s clothing for the first half.

“Sorry, but I already have a partner in mind,” I replied.

My partner was, of course, Madeleine. She had been looking forward to it, so I couldn’t accept Van’s invitation.

Van didn’t seem to have expected me to say no, and once again, I felt his mood turn sour.

“A partner? Who is it?”

“I’m not obliged to tell you anything,” I retorted.

“Is it your fiancé? Are you engaged?” Van pried.

“I don’t have one. My partner is just one of my acquaintances.” I didn’t want to cause Madeleine any trouble, so I kept things vague. We would both be disguised, of course, but this was just in case.

“An acquaintance?” he said. “I find it hard to believe that your partner is just an acquaintance when it sounds like he’s trying to keep you to himself.”

It seemed that he was under the impression that my partner was a man. Now, things were getting interesting.

“All right, then. If you can find me at the ball, then I might just give you a dance.”

“Okay. No matter where you are, I promise that I’ll find—”

All of a sudden, Van held a hand to his head and started writhing in pain. Concerned, I rushed to him.

“Van, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s just a migraine. Don’t worry about it,” he said, brushing it off.

“Is your mana depleted again?”

“No, it’s not. These headaches are just becoming more frequent, that’s all. Don’t mind me.”

“‘Don’t mind’ you? This is rather hard to ignore. And you say they’re getting more frequent? Are you sure you’re not sick?”

“It’s settled down now. Besides, it only hurts for a few seconds. I’ve already been checked by a doctor, but he says that I’m at the prime of my health,” Van explained.

“Well, if your doctor says so...”

“I look forward to seeing you at the ball.” Van left me those words before leaving the house.

After that, my heart felt like flames were smoldering within it. What was this feeling? Was it because of Charlotte’s memories? No, it felt like it was something else.

But no matter how much I tried to think about those questions, no answers came to me.

After Van left, I placed the bouquet of milk vetch in a vase.

“Have you learned your lesson about being mean, milady?” Parfeil chided me, clearly somewhat displeased.

“I have. I’ll need to work on that,” I replied. There was no way I could have predicted Van going out of his way to find milk vetch seeds and growing them in a greenhouse.

The color of the flowers caught my eye, and I realized they were much more

vivid than the usual ones you'd see in the wild. Was it because they had been grown in a greenhouse? Curious, I examined them with the Evaluation Glasses.

"Huh...?!"

"Milady, what's wrong?"

"It says these flowers are high quality!" I exclaimed.

"High quality? You mean they're as good as something an alchemist would create?"

"Yes!"

Van had said that he'd raised them himself, but had he used his parents' clout to hire an alchemist or something? What a mystery.

"In any case, these flowers are too high quality to just let them sit around on display," I said.

Milk vetch had other uses, such as cooling down fevers and helping to recover fatigue. These were valuable as medicine for dragonkin women.

For now, I decided to dry them, and I later made tea from the dried flowers. When I analyzed the resulting drink, it was also evaluated as high quality. High-quality ingredients really did result in high-quality products.

Still, the mystery of how Van had managed to make these flowers bloom remained.

The preparations for the ball were proceeding smoothly. Today, we had called a seamstress to adjust my brother's suit to my measurements. The seamstress wielded her needle and thread masterfully, working on the garments as if she were casting a spell.

The dress I had been planning to change into midway through the ball was one I had already prepared back in the spring. It only needed a few additional frills and some lace to be ready to wear. Our household wasn't as wealthy as Madeleine's, so I couldn't afford a brand-new dress for every season.

While the seamstress was focused on her task, I was learning the male part of the dance from my brother.

“Mille-Feuille, this is the first time I’ve heard of anyone cross-dressing for the ball,” Glacé said.

“Madeleine said she wanted to do this. You’d agree to do this too if you saw how much fun she was having,” I replied.

“Well, you’re right about that.”

We called over one of the maids so I could practice the actual dance. I’d had no idea that it was so much work to take the lead perfectly for a girl while dancing.

The next day, my body was hurting all over. It just so happened that we had dance class at the academy that day, so I ended up mixing up the male and female parts of the dance. I felt so sorry for the teacher—I stepped on her toes multiple times.

After school, Madeleine and I went to shop for wigs to wear at the ball. I was amazed at the huge selection. Whenever the season for social events arrived, masquerades were held all over the land, and the most popular wigs tended to sell out quickly.

The shopkeeper, a master of their trade, pitched the wigs with great enthusiasm. “Our bestseller is this silver wig, guaranteed to sweep the Dragon Duke himself off his feet! Customers can’t stop talking about the air of mystery it gives them!”

“Millefie, what do you think about this wig for your male outfit? The one with the long golden hair? I’m sure it would look wonderful if we tied it into a ponytail!” Madeleine suggested.

“Don’t you think that color is too flashy?” I said with reservation.

“But it suits you!” Madeleine insisted, looking at me with puppy-dog eyes. I just couldn’t refuse that gaze of hers.

“Fine, I’ll get this for my male outfit. As for my female one—”

My gaze then landed on a wavy, pearl-gray wig, and I immediately made my choice. As for Madeleine, she decided on a bright red wig, which unexpectedly suited her very well.

We didn't need to worry about getting masks. The event would be providing some, all with the same design on them.

"Millefie, I'm looking forward to the event."

"Me too."

I suddenly remembered that Van would also be attending the ball. I wondered if he was going to be okay, as I had last seen him being troubled by a migraine. Then again, if he started feeling sick, he had friends who would stop him from overexerting himself. It wasn't like he was a kid anymore, so he needed to know his limits.

However, this wasn't the time to be worrying about Van. I still had to practice my dance steps some more—I didn't want to tread all over Madeleine's toes.

I covered my head with a hood as I headed out. I had no idea where or when Van would show up, so I had to disguise myself. Being a rabbitkin, Parfeil would stand out too much if I brought her, so I had a different attendant accompany me into town.

My destination was the confiserie. It seemed that Madeleine's mother had caught wind of a woman purchasing caramel candies. The rumor of the witch herbalist spreading around town was dangerous, but I couldn't just ignore the suffering of dragonkin women, so I had been providing caramel candies only to women whose lives seemed to be in grave danger. Between magic academy schoolwork and learning high society manners from my tutor, I had a huge pile of work to do, so having a place to buy high-quality caramel candies to start from was a lifesaver.

My goal in visiting today was to have my attendant learn the confiserie's location so she could buy the candies from now on. That would eliminate the need for me to show up in person to buy them.

After buying the candies, we were heading back to the carriage when I found a woman curled up on the street. She, like me, was wearing a hood to cover her face.

I called out to her. "Hey, are you all right?"

“Uuuugh...” She tried to speak but was unable to form a coherent sentence. Her exposed hand was shivering and deathly pale.

I had once read that someone close to complete mana deprivation could suffer from a numb tongue and become unable to speak. I realized this woman must’ve been suffering from mana depletion, and I needed to restore her mana immediately.

I had some enchanted caramel candies with me in case of emergencies, but they weren’t enough for depletion this severe. However, I also had the dried milk vetch flowers in my belt bag, just in case. I took them out and put them in the woman’s mouth, but she gagged and spit them out.

“It’s okay, these aren’t poisonous. It’s medicine for recovering lost mana. Chew well before swallowing, okay? Take your time.” I tried to soothe the woman and get her to take the medicine.

Still, it wasn’t very convincing for a random stranger to come up to you and say it was fine to chew on some suspicious herbs.

What should I do? Her life will be in danger if I leave her like this.

I braced myself and whispered into the woman’s ear. “I’m the witch herbalist, a friend of women.”

I saw her eyes react to my words—it seemed that she had heard the rumors about the witch.

“These are dried milk vetch flowers enchanted with mana from the moon,” I said, reassuring her. “I’m sure these will help you recover.” To further convince her, I put some of the flowers in my own mouth, chewed on them, and swallowed. I immediately felt the mana in my body stir, and I could feel myself becoming revitalized.

“See? I’m fine, right? Come now, have some.”

The woman nodded slightly. It seemed that my actions had paid off. She put some of the dried milk vetch in her mouth.

“Ahh!” she cried.

I could see the color instantly return to her hands. I let out a sigh of relief

after seeing that it was effective.

“A-Are you...really the witch herbalist?” she asked. Her voice sounded young, but it was difficult to tell the age of a dragonkin from just their voice or appearance.

“Yes, I’m the witch herbalist. Keep today a secret, okay?”

The woman nodded. Now I only needed to bring her to a physician...or so I thought. Instead, the woman’s attendant and a couple of knights who seemed to be her bodyguards approached her.

“Your Highness!”

“We finally found you!”

Her convoy quickly surrounded her, and I used that moment to slip away from the scene.

She should be in good hands now.

Shortly after, our carriage arrived. My attendant and I boarded it and headed back.

Back at home, I stared out the window. The woman from earlier had been called “Your Highness” by her escorts. She must have been a noble of very high standing.

How come these important nobles keep managing to shake off their escorts so easily? Van and “Her Highness” both. I just don’t understand.

In any case, I had now named myself the witch herbalist to help that noblewoman recover. Now, I could only hope that she would remember to keep quiet about it.

And finally, the day of the coed ball arrived. I had been getting ready for it since the morning.

I’m so glad I don’t have to wear a corset today.

Today, I was wearing a pair of pants and a shirt, along with a tie. Putting on a

jacket instantly straightened my posture. I completed the look with the wig that Madeleine had picked for me, tying its long hair up in a ponytail.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, you look so handsome,” Parfeil said upon seeing my outfit. “You look dashing!”

“Really? That’s good to hear,” I said, accepting Parfeil’s compliment. I held out my hand to dance with her, and her face turned red—an unusual response from her.

“Milady, please don’t be such a tease!”

“Oh, sorry about that, Parfeil.”

“I’m so flustered!”

“Same here.”

That was enough fooling around as it was almost time to meet up with Madeleine. We stood by the entrance and she arrived right on time.

Upon seeing me, she covered her mouth in shock and even began to tear up.

“Madeleine, what’s wrong?” I asked, worried.

“Millefie, you look even more amazing than I expected!” Madeleine exclaimed.

“Huh?”

“Your slender figure, your androgynous profile, and your princely aura! It’s like you’re a hero from a romance novel! You look *perfect*!”

“Th-Thank you...” I was relieved that I lived up to Madeleine’s expectations.

The coed ball was taking place at the Burgundy Manor, a place in the middle of the city’s central district that held various social events. Inside its white brick walls was a dance hall that could fit up to two thousand people. The two magic academies held the coed ball here every year.

Madeleine and I left our carriage and surveyed the venue. All the attendees were wearing masks, so it was impossible to tell the guests apart from one another.

It was also forbidden to use our real names here, so Madeleine and I had come up with pseudonyms—I was “Phy” and Madeleine was “Nene.” We needed to pay careful attention so as to not call each other by the wrong names, especially Madeleine.

As I had been wearing high-heeled shoes, the difference between our heights was more pronounced than usual, which Madeleine seemed to be delighted about.

She showered me with even more compliments as we entered. “Oh, Phy, you’re so dashing today! And you’re handling your role as an escort very smoothly!”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

We went past the marbled entrance arch and climbed the stairs. I kept in mind my brother’s advice about holding on to Madeleine’s waist as we walked.

The dance hall was already filled with attendees. I had my doubts about whether people would be able to socialize while hiding behind masks, but it looked like everyone was enjoying themselves.

“I think there’s something exciting about not being able to disclose your identity to others,” Madeleine remarked.

“Indeed,” I replied.

There was food and drinks set out in a corner of the dance hall. The menu included a number of cakes that I figured Madeleine would love.

“Madeleine, look, there’s cake!” I whispered to Madeleine.

She started to fret a bit. “My corset strings will pop if I start eating that.”

“Oh, I suppose you’re right.”

As Madeleine and I made small talk, a group of three women approached us.

“Good evening. Is this your first time at a party?” one of the women asked me.

“Yes, it is,” I replied.

I worried that my voice would give away my gender, but that didn’t happen.

Instead, the group complimented me.

“You look so handsome!”

“You’ve really caught my eye!”

In the end, one of them asked me for a dance.

“Sorry, but Phy will be dancing with *me*!” Madeleine grabbed my arm and rejected the invitation for me.

The group of women backed off and went away, but they clearly looked displeased.

“Nene, please be gentler when rejecting invitations,” I chided her.

“Oh, you’re quite right, Phy. But I was so offended at the thought of them taking you away from me!”

“You’re my only partner while I’m dressed in this outfit, Nene,” I reassured Madeleine.

“Oh, Phy, thank you!”

The song being played changed, and now there was a waltz with a slow tempo. I was sure that even though she was wearing a corset, Madeleine would be able to dance to this with few difficulties. I was a bit embarrassed to do so, but I invited her to dance with me.

“Milady, may I have this dance?”

“O-Of course! I would gladly dance with you.” Madeleine happily accepted my invitation.

I took her hand and placed it on mine, and we carefully made our way into the group of dancers. An enchanting melody performed by the orchestra filled the halls.

It was time to bring about the fruit of my efforts. I showed off the steps I had practiced, dancing to the gentle rhythm. Madeleine matched my movements with a charming dance that evoked the image of songbirds flitting about on the ground.

We finished dancing and slid off to the side. As we did, people started

gathering around us.

“How lovely!”

“That was wonderful!”

We were showered with such compliments. It felt nice to receive that much praise, and Madeleine looked happy too.

All of a sudden, the sea of people parted. A tall man with braided, icy-green hair that reached his chest approached us. He wore military-style formal wear that strangely suited his stature. Like all of the other attendees, his mask hid his identity. Still, he walked toward us with quick strides and spoke to us in a haughty tone.

“Hey, you there!”

Immediately, I recognized his voice as Van’s.

Did he approach me because he figured out who I was?

He followed that up with a question. “Um, are you...a man?”

He must have sounded outlandish to everyone else watching. Van himself must have been questioning his own judgment too, if his tone was any indication.

If I say something here, he might be able to identify me by my voice. Now what should I do...?

But before I could deliberate further, Madeleine spoke up.

“This man is *my* dance partner! I would like to ask you to refrain from badgering him!”

Madeleine had rebuked Van with such vigor that he flinched. In the meantime, his friends arrived to pull him away from the commotion.

I took Madeleine to the side as well and whispered into her ear. “Thank you, Nene. You really helped me out there.”

“You’re welcome.”

A while back, when Van had bumped into her, she had cowered behind me. But tonight, she had managed to confidently confront him to protect me. I was

grateful, of course, but I didn't want her to push herself too much.

After all that commotion, I refreshed my throat with some apple juice and headed to the changing room that we had reserved prior. It was almost time to change into my other outfit.

Normally, men and women had to reserve separate rooms from one another. Of course, since we had made a reservation as Mille-Feuille and Madeleine, we'd had no difficulty in obtaining a room.

We checked our surroundings before dashing to the door. We managed to get inside without being seen.

Parfeil was waiting there for us. "Welcome back, Lady Mille-Feuille!"

"Thank you for waiting, Parfeil."

"Did you enjoy the ball, milady?"

"Yes, quite," I replied. I sat on the couch to catch my breath. "That was nerve-racking. Madeleine, how are you doing?"

"I feel like my chest is about to burst from all the excitement!" she said.

We had managed to get through the dance without my disguise being broken. Looking back on it, this had been just the right amount of thrill for us.

"Everyone in the hall must have mistaken you for a prince from somewhere, Millefie," Madeleine remarked.

"I'm amazed that I managed to fool everyone with my outfit."

"You were so dashing out there, after all!"

I removed my suit and changed into my dress with Parfeil's help. I had picked this simply designed emerald-green dress so I could have it customized, and the seamstress had managed to touch it up to make it look even more elegant than before. I put on my pearl-gray wig and fastened it with hairpins, and Parfeil fashioned it into a beautiful upswept hairstyle.

Madeleine also changed into a sapphire-blue wig, which Parfeil styled into a half updo. She also put a shawl on over her dress. Just changing her hair color and hairstyle made Madeleine look like a completely different person.

“If I kept the same appearance as earlier, everyone would be asking where Phy went, wouldn’t they?” Madeleine explained.

“You’re right about that,” I said, drinking the tea that Parfeil had poured. Unlike earlier, I was now wearing a corset, which made it more difficult for me to relax. “Madeleine, I’m surprised you managed to dance with a corset on.”

“It was difficult at first, but I managed to ease in while dancing. I almost forgot that I was wearing one! How about you, Millefie? Wasn’t it hard to dance with high heels on?”

“It wasn’t too hard. I was more worried that I’d step on your toes by accident,” I admitted. I felt some relief knowing that Madeleine had enjoyed the dance.

“Oh, that reminds me. About that man pestering you earlier—”

“It was Van Citron,” I said, preempting her.

“I *knew* it was him.” Apparently, Madeleine had also figured it out from how he sounded. “His voice has a charming quality about it. I think the way he speaks in a low voice is very attractive, and it’s very recognizable,” she said, complimenting Van.

“I suppose it is.” I hadn’t really been paying attention to his voice, but now that I thought about it, a familiar line echoed in my head.

“No matter where you’re reborn, I promise that I’ll find you!”

I felt my heart beat faster as I replayed the Dragon Duke’s words. But that was a voice from my previous life—why was I remembering it now while I was talking about Van? I thought that their voices sounded alike, but it must have been a coincidence...so why did I feel so uneasy?

“Millefie, is something wrong?” Madeleine asked.

“O-Oh, it’s nothing. I’m fine,” I reassured her.

“If you’re tired, you should rest here for a while.”

“No, really, I’m fine.”

I didn’t want to worry Madeleine any further, so I explained the wager

between me and Van to her instead.

Madeleine was surprised. “Oh, to think that you’ve been getting close to him while I wasn’t around!”

“I haven’t been getting close to him! I only met him by coincidence,” I protested. I told her not to be surprised if Van suddenly showed up.

She puffed out her cheeks as if to say, *“That’s no fun!”*

Instead, she said, “It seems like Mr. Citron has taken quite an interest in you.”

“He only finds me interesting because I’ve been talking to him like an equal. He’ll get bored of me soon enough.”

“Do you really think so?”

Although he had been wearing a mask, tonight had been the first time I’d seen Van without a hood on. I tried to imagine what he might look like underneath the mask, but the only face I could imagine was the Dragon Duke’s. Why, though? They were two completely different people.

I shook my head, trying to push away all thoughts about the Dragon Duke. At last, I headed out with Madeleine to the dance hall to clear my head.

The hall was just as lively as we’d left it. Unlike when I had been wearing my male outfit, I didn’t feel like I was attracting unwanted attention anymore. But just when I was about to let my guard down, a voice called out to me.

“I finally found you!”

Van Citron was running toward us. It seemed like he had been desperately searching for me because he looked out of breath.

“I didn’t get the wrong person this time, did I?!” he asked.

“No, you didn’t, so calm down already,” I reprimanded him.

But the moment I told Van that he was right, he did something I never would’ve expected—he embraced me, right in front of a crowd of spectators.

“Yes! I finally found you!!!”

Van was so excited that he began acting like a big, happy dog around me. I felt my heart leap in my chest.

In the next moment, Van's friends were behind him, shouting.

"What are you doing?!"

"Cease that at once!"

Then, Van did something else beyond my wildest expectations—he swept me off my feet and into his arms and began running.

"Hey?!" I yelped.

"Better keep quiet or you'll bite your tongue," Van warned me.

I wanted to protest but decided to follow his advice. Van ran past his posse into the ground-floor hallway and out into the garden. He finally put me down at a gazebo deep within the garden.

"You sure are good at getting away from your friends," I commented.

"I do my best."

Unbelievable. I had intended my remark to be sarcastic, but he looked as happy as if he'd received an actual compliment. My tone had completely gone over his head.

"So how did you find out it was me? What gave it away?"

"Your smell," Van replied.

"Huh?"

"I could tell by your smell," he said again. "But there was a man at the dance hall who smelled exactly like you, so I got confused."

Are you some kind of dog? I almost said that to his face, but I managed to swallow my words. Dragonkin tended to have some heightened senses, such as enhanced sight, smell, or hearing. It seemed that Van had a particularly good sense of smell.

"Still, I thought that was strange. I've never gotten someone's scent wrong before."

"The dance hall reeked of perfume. Maybe that was interfering with your sense of smell?" I offered an explanation to throw him off.

“Yeah, that’s probably what happened.”

Relief washed over me—it looked like I had managed to cover my tracks. It didn’t really matter if he managed to find out, but I thought it’d be no fun if he uncovered my disguise.

“Oh yes, I have a question for you,” I said.

“What is it?” Van asked. I could hear the excitement in his voice, but my question wasn’t about him.

“How did you manage to get those milk vetch flowers?”

“Oh, those?”

“Yes.”

Van *really* must have thought that I was going to ask about him as I sensed a hint of disappointment in his tone once I brought up the milk vetch.

“Did you actually hire an alchemist to grow those?” I asked.

“I did not! I raised those flowers with all my heart!”

“Really now? Could you please tell me all about how you did it?” I requested.

“Well, if you insist, then I’ll talk about it,” Van said, becoming haughty. Just hearing the word “please” led him to immediately change his tone. “My first attempt to raise the milk vetch flowers failed. There were some buds, but they didn’t bloom.”

Milk vetch, which bloomed in the early spring, wasn’t adapted to warm weather. In fact, it was resistant to the cold. Normally, one had to plant seeds in the autumn and have them germinate. The buds would then survive the winter so that they could bloom in the spring.

“So, the greenhouse was too hot for the buds?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

He had then had the thought that it might be better to raise them outside, so he’d planted the seeds out in the cold.

“That was also a failure,” he explained. “The frost killed all the buds.”

Even though milk vetch could grow in poor soil and was resistant to the cold, they stood no chance of survival against frost. They needed to be grown in autumn, before the frost could set in.

“What did you end up doing, then?”

Perhaps it was because I had been listening intently, but I felt a hint of pride in Van’s voice as he started explaining what he had done.

“I remembered an interesting farming technique that I read in a history book.”

He was referring to a technique developed during a famine hundreds of years ago.

“They mixed powdered magicstone into the soil and enchanted it in order to make crops grow faster,” Van explained.

Magicstone fertilizer—a substance that provided mana to plants. It was magic that made the quick growth of plants possible.

“I raised the flowers in the greenhouse so that they wouldn’t die to frost.”

When magicstone fertilizer had been mixed into the soil and enchanted, buds had started to grow in an instant. By the next day, the flowers had bloomed.

“It took me a whole month because of my failures, but I delivered the flowers as promised.”

“Incredible...!” I said.

“Well, it wasn’t such a big deal—”

“No, this is the discovery of a lifetime!”

I leaned in and grabbed Van’s hands.

“Wh-Wha—?!”

“Could you give me the recipe for that magicstone fertilizer?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“I’m interested.”

“Do you love milk vetch *that* much?”

“I do!”

“Then I’ll grow more and give them to you.”

“I want to raise them myself! Please?” I begged.

Unlike the ointment and caramel candies, it was possible to produce milk vetch at a larger scale. By making tea with it and adjusting the concentration, it would be possible to adjust the amount of mana that it could restore too.

“All right. One of these days, I will come to your house and teach it to you,” Van said.

“Huh? But why...? Can’t you just teach the recipe to me through a letter?”

“It’s not that easy. There’s a trick to making it,” Van explained.

Even so, he seemed to have gotten the hint that I didn’t want to be taught directly. His expression had clouded over, and I could see a hint of disappointment as he said that.

“Then, um, never mind, then,” I said. “I’ll leave it to you.”

“There’s no way around it, so I’ll be showing up to teach you.”

Suddenly, a bell rang to signify that there were ten minutes until the end of the event. The ball was almost over.

“Well, we’d better head back to the hall.”

“Oh no!” Van stood up in a rush and grasped his head.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I haven’t danced with you today!”

“Oh, that’s too bad. Then next time—”

“There’s no next time! I’ll be graduating from the academy this year.”

“Then perhaps we’ll meet at a party somewhere?” I suggested.

“Maybe, but I wanted to dance with you today.”

Van was visibly dejected, much like a large dog after having been told that he wouldn’t be going on a walk outside today because of rain.

With this tall stature of his, I wish he didn't look so pitiful when he's sad.

"I can still hear the ensemble playing, you know," I said to him.

"So?"

"So, shall we dance?"

I offered my hand to him, and Van looked delighted as he took it. If he had a tail, I was sure that it would be wagging madly right now. He truly wore his heart on his sleeve.

The final song of the ball was a fast-tempo waltz. In this wide-open garden, we didn't have to worry about bumping into anyone else. We held hands as we danced under the starry night sky. The scent of lily of the valley filled my nose as I stayed close to him. For some reason, I felt uneasy.

One, two, three. One, two, three. We spun and danced as we counted the steps. The spins were much faster than a regular waltz, and it was a struggle not to make a misstep.

Suddenly, I sensed Van's gaze on me. He looked gentle and was smiling at me. I felt my heart skip a beat. Though we were both wearing masks, at this distance, I could see his sky-blue eyes. They glittered with innocence, clearly enjoying the sight of me.

"You seem to be confident with your moves," I quipped.

"I'm just enjoying myself. I don't care about the steps right now. Just move as you please. It's more fun that way."

My dance teacher would've fainted at those words, but right now, there was no teacher to watch our every move. There was only the night sky above and the beautiful roses that bloomed in winter.

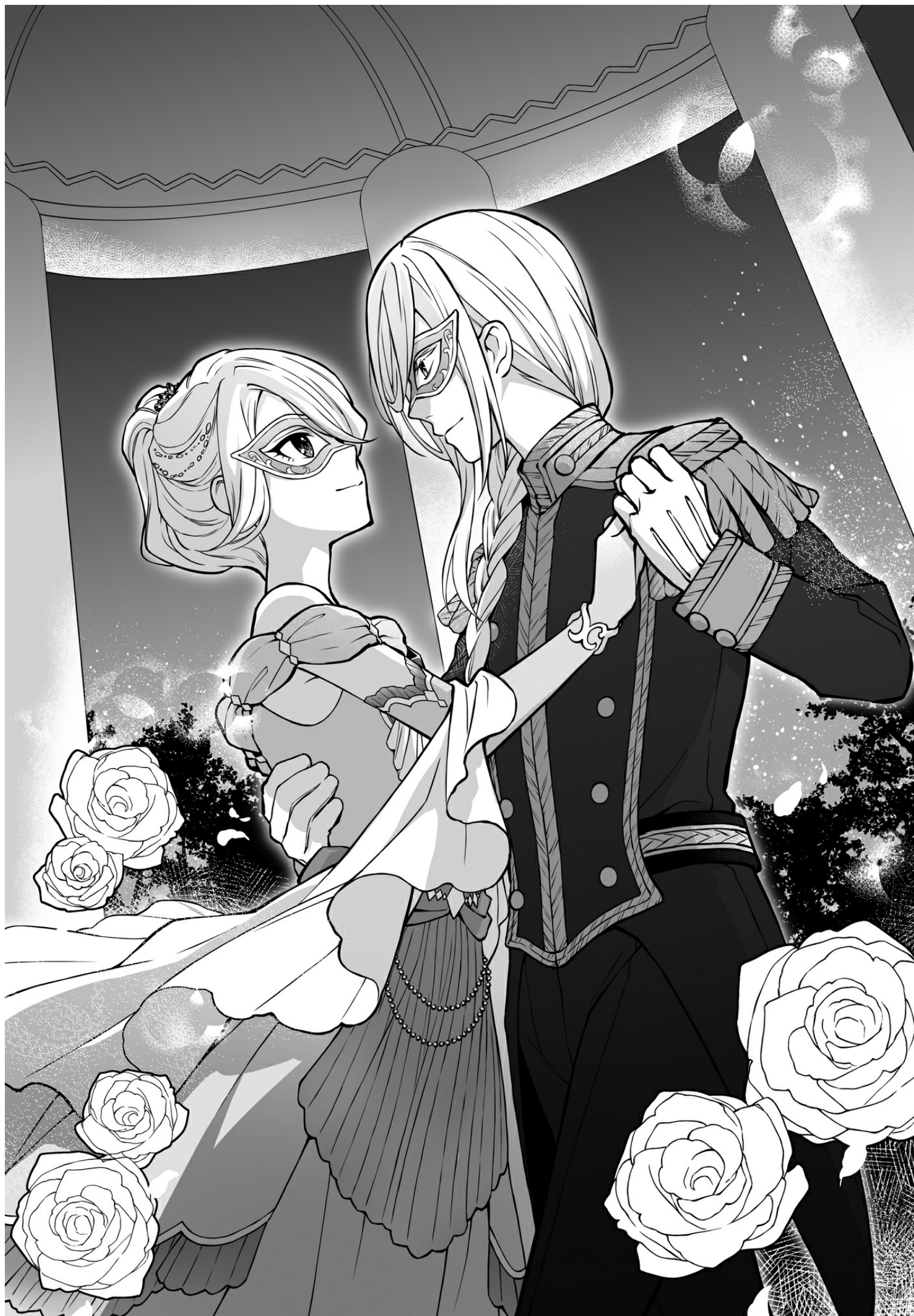
"This waltz was originally performed in small rural villages. There were no proper steps to it like there are now," Van explained.

"So, we just need to enjoy ourselves?" I asked.

"That's right."

Then there was no longer a need to worry if I was getting the steps right. Just

as he suggested, I danced and moved around as I pleased. As I did, the scenery around me changed. Once I stopped worrying about the proper moves, I became able to appreciate my surroundings: the roses, the night sky, and the expressions on Van's face.



Once the song ended, we plopped down on the grass. Van had played around too much and fell over on his back.

“Jeez! What are you doing?” I asked.

Van didn’t reply, and instead pointed at the sky. Stars dotted almost every bit of the sky, and it was almost as if he could grasp them.

“It’s beautiful,” he muttered.

For a fleeting, peaceful moment, we gazed at the countless stars in the sky. But before long, we heard voices calling for Van from a distance.

“It seems like your convoy has arrived. Why don’t you go and greet them?”

“No way.”

“You’re not some small-time brat, you know.”

I stood up and helped Van up. He hesitated to grab my hand for a moment but eventually stood up as well. We brushed off the grass on our clothes and returned to the hall. Van met up with his escorts, and I went to join up with Madeleine and Parfeil. We had set our meeting place at the entrance in case any of us got lost.

We boarded our carriage and headed home.

“Millefie, how are you doing?” Madeleine asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked back, puzzled.

“Well, um, did Van Citron do anything...strange to you?”

“Strange?”

I paused to think about what she was saying, and as I did, Madeleine placed her hands over her mouth and appeared to be scandalized.

“If he did anything to you, we’ll have to make him take responsibility!” she said.

“Responsibility? How?”

“Why, have him *marry* you, of course!”

I almost rolled my eyes at Madeleine’s outlandish remark. *Marry Van Citron?*

There's no way I would ever. Absolutely not.

"Madeleine, I'm fine," I insisted. "He didn't do anything that would require him to 'take responsibility.'"

"I'm glad that we were at a masquerade. If we had our faces exposed, you being abducted would be the talk of the town right now!"

"Well, that's a terrifying thought," I remarked.

My meeting with Van had provided me with useful information, however. I told Madeleine about the magicstone fertilizer.

"If you can grow high-quality milk vetch flowers, then the future of dragonkin women looks bright!" she said.

"Indeed."

Once mass production became possible, I could make "witch herbalist" my actual occupation. Managing that with just Madeleine and me would be difficult, so perhaps we could enlist Glacé's help as well. Such connections between people would help illuminate the future ahead.

Isn't that such a wonderful thing? I believed that thought with every fiber of my being.

Chapter 3: Who Is the Witch Herbalist?!

As promised, Van visited my house to teach me how to make the magicstone fertilizer.

“We only need basic Earth Magic for this,” he explained to me. “There’s a trick to it, but we don’t need to do anything more advanced.”

“Then you could’ve just written it down instead of coming here,” I mumbled.

“Did you say something?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Unlike at the coed ball, we couldn’t be left to our own devices today. Parfeil was in the corner of the room as a chaperone.

“Oh, I just realized that you’re alone today. What happened to all your friends?” I asked Van.

“I sneaked away from them.”

“I’m surprised that they haven’t abandoned you by now,” I said, astounded by his persistence.

“Well, of course not! I’m, uh, quite important, after all!”

“Yes, of course you are.”

I’d recently noticed that Van spoke with the tone of a proud noble, but it was mixed with the roughness of a teenage boy. It must have been the influence of the boys’ magic academy on him.

He almost sounds cute when he talks like a teenager.

I still had yet to get a proper glimpse at his face, and his background was a complete mystery to me. But no matter where he was from or who he really was, all I needed right now was for him to teach me how to make the magicstone fertilizer. I had browsed various reference materials regarding the fertilizer, but none of them were able to provide information on how to make

it. Van's social standing must have been high enough to give him access to restricted books and materials, so I couldn't help but envy him.

Still, I was glad that he was kind enough to share what he knew. At the very least, I wanted to express my gratitude to him for this opportunity.

"Oh yes, do you remember when we talked about the burdens that dragonkin women carry? I've been doing some research of my own since then," Van told me. Apparently, mana depletion was a major cause of dragons going berserk while transformed. He had come up with the idea of giving something like my caramel candies to dragonkin men as a preventive measure.

"But Duchesse says that the matter isn't that simple," Van continued.

"Duchesse?"

"Yes, of House Langue de Chat."

"Oh, your polite friend," I commented.

"Yeah, that's him."

According to Duchesse Langue de Chat, simply restoring a dragon's mana wouldn't suppress a berserk state. Only the Suppression Magic of dragonkin women was able to do so.

"Of course, feeding a dragon in his berserk state presents a problem in itself," Van remarked.

"You're right, now that you mention it."

It seemed that berserk states were a burden that both men and women needed to carry after all.

"What do *you* do when you go berserk?" I asked Van.

"I've been relying on one of my relatives, but her constitution is rather frail..."

According to Van, whenever she had used Suppression Magic, she had ended up bedridden for up to a month. Recently, they had been calling in a Sealing Enforcer before Van could go into a berserk state in order to pin him down.

"We tried searching for that witch herbalist you mentioned before, but we couldn't find her."

“I see.”

“If only we could find a way to solve this without relying on her...” Van lamented.

If I could manage to mass-produce the milk vetch flowers, I might be able to save Van’s relative. I still wasn’t sure if I would be able to succeed, so I held back my thoughts.

“Van, here’s some caramel candy from the witch herbalist. Why don’t you give these to your family?” I said, offering them to him.

“Don’t you need those too?”

“I’ll be fine. Besides, neither my brother nor my father transform that often.”

I placed the candies in his hands and clasped them together.

“Mille-Feuille, thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome. Think of it as my gift of gratitude for teaching me how to make the magicstone fertilizer.”

Van then started teaching me the method for making the fertilizer. It wasn’t as easy as crushing magicstones and mixing them with soil; a spell was required to combine the materials.

“And that’s how you do it,” Van finished.

“Got it. I’ll try it next.”

My first attempt ended in failure. On my next try, I managed to succeed with Van’s help. By then, I had figured out the idea behind the procedure. With enough repetition, I would probably learn to master it.

As we were admiring the finished magicstone fertilizer over tea, an unexpected visitor showed up—my brother.

“Mille-Feuille, can I have a word with you?” he called from outside.

Without waiting for my response, Glacé barged into the room. He must have had no idea that Van was here because the moment he saw a stranger in the room, his face went pale.

“Mille-Feuille, who might this young man be?”

“He’s Van. Van Citron,” I replied.

“Citron? First time I’ve heard of that name,” he said, puzzled. It appeared that he’d thought that it was Madeleine who was visiting, so that was why he’d opened the door without waiting for my reply.

A bachelor and a bachelorette fraternizing in a room did not paint a good picture. Even if there was an attendant to watch over them, this was an unthinkable act. Even Madeleine and Glacé, despite being engaged, weren’t allowed to rendezvous on account of them having yet to marry.

Glacé began interrogating me. “What have you two been doing here?”

“Studying magic,” I replied.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Right, Parfeil?”

“Yes, unmistakably,” my attendant replied. “Both of them were quite diligent in their studies!”

“I see...”

Glacé had been staring—almost glaring, honestly—at Van, and the latter swiftly stood up. Without hesitation, he approached my brother and bowed deeply.

“I apologize for visiting without prior notice and for spending some time alone with Lady Mille-Feuille,” he said. “I will send a notice beforehand the next time I visit.”

“Mr. Citron, shall we have a bit of a talk?” said Glacé, and he then led Van out of the room for a chat.

I’d thought that Glacé had no interest in me, but it seemed that that wasn’t the case.

“I hope Van will be fine,” I whispered to Parfeil once the storm brewing in the room had moved outside.

“Right now, I worry more about Lord Glacé,” Parfeil said.

“Why is that?”

“Just a gut feeling.”

An hour later, Glacé returned. His face was completely pale.

“Mille-Feuille, I think you should stop seeing that man,” he said.

“Oh, why is that?”

“He’s not a good match for you.”

“Hmm, I see...”

Just as I had thought, Van must have been the heir to a high-ranking family and had barged into our household without warning. Perhaps it really *was* time for me to cut him out of my life.

“I understand. I’ll stop seeing him.” I agreed to my brother’s request.

Our relationship had been built out of business interests, so I had no hard feelings about having to stop seeing him...or so I thought. Instead, I now felt like someone had grabbed my heart and squeezed it tight.

What is this feeling? I thought long and hard but couldn’t find any explanation.

I should just forget about him, I decided and did my best to shelve these inexplicable emotions in a corner of my mind.

We were now deep into the winter and it had been a month since I’d last seen Van. The days had become bitterly cold, and the snow seemed never-ending. It was said that winter only truly began once the snow started to pile up.

Today, Madeleine and I were in the greenhouse. Parfeil and a gardener were also here to help us out. Since we would be tending to plants, Madeleine and I had borrowed aprons from the maids. Being in a maid’s outfit made me feel different from usual.

“All right, let’s start,” I announced. Our objective was to plant the milk vetch seeds. “Before anything else, we’ll spread the magicstone fertilizer.”

The gardener was curious about the bag on the floor and stared at it. “Milady,

is this the fertilizer you were talking about?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” I replied.

The powdered magicstone fertilizer was sparkling from inside the bag. I spread a modest amount of the fertilizer onto the soil, and the others used hoes to till the fertilized soil. While Parfeil and the gardener wielded their tools with adept hands, Madeleine struggled as it was her first time doing garden work.

“Huff, huff... Th-This is quite difficult!”

The gardener went over to Madeleine and taught her the proper techniques to till the soil, and she quickly got better at her work.

The plot of soil was not that big, so we finished the first part of our work within an hour. Then, all that remained was to sow the seeds. We buried the seeds we sowed under a layer of soil. After we had watered them, the soil began giving off a faint glow.

“Wh-What’s happening?!” the gardener exclaimed in surprise.

“The magicstone fertilizer is glowing?” Madeleine asked.

“No, I think the Earth Magic is reacting to the water and activating,” I speculated.

Once I finished watering the seedbed, bumps began showing in the soil, and in the blink of an eye, milk vetch buds began to sprout.

“Millefie, they’re sprouting!”

“What a surprise!”

“Apparently, they’ll start blooming by tomorrow,” I said.

“I can’t wait to see them,” Madeleine replied.

We finished up our work, and Madeleine and I sat down for tea.

“Millefie,” Madeleine began. “Earlier, Glacé talked to me about Van Citron...”

It seemed that my brother had also requested that Madeleine stop meeting up with Van.

“I can’t believe my brother would go as far as chiding you about Van as

well...”

Madeleine was concerned. “I don’t really mind, but what about you, Millefie? Are you fine with not seeing him anymore?” she asked.

“Well, of course! It felt like I couldn’t get rid of him. I won’t miss him at all.” But even though I had said that, I felt a dull pain in my chest. It was as if I had hurt myself with my own words.

Why? Even though I asked myself, I couldn’t find an answer.

“I might be imagining it, but are you attracted to Van Citron?” she then asked.

“Wh-Why would you think that?”

“A gut feeling, perhaps.”

Too many people have been saying that around me lately.

However, Madeleine’s words forced me to confront head-on the feelings that had been bothering me.

Attracted to Van? Me? To that haughty, bratty man? The man who kept acting like a big puppy, with his innocent, childlike laughter?

I’m attracted to him?

“There’s no way I could be attracted to a man whose face I’ve never seen before...I don’t think.”

If I ever had a small inkling of *wanting* to see him—it must have been simply to update him on the work I had been doing. That was *definitely* it.

“But, Millefie, I’m sure that I had been attracted to Glacé before meeting him, back when we had only been corresponding through letters. You might not like him as a person, but you *are* attracted to his personality.”

“His personality, huh...”

Van had never treated me as the daughter of a noble. Instead, he was perhaps the first man to interact with me as though I were a normal dragonkin girl.

“Still, I wonder why Glacé told you to stop meeting with him,” Madeleine wondered aloud. Glacé had been uncharacteristically on edge, so Madeleine

hadn't been able to ask him why.

"I'm only speculating, but it was probably because Van is close to the Dragon Duke," I commented.

"I see..."

Nothing about the Dragon Duke's marriage had been announced to the public, so it was possible that Van was the Dragon Duke's son. If that was the case, then that would explain why his friends were so overprotective of him.

And of course, a family like mine was a terrible match for the son of the Dragon Duke. I wouldn't blame Glacé for turning pale and telling me to stop meeting with Van.

"That reminds me. Millefie, have you done the Rite of the Mana Altar?" Madeleine asked.

"No, not yet."

The Rite of the Mana Altar was a ritual that measured one's mana capacity. It was performed yearly during the season when iris flowers were in bloom. For the last three years, I had gone to the church with Parfeil for the ritual, but once I had seen the line, I would give up and think that we could always go the following year.

"They'll measure my mana capacity once we graduate anyway, so I don't see the point in going to the church just to do that," I argued.

"I see. And how are your parents planning your marriage?" she asked.

"Last I heard, father was busy gathering funds for my dowry. That was a year ago."

The dowry—or in other words, capital that the bride's family needed to prepare for her marriage. Normally, it was something that a family had to begin saving the moment a daughter was born, but my father had completely forgotten about it. My mother had apparently had to remind him about it on my thirteenth birthday, and now they were scrambling to gather the funds. At present, they had barely saved anything up, so any talk about my marriage was up in the air.

The dowry was an important matter for dragonkin women wanting to get married. If a woman wished to marry into a high-ranking noble family, she would need to prepare a vast amount of money.

“If I don’t get married, I think I would just pretend to enter a monastery and *actually* become the witch herbalist,” I quipped.

“N-No way! I would be devastated if House Forêt Noire didn’t have you in it!” Madeleine lamented.

“Madeleine, I am a woman, so I won’t be living in this house forever.”

If I ever got married, I would have to leave this house. Having my husband live here was out of the question while my brother was around.

“But I’m only marrying Glacé because *you’re* around!” Madeleine cried.

“You’re marrying my brother because you love him, aren’t you?”

“Well, I love him as much as I love you!”

“I’m honored, but you should never say that in front of my brother, okay?” I chided her.

“Well, of *course* not!”

I felt relieved as I saw Madeleine nod in affirmation. Her love for me could be overwhelming at times.

“I had been thinking that you should just go ahead and marry Van Citron, but it seems like that would bring a lot of problems on its own,” Madeleine added.

“I would rather not have people criticize me for entering a marriage with mismatched social standings.” I knew that Van’s friends in particular would definitely not approve of such a marriage.

Madeleine’s attendant then approached and whispered into her ear. It seemed that it was time for her to go home.

“Millefie, I will take my leave now,” she said.

“All right then. Thank you for accompanying me today. I had a lot of fun.”

“Me too!”

Madeleine departed with a huge smile on her face, and Glacé entered soon afterward.

“You just missed Madeleine,” I told him.

“I thought she would at least show her face before she left.”

“She must have thought you were busy.”

“Then I’ll leave it at that.” Glacé took a seat at the bench that Madeleine had previously occupied.

“Do you need anything from me?” I asked him.

“I was just checking up on you,” he replied.

“About what?”

“Checking up on whether you’ve been meeting up with *him*.”

“I haven’t,” I said. “If you don’t believe me, why don’t you hire an investigator and find out for yourself?”

“No, I believe you. I don’t think you would ever lie to me,” Glacé said with confidence.

“Are you sure about that?” Depending on the circumstances, I would definitely lie, even to him. But when I expressed as much, Glacé merely laughed it off.

“I’m sorry I can’t approve of your relationship with Van,” he said.

“I don’t really care. I’m sure father won’t be able to gather enough funds for my dowry anyway. At this point, the best case for me would be getting married to some old widower.”

“Our parents are doing their best so that doesn’t happen.”

“Well, I’m not holding my breath,” I scoffed.

“I really am sorry about all this. But I can confidently say that you will never be able to marry that man.”

“I *know* that. Even if the world turned upside down and I actually married him, I would never hear the end of it from the heir of House Langue de Chat.”

Glacé's brow furrowed the moment I mentioned that noble house. "The heir of House Langue de Chat? I heard that the head of House Langue de Chat is unmarried. His only family should be his mother and elder sister."

"Then that means I met the head of the house himself?" I asked.

"Most likely."

I had thought that the man I had met was my age since he had been wearing the mantle of the boys' magic academy. Though, come to think of it, there had been a man who sounded middle-aged among Van's escorts. There was no reason to think that his convoy was all in their teens.

Dragonkin lived for up to a thousand years, so many of us had appearances that did not match our ages. The age we appeared to be varied by individual. Perhaps Duchesse Langue de Chat had stopped aging before he'd fully matured in appearance.

"So where did you meet the head of House Langue de Chat?" Glacé inquired.

"He was one of Van Citron's escorts," I answered.

"Van Citron... Ah, I see." It looked like some pieces had fallen into place in Glacé's head. "In any case, now that you're no longer meeting with Van, you'll never have to interact with House Langue de Chat's head of house ever again."

"Well, yes."

I had noticed that Glacé's face looked ill, and he looked worse and worse as our conversation continued.

"Glacé, perhaps you should drink some hot milk, take a bath, and get some rest," I added.

"Yes, perhaps I should." Following that with a big sigh, Glacé stood up and left the room.

The next day, Parfeil and I went to check on the milk vetch flowers.

"Oh my word!"

"Wow! This is incredible!"

The flowers in the greenhouse were in full bloom. The colors were as vivid and brilliant as the flowers that Van had given me.

“I can’t believe that the magicstone fertilizer would make them grow this quickly,” I marveled.

“This is quite an innovation,” Parfeil remarked.

I stooped and used the Evaluation Glasses on the flowers. All of them were judged to be of high quality.

“Parfeil, I’m going to pick the flowers now.”

“Got it, milady!”

We were still at the initial stages and had used only a small part of the greenhouse, so our harvest was quite modest. We had finished picking everything in just an hour. Afterward, we would dry the flowers at noon and bathe them in moonlight at night. Once they had absorbed enough mana, we’d pack them into jars as milk vetch tea.

After picking the flowers, we mixed the remainder of the plants into the soil. I spread out some magic fertilizer and planted some more seeds.

I watered the seedbed, but there were fewer buds than the last time. They were also paler in color.

“Oh, what might be the problem?” I wondered.

“They look pale and fragile compared to last time,” Parfeil commented.

I decided to wait and see what would happen.

The next day, we went to the greenhouse to check on the plants.

“Wh-What happened here?!” I exclaimed.

“Oh, my.”

Instead of a field of flowers, there were only withered buds.

I put in the right amount of fertilizer and gave them enough water. How could this have happened?

I rechecked the magic formula I'd been using, but it yielded no answers. After a futile effort in trying to piece together the puzzle, I decided to ask the gardener for help. I immediately found my answer.

"Ahh... Milk vetch plants are legumes, so it must have caused overcropping," the gardener explained to me.

"Overcropping? What's that?"

"It's what happens when you plant the same crop over and over again. The plants become prone to disease and their growth is stunted."

This was apparently something that could happen while growing vegetables.

I can't believe we can't keep growing milk vetch...

"How do I keep growing milk vetch in the same plot, then?" I asked.

"You'll have to replenish the soil by planting a different crop in the same plot," the gardener told me. "You might be able to grow it that way, but it's best to just use a different plot altogether."

There were two greenhouses on our property. Since one of them was being used to grow the flowers that mother liked, I couldn't use both of them at once.

"If the plants can grow within two days, then may I suggest changing the crop you are currently growing?" the gardener advised.

"Yes, that sounds good. Are there any medicinal herbs that I could plant?"

"Well, may I suggest..."

Thus, I ended up having to grow different herbs in the greenhouse, with the help of the gardener.

Until now, the witch herbalist—or in other words, I—had been providing caramel candies, pimple ointment, and milk vetch tea only to dragonkin women who were in particularly poor condition.

Of course, I hadn't been bringing the items directly to them. At a salon that dragonkin women frequented, I had set up a mailbox on an ash tree inside the establishment's tea room. I had requesters write letters describing their

symptoms, and they'd drop them into the box. Then, at night, I had one of my familiars—a squirrel—bring the letters to me.

I had been charging one gold coin for every request. It was expensive, but considering the long term, the treatment was cheap. On the other hand, if I provided the medicines for free, bad actors were sure to take advantage of it. I took all of that into account when I had set my pricing.

"I'm counting on you today again," I whispered to my familiar. The squirrel nodded to affirm my orders and leaped out the window. I had placed a barrier around the mailbox and it required a key to open. I left managing the mailbox to the squirrel as well.

Eventually, I would receive the letters and payments, and after confirming that the requester was actually suffering from the symptoms described, I'd order a squirrel to deliver the medicines.

At this point, I had made contracts with multiple squirrels. They were all white squirrels—phantasmal beasts that lived deep in the forest. Each of them demanded a single fruit with every request they granted—a cost that I could easily afford. The squirrels were quite smart too, and they could understand language with ease.

At first, I'd had Parfeil check the contents of the mailbox, but the requests had increased in number. There were even some folks who had waited in the shadows, trying to expose the identity of the witch herbalist. While Parfeil was good at being stealthy and was sensitive to the presence of others, it was no guarantee that we wouldn't be found out. Rabbitkin were not a common sight, so if someone noticed Parfeil, I would immediately be identified as the witch herbalist.

That was why I had decided to make contracts with the white squirrels. The terms of the contract were quite light: there were no restrictions on the creatures' activities, and they could go back to the forest whenever they liked. Regardless, it seemed that they had taken a liking to life at our mansion and would regularly visit my room.

Today, there were about ten white squirrels in my room, all lying around with their bellies exposed. With how relaxed they appeared, I couldn't blame

someone for thinking that they looked nothing like the wild phantasmal beasts that they had been until recently.

I had also been making the squirrels help out with the garden. They were clever, dexterous, and quite adept at working the land. Since Madeleine was busy with wedding preparations, this was a huge burden off my back.

During these busy days, an invitation arrived at my house for a party sponsored by the Duchy. The state rarely held events such as these, and on top of that, this one was exclusively for female nobles. Something like this was completely unheard of.

It seemed like the event was a debut for one of the royal ladies, but the invitation did not disclose her identity. It was most likely for the woman by the Dragon Duke's side during his public appearance.

The party was the talk of the town among the dragonkin women—it was quite possible that the debutante was the Dragon Duke's wife.

"Hum..." I sighed.

"Lady Mille-Feuille, don't you want to attend the party?" Parfeil asked.

"No, that's not it..."

I was sure that Charlotte's memories were causing me to be depressed after hearing about a woman close to the Dragon Duke. *How irritating*, I thought. And thinking about the Dragon Duke also had me thinking about Van, which only increased my melancholy.

Of course, declining the invitation wasn't an option as all the invitees were forced to attend. I sighed again and ordered Parfeil to respond to the invitation.

Right now, I had too much on my plate to be attending parties. Too many women were suffering from mana depletion, and I wanted to save as many of them as I could by making medicine for them.

At the same time, I was getting to the point where doing all this by myself wasn't sustainable. Though the white squirrels were clever, I couldn't consult them for managing my work.

What are my options?

First off, my father was out of the question. He was clumsy enough to completely forget about saving up for my dowry, so there was no way I could ask him to manage the witch herbalist's tasks.

Next was my brother. I never quite knew what he was thinking, and we were far apart in age. I couldn't trust him enough to discuss my thoughts frankly with him. In short, he wasn't an option either.

Is there anyone who cares enough about the problems of women who I could trust with my work?

The moment that question came into my head, one man immediately crossed my thoughts.

"Van..."

Once I said his name, the dam holding back my feelings burst.

I want to see him.

I wanted to see him, to tell him that I'd managed to raise some flowers and how I'd failed by planting the same crop consecutively. I could picture him laughing at my mistakes. I was sure that I could trust him with the witch herbalist's work.

Is there a way I could meet up with him?

I suddenly realized that one of the white squirrels had placed its tiny paw on my hand. It was as if it was trying to encourage me or offer some help...

"Help... Yes, that's it!"

I took out the letter I had previously received from Van. There must've been mana trails left on his note—phantasmal beasts like the white squirrels would be able to extract information from this and find him.

"Hey, could you please help me? I'm going to write a letter, so could you bring it to Van?" I asked the squirrels.

They gathered around and nodded as if to reassure me that it would be done.

Three days later, the squirrel I'd entrusted the letter to had returned with a different letter on its back.

"It's a reply from Van!"

I thanked the squirrel and gave it a pile of fruit. It shared them with its friends. I stared at the heartwarming scene for a while before Parfeil snapped me out of it.

"Milady, are you going to read the letter?" she asked.

"I will, I will."

My heart was pounding as I opened it.

The letter's content surprised me: he said he would not be meeting up with me. Apparently, this was the busiest season of the year for him. My heart sank upon reading that, but the next words were also unexpected—because tonight, he would perform magic to transport me to him using a mirror.

A magic circle was drawn on the second sheet of paper that he had sent to me. I only needed to stick it onto a vanity mirror or something similar.

"Magic to transport someone? It sounds like a fairy tale!" Parfeil exclaimed.

"It does," I said. It was actually high-level magic that was forbidden to practice in the modern day. "Just who is this man?"

"He must be from one of the country's most high-ranking families," Parfeil surmised. "You could count those on one hand."

"Why would someone like that be studying at a magic academy?"

"Um... Maybe he just wants to expand his knowledge?"

While I couldn't deny my excitement at being able to see Van again, the rational side of me was ringing alarm bells in my head.

"Parfeil, if I don't return within an hour, I want you to get one of my squirrels to track my mana and find me. They'll follow your orders in exchange for fruit," I told her.

"But are you going to be okay on your own?" Parfeil asked, clearly worried about me.

“I’ll bring a few squirrels with me too.”

“Understood.”

As a precaution, I decided to verify whether the letters were genuine, but doing so turned out to be a more annoying process than I expected. Still, I couldn’t fully trust the letter as there was a chance that I would be abducted once I got transported by the mirror. I analyzed the mana trails left on the letter and constructed a magic formula for it. Upon solving the formula, I concluded that it was indeed Van’s mana.

The whole process had taken me five hours, but there was no harm in being cautious before taking action.

And so later that night, I stuck the magic circle to a mirror. At the promised hour, the magic circle began to give off a faint glow. The vanity mirror’s surface began to ripple like the surface of a pool of water.

Parfeil stared at the mirror in surprise. “Wow, so *this* is Transportation Magic using mirrors! I’ve been around for over two hundred years, but this is my first time seeing it!”

“I looked into it, and apparently this is a kind of Forbidden Magic,” I said.

“Wow...”

Parfeil draped a mantle over my shoulders. I stuffed two white squirrels into its pockets, and another two hopped up on top of the garment. Apparently, I was going to have to bring four squirrels with me.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, please be careful.”

“Yes, I will.”

I touched the mirror, and my body was immediately pulled into it. I felt myself tumble into a place that was clearly different from where I had previously been standing. I braced myself for impact and landed on something soft.

“Whoa?!”

I managed to soften my fall and sat up. I scanned my surroundings and found that I was on a canopy bed.

“Hi there, Mille-Feuille,” a voice called out to me.

It was Van, peering into the bed. As usual, he was wearing a hooded mantle. He looked like a completely suspicious person, but he was, without a doubt, the Van Citron that I knew.

“Van...!”

I struggled to get off the bed to approach Van. I almost ran to him with outstretched arms to embrace him but remembered that would be inappropriate. But even though I remembered that, I lost my balance and fell into his arms anyway.

“Wha—!”

“Whoops!”

Van managed to catch me as I fell. His smell and warmth made me tear up. This was the first time I’d felt anything like this.

“It’s been a while,” he said in greeting.

“Yes, it has.”

“How have you been?”

“Just fine, thank you.”

Van gently patted my back. I found it to be a comforting sensation.

“I can’t believe that you would be the one to contact m— Whoa?!”

“Wh-What is it?” I asked, flustered.

“There are squirrels on your arms! Two of them!” Van exclaimed.

“Oh, these are white squirrels. They’re phantasmal beasts helping me out with my work,” I explained.

I introduced the two other squirrels in my pockets as well. However, the creatures shrunk back upon seeing Van.

I wonder what’s wrong? They seemed to be agitated, so I let all four of them hide in my pockets.

“There are guards keeping watch outside the room, so we can’t talk for very

long,” Van said.

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan to stay that long anyway.”

Van climbed into the bed and sat across from me. Normally, two young teens of the opposite sex sharing the same bed would be scandalous, but this wasn’t the time to feel shy. I needed to tell him what I wanted quickly.

“You wrote in your letter that you needed something from me. What is it?” Van asked.

“About that...”

I recalled Parfeil’s advice. If I wanted to ask Van for help with my work as the witch herbalist, I needed to figure out his identity first. And before *that*, I needed to figure out how he felt about everything.

“Do you still feel the need to save dragonkin women from their plight?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Then I have a request for you.”

Without disclosing anything about the witch herbalist, I told him that I had been working to help women with their problems.

“But, before I ask for your help, I need you to reveal your identity.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Van replied.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m not asking this because I think you’re a bad man.”

“I understand. In fact, I’m impressed that you’ve been interacting with me for this long without asking who I was.”

“I figured that you weren’t an average person, considering you’re always surrounded by those friends of yours. That’s why I never asked. I thought you all looked sinister,” I confessed.

“Sinister sure is a mean way to put it,” Van replied.

Even now, I didn’t wish to know Van’s identity, and I even had a feeling that I would be happier if I remained ignorant. But I knew we couldn’t keep going like this. Something had to change.

“Will you accept me no matter who I turn out to be?” Van asked.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to know who you are before I can answer that.”

“You’re...quite a cruel woman,” he said.

“I won’t deny that.”

I was not an innocent, ignorant princess living in a dream like my previous incarnation had been. I couldn’t just believe anyone blindly anymore.

“Mille-Feuille, could you give me some time to think about this?” Van requested.

“About what?”

“I need to make time to help out with your work. I’ll have to adjust my schedule.”

“That’s fine. Thank you.”

For a while, we talked about our recent activities. Van told me about how he had taken leave from school in order to focus on his work. Because he had gotten away from his escorts too many times, he was now forbidden from heading out.

As for me, I told Van about how I had succeeded in harvesting milk vetch flowers using the magicstone fertilizer. I also told him about how I had failed the second time because of overcropping.

Van listened to my stories intently. Even though I couldn’t see his face, I could tell that he was enjoying himself.

“I need to leave soon,” I told Van.

“All right,” he replied. He then let me know that he’d made the magic circle so that I could use it any time.

“Wait, I can use it whenever? Is that truly all right with you?”

“Is what all right?”

“Are you fine with me being able to come here any time?” I said again. “What if I was actually a bad person?”

I was worried about him, but Van laughed off my concerns.

“Don’t worry about me. The magic circle is one-way, so you can’t use it to go home without my magic. There are several guards right outside my room too, so it’s impossible to escape.”

“I-I see,” I stammered.

Van also informed me that he would be in his bedroom at night, so I could come during that time.

“Oh, but you should avoid visiting during the full moon,” he added, warning me. “There’s a high chance that I would be transformed during those times.”

“All right.”

Van then stared at me intently, observing me more seriously than he had ever before.

“What is it?” I asked him.

“Mille-Feuille, are you...? Never mind, it’s nothing.”

“That makes me even *more* curious about what you were trying to say.”

“No, it’s nothing. Sorry.”

It seemed that he so desperately wanted to ask me something—to confirm whatever it was, but he had stopped himself from doing so.

“You can always ask me anything, but I’m not sure if I can answer,” I told him.

“I’ll save it for the next time I see you.”

“All right, then.”

I still had plenty of things I wanted to discuss with him, but almost an hour had passed. Parfeil must have been getting worried about me by now.

“Well then, good night to you.” I bid Van farewell.

“You too.”

Van returned me to my room with Return Magic. Parfeil had been waiting in front of the mirror all this time, and she breathed a sigh of relief upon my return.

“Welcome back, milady.”

“Thank you for waiting, Parfeil.”

All of this left me quite agitated, so Parfeil prepared me some hot milk with a lot of honey so I could relax. Thanks to that, I was able to get a good night’s sleep.

The day of the state-sponsored party arrived, and Madeleine and I decided to go together.

The lovely white palace walls held the residence of the royal lady debutante. All the other invitees had their mouths agape at its beauty.

This palace hadn’t existed during Charlotte’s time, so it must have been constructed by the Dragon Duke for the royal lady.

Our mothers were already waiting inside the palace halls. Perhaps it was because there were only women in the grand hall today, but there was an elegant atmosphere here that I was not used to experiencing.

Madeleine and I encountered some acquaintances from the magic academy, so we stopped by to chat. The conversation topic was the Dragon Duke.

“I wonder what kind of person the royal lady is?”

“She’s one of the most beautiful women in the duchy! I saw her face when the Dragon Duke showed himself in public!”

“My, really? I can’t wait to see her!”

I had only been listening idly when the conversation topic shifted to me.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, you must also want to marry the Lord Dragon Duke, right?”

“Well, I’m not really—”

While I was about to say that I wasn’t interested, Charlotte’s memories reminded me all about her strong desire to marry the Dragon Duke. Meanwhile, an image of Van crossed my mind when the topic of the Dragon Duke came up. I desperately tried to shove these thoughts into a corner of my mind.

Our friends had been so engrossed in conversation that they hardly noticed that I had stopped talking.

“That reminds me. My grandmother told me that the Dragon Duke was engaged a hundred years ago!”

“Really?!”

“Yes, really! She was not a dragonkin, but a princess from the Kingdom of Sacristain. If I’m not mistaken, I think her name was...Charlotte?”

Suddenly, I was hit with a bout of dizziness. I felt that I was about to collapse, but I did my best to keep myself together.

Madeleine seemed to notice. “Millefie, are you okay?” she whispered to me.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I responded.

Right now, I didn’t want to hear anything about my past life. I desperately wanted to shut my ears so I could stop listening to the conversation.

“But there’s no way that anyone other than a dragonkin woman would be able to suppress a dragon’s transformation.”

“I’m sure she must have been a naive and sheltered princess.”

Charlotte could indeed have been described as either innocent at best or naive and sheltered at worst. She hadn’t known how to doubt or hate anyone. She had truly been a saint—a pure, untainted woman. And the Dragon Duke, sick and tired of war, had fallen deeply in love with her.

“But I heard she was assassinated.”

“Oh my!”

“There were rumors that it was someone sent by the Kingdom of Sacristain.”

“But why would they have their own princess killed?”

My surroundings started to spin before me.

“Millefie, you don’t look so well,” Madeleine said, loud enough so that our friends could hear it. The conversation stopped, and all attention shifted to me.

“Oh, she’s right.”

“Lady Mille-Feuille, are you feeling ill?”

“Would you like to rest in a break room?”

I thought that might’ve been for the best. Hearing my friends bring up my past life in conversation was making me dizzy.

“Millefie, I think you should get some rest,” Madeleine said, clearly worried about me.

“Yes, I will. I think I’ll go on my own.”

“No, I will go with you.”

“Madeleine, weren’t you looking forward to seeing the royal lady?”

“I am sure that there’ll be more opportunities to see her in the future. But right now, I’m worried about you, Millefie.”

“Thank you,” I said weakly.

We entered one of the break rooms so I could get some rest. Just sitting on a bench made me feel much better. The maids prepared some hot milk for me, and it helped me feel more relaxed.

“Today is the royal lady’s debut, but it felt like all the conversation was about the Dragon Duke instead,” Madeleine remarked.

“The royal lady hasn’t made an appearance in a formal capacity yet. I suppose there aren’t any other rumors to be made about her right now.”

“That’s true, but still...”

I had only been standing around and talking, but I felt exhausted. I had no energy to go back to the main hall.

“Madeleine, I think I’ll just head back home,” I said.

“Then I will accompany you.”

“You should go back to the party.”

“I’m not interested in being at a party without you. I will go home with you.”

“Madeleine...”

In the end, we decided to head back home. I sent word to my mother before

leaving.

Three hours after I had gone home, my mother returned. Unusually for her, she headed straight for my room.

“Mille-Feuille! Mille-Feuille! Are you awake?!”

“Mother?”

When I opened the door, I saw my mother there, clearly agitated.

“Mille-Feuille, why weren’t you at the party?!” she asked frantically.

“I wasn’t feeling very well. Didn’t I send you a message?”

“I received it, but you said nothing about *why* you left!” she cried.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t want to ruin your fun at the party.”

“Fun?! How could *that* be any *fun*?!”

According to mother, she had enjoyed the party at first, and nothing had seemed out of the ordinary. However, the air had completely changed once the royal lady made her appearance and made an unbelievable announcement to everyone.

“Her Highness announced that she had met the witch herbalist.”

“Huh...?”

Where could I have possibly met her? I searched my memories for answers. The words “Her Highness” reminded me of one person—the hooded woman who had collapsed by the roadside in the merchant district. That woman had been called “Her Highness” by her escorts.

It now seemed that *she* had been the royal lady.

“She ran into the witch herbalist by coincidence while looking for her,” my mother said.

“Why would she be looking for the witch herbalist?” I asked.

“To capture her.”

Chills ran down my spine as I heard my mother’s reply.

“She declared the witch herbalist to be a criminal, profiting off the power to ease the suffering of dragonkin women everywhere,” she continued.

“Sh-She *what?!* ” I shouted, incredulous.

The moment I did, mother grabbed my shoulders frantically. “Mille-Feuille! What do you know about the witch herbalist?!”

“Huh?”

“The way you reacted to her calling the witch herbalist a criminal... You looked furious, as if she were talking about *you*.”

I tried to sweep away mother’s hands from my shoulders, but her nails, sharp as a dragon’s claws, dug deep and wouldn’t let go.

“You’ve been growing strange herbs in the greenhouse with Madeleine for the past few months, haven’t you?” she said, pressing me further.

“That’s—”

“And this!”

A white squirrel emerged from the bag mother was holding. It gazed at me with watery eyes. Mother had captured the poor creature.

“This is a phantasmal beast, isn’t it? Why have these creatures been coming and going from your room without *my* permission?!” mother growled at me, her eyes ablaze with fury, as if a demon had taken hold of her.

Ever since I had been a child, my mother had been rather liberal when it came to raising me. I would only see her once or twice a month. She’d left nurturing me to a wet nurse, my education to a tutor, and my supervision to Parfeil. Still, she hadn’t completely abandoned me or my brother. She would check in on us from time to time, sitting with us for tea and snacks while asking us about recent goings-on.

That same mother was now exploding with fury at me. She had a wealth of evidence about my identity. I was sure that she had figured it out long ago and just decided not to interfere.

She had always been reminding me not to act in ways that would besmirch the Forêt Noire name. And now, I had gone far beyond besmirching my

household and was about to drag them into a massive incident.

“Her Highness said that she had placed a magic sign on the witch herbalist that day to keep track of her. She was using that to investigate everyone in the party hall, one by one!”

“Wha—?!”

When did she do that?! I desperately tried to jog my memory, but I couldn’t figure it out. The royal lady was part of the lord of the dragonkin’s bloodline. Performing high-level magic without incantations or leaving a trace must have been a trivial task for her.

“She said that she would go to the home of everyone who did not attend the party. There’s no escape for the witch herbalist now.”

I felt mother’s gaze on me, pleading for me to confess.

I couldn’t keep hiding it any longer. “Mother... I’m the witch herbalist.”

“I *knew* it!!!”

Apparently, she had heard about the witch herbalist from Madeleine’s mother. She had also learned that Madeleine had obtained mana-restoring caramel candy from me. She must’ve certainly suspected something at that point.

“The only ones invited to the party who didn’t show up were you and Madeleine,” she then said.

In other words, we were the prime suspects—the ones most likely to be the witch herbalist.

“H-How could I let this happen...?” I stammered.

At this point, I felt that it was best to turn myself in. Just as I was about to dash out of my room, mother grabbed my collar to stop me.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

“To the royal lady’s palace,” I answered.

“You wait right there, young lady. You will go nowhere until your father gets here.”

“But I can’t get Madeleine involved in this!”

“It’s too late for that,” she said. “Madeleine might as well be part of our family now.”

“But—”

“No buts! Be quiet and listen to me!!!” mother bellowed.

“Yes, mother.” I had no choice but to obey.

Mother then went off to send out a messenger pigeon telling father to come home as soon as he could.

What should I do now...?

Parfeil then showed up to my room. She held me gently and whispered something unexpected into my ear.

“Milady, what if you transported yourself to Lord Van Citron’s room?” she suggested.

“What?”

“I’m sure it will be safer than staying here.”

“I’ll just cause trouble for his family if I do that.”

Running to Van Citron would solve nothing. I didn’t do anything wrong, so I shouldn’t be going into hiding.

I suddenly remembered a hidden drawer I had in my room. I opened it for the first time in a long while and looked at my old diaries and some trinkets I had received as birthday presents. Our family was not particularly wealthy, so the accessories had little value. However, there was one exception—a pendant made of tiny seed pearls that I had received from my mother for my fifteenth birthday. Originally, it had been a present given to my mother on the day of her betrothal. Its centerpiece was a brilliant sapphire gem. I had left this pendant untouched since the day of my debut ball.

“Parfeil,” I called out.

“Yes, milady?”

“I want to give this to you.”

I handed Parfeil the pendant, and her eyes went wide in shock.

“M-Milady! Wh-What’s with this, all of a sudden?!”

“I might not be able to see you again, so I wanted to give you this as a token of my gratitude,” I told her.

“L-Lady Mille-Feuille, I could never receive such a valuable gift from you!” she cried. “And besides, I was planning to take my separation fee once you’ve died of old age!”

“You’re planning to live longer than a dragonkin like me?”

“Well, of course! I already decided to live my entire life serving you, back when you picked me up off the streets!” Parfeil declared.

I had first met Parfeil more than ten years ago. I had found her collapsed on the street and had taken her home. My parents had been vehemently against keeping her, as many beastkin had violent temperaments. However, I’d used my birthday wish—a tradition that we had at House Forêt Noire to grant any wish we had on our birthdays—to keep her as my attendant.

As for why I picked up Parfeil off the streets? As a child, I’d loved my rabbit dolls, so, of course, it was because I had found her rabbit ears to be adorable.

Parfeil was formerly an adventurer, and she had endeavored to learn the manners and customs of nobles to serve me all this time. She was always bright and energetic, made delicious hot milk, could protect me in a pinch, and always took my side. I could never thank her enough for all that she’d done for me. No number of sapphire pendants could ever express my gratitude.



“I have no intention of ever leaving you, milady! Be it prison or exile to an island, I will be with you!”

“Parfeil... Thank you.”

I gave the teary-eyed Parfeil a tight embrace. My thoughtless actions had caused trouble, even for her.

“Parfeil, I’m no longer scared to go anywhere, as long as you’re around.”

“Same here!”

As we exchanged those words, we heard the loud clanging of footsteps outside. The door slammed open, and knights clad in armor emblazoned with the crest of the Dragon Duke barged into the room.

“We are the Order of the Knights of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair!”

“We order you to surrender!”

“We will be taking you before the Dragon Duke himself!”

I wasn’t afraid to go anywhere as long as Parfeil was around, but of course, neither of us expected that our next destination would be the Dragon Duke’s palace.

Just how did things end up like this?

Chapter 4: A Summons from the Dragon Duke

The carriage carrying me and Parfeil rattled and swayed.

We had been arrested and restrained by the Order of the Knights of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. Mother had bawled and begged the knights not to take me, but her pleas had fallen on deaf ears. Parfeil had rushed into the carriage before they'd closed the door and she'd managed to get inside. The knights had tried to drive her out, but since she had clung to me and refused to let go, they'd had no choice but to take both of us in.

A few of the white squirrels had also attached themselves to Parfeil. They didn't seem to like being around the knights, so they remained hidden in the pockets of her coat.

Why are the knights taking me to the Dragon Duke? I had been abducted before I could even find out. I tried asking the knight sitting before me.

"Um... Why do I have to be taken to the Dragon Duke?"

The knight gave me the cold shoulder and didn't even twitch. He must have been ordered not to answer any of my questions.

"Lady Mille-Feuille, shall I give this knight a good tickling?" Parfeil offered.

I let out a sigh. "Do *not*."

I'd thought that I would be taken before Her Highness the royal lady, so why was I being taken to the Dragon Duke instead?

Like cattle waiting to be sold, we stayed put until we arrived at the Dragon Duke's palace.

I gazed at the palace—an imposing structure made from blackened brick. These bricks had been scorched with magic flames, making them resistant to fire. The palace's facade projected an image not of elegance but of stability.

The last time I had entered this palace was during my debut into high society.

I had last seen the Dragon Duke's face almost half a year ago, and it had been a century since I—as Charlotte—had last spoken to him.

Did he find out that I'm Charlotte's reincarnation? If the Dragon Duke were after my life, the knights probably would have killed me on the spot. Alternatively, it was possible that the Dragon Duke wanted to execute me by his own hand.

My heart pounded as I anticipated all sorts of terrible things. Just what had happened a hundred years ago? It terrified me that I had only partially recalled Charlotte's memories. Thinking about all of it made me feel ill.

The palace interior was plain and drab. A century ago, the hallways had been lined with fancy decor and portraits of the residents' ancestors, but now, those were nowhere to be seen. The red carpet that had previously lined the floor was gone, and the stone floor was now bare.

Finally, I arrived before the door that led to the former Kingdom of Sacristain's audience chamber. The Dragon Duke was waiting inside.

The knights who accompanied us opened the double doors. Sitting on the throne atop a platform was the pinnacle of all dragonkin—a man with long, silver hair that reached his waist, ice-cold blue eyes, and a beautiful visage: the Dragon Duke Vacherin.

He gazed at me like he had seen filth. He raised a hand, and the knights that had been surrounding him left the room. Only the Dragon Duke, Parfeil, and I remained in the audience chamber.

The Dragon Duke broke the tense air with an unusual remark.

"Sorry about the big shock! It was an emergency, after all!" he said. He now wore a big smile on his face, and his hands were raised as if welcoming an old friend.

Just what is happening? Invisible question marks began popping up all around my head.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "You're not acting like your usual self."

I realized from his greeting that he must have been addressing Charlotte, my

previous incarnation. I dropped to the floor and knelt in respect. Parfeil followed suit.

“Your Highness, I am honored to be in your presence. I am the viscountess of House Forêt Noire, Mille-Feuille.”

“I already know that,” the Dragon Duke replied.

He stood up from his throne and approached me. I had no idea what he was thinking, but he lifted my head to meet his gaze. His stunning blue eyes were peering down at me, and I felt like I was gazing at the sky. It was a mysterious feeling, but it made me feel at ease.

“Wait, don’t you recognize me?” he then asked.

“Excuse me?” I was puzzled.

The Dragon Duke suddenly lifted the hood of his luxurious mantle off his shoulders. He pulled it up and over his head far enough to cover everything except his mouth.

“It’s me,” he declared.

“Van... Is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me. I thought you’d recognize me from my voice.”

“That can’t be!” I cried. “*You’re* the Dragon Duke?!”

“I am. Who did you think I was, exactly?”

“Some brat from a rich noble family?”

“Huh?!”

“Either that or the Dragon Duke’s son.”

“*Hell* no.” Apparently, the question he had been desperately trying to ask me the other day was whether I recognized him as the Dragon Duke. “I really thought you figured out my identity,” Van said.

“I mean, who would’ve thought that the Dragon Duke himself was attending a magic academy?” I asked.

“Well, I guess that’s true.”

I felt relieved at the thought of Van not being the Dragon Duke's son—perhaps due to Charlotte's memories. Thinking back on his words, it seemed that he had no idea that I was the reincarnation of Charlotte. I wasn't sure whether to consider that a good thing.

"Why have you been attending the boys' magic academy?" I asked him.

"I've been going there to learn to be more sociable. I've also forgotten most of the basics of magic, so it's a good opportunity for me."

The Dragon Duke—the most powerful sorcerer in the nation—had forgotten the basics of magic? How could that have possibly happened?

Whenever I'd interacted with Van, I hadn't sensed anything strange—he'd seemed like a normal student from the academy and acted appropriately for his age. However, if he was the Dragon Duke, some things didn't add up. For example, he seemed completely different from the person in Charlotte's memories. Charlotte's Dragon Duke had been calm, quiet, and mature. In contrast, Van was friendly and talkative, even to the point where I sometimes wished he would talk less.

Are they really the same person?

Did the Dragon Duke—a quiet and coolheaded man—only seem like a proper adult to Charlotte since she was younger? That was definitely a possibility—she had not been allowed to interact with men other than her father.

The more I thought about it, the more confused I became.

I asked Van the question that had been in my head since I'd arrived. "So, why did you bring me here?"

"Because my family tried to declare you a criminal and arrest you."

By "family," he must have been referring to the royal lady, though it seemed that Van had no intention of disclosing his relationship with her. I felt a vague unease at not knowing more.

"Mille-Feuille, you're the witch herbalist, aren't you?" Van inquired.

"That's... Yes, that's right," I confessed.

"I knew it."

Apparently, Van had suspected that I was the witch herbalist ever since I had given him the caramel candy. When we'd met the other day, he had almost been about to ask me if that was actually the case.

"I wanted to put you under my protection before my family started to act," Van explained.

"Protection?" I echoed.

"I thought I ordered my knights to bring you here quickly."

"I'm here because your knights *arrested* me," I replied, and Parfeil nodded in agreement beside me.

I had been pushed into a carriage and abducted. Mother had broken down crying, and they'd also handled Parfeil violently. That was not what I'd expect "protection" to look like.

"I see. I apologize for not being clear with my orders." Van deeply bowed his head.

"Um... I don't think the Dragon Duke should be bowing down to someone inferior in status," I advised him.

"O-Oh, yes, you're right. Duchesse also said as much, but I'm still not used to all this."

Apparently, Duchesse Langue de Chat was Van's guardian and manners tutor.

The Vacherin in Charlotte's memories was a man who was the head of his race—he struck me as someone with the dignity and poise of one who stood above all of dragonkin.

In contrast, while Van acted like a proud noble, he lacked the imposing aura of Vacherin. What had happened to him?

"Mille-Feuille, will you forgive me for the disrespectful treatment you received?" he asked.

"I forgive you."

"Thank you." Van then informed me what he was planning to do. "I will guarantee your safety and your innocence. In exchange, I want you to work as

my maid.”

“Wha— Th-This is too sudden!” I cried out.

“We have no other choice. By tomorrow, the newspapers will be exposing your identity as the witch herbalist. There’s no way you would be able to return to your normal life.”

I had no retort to that.

Van had also ordered my family to leave their property. He had anticipated that reporters would be swarming the Forêt Noire house by tomorrow, so he’d made the decision to have them leave the capital. Van had already sent sorcerers to send them away with Transportation Magic.

“I really wanted to work with you, but I didn’t wish for it to happen like this,” Van said apologetically.

“Neither did I.” I had also wanted to do the witch herbalist’s work with Van, but I could never have imagined that I was actually working with the Dragon Duke himself.

Suddenly, Parfeil caught my attention, as she looked ill at ease.

“Parfeil, did you actually know that Van was the Dragon Duke?” I asked.

“Um, well, ha ha... His voice *did* sound like the Dragon Duke’s...”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I mean, there’s no way that the Dragon Duke would attend the magic academy, right?” she said. “And there’s a lot of people out there whose voices might sound similar! I thought I was just imagining it!”

I hung my head in embarrassment upon hearing Parfeil’s explanation. If I had known that Van was the Dragon Duke, I would’ve treated him with more respect.

“Actually, um, how should I say this...? Our relationship ended up being different than I had intended. I want to work on that as we go forward,” Van said.

“Different? In what way?”

"I wanted you to become my f— Actually, never mind. In any case, you are now under my protection. Of course, nobody around us will accept that."

"Well, yes."

"But you're not one to accept the status quo without question, are you?"

"Of course not," I replied.

"Then serve me well as my handmaiden," he said. "I will support your work as the witch herbalist in turn."

The title of maid was reserved for women who served other women. A maid who served a man was unheard of.

"Actually, I already have an attendant, so you should focus on being the witch herbalist. But until your work becomes stable, you must consider yourself as my personal attendant," Van said.

It seemed that the role of "personal attendant" would be temporary. I'd be able to use the palace greenhouse to grow my plants, and Van would provide me with staff to help me with my work.

"I want to shine a light on the future of all dragonkin women. Mille-Feuille, will you assist me in this task?"

"Yes, of course I will!" I happily answered.

However, I immediately hit a realization. *Did I just accept a job as the Dragon Duke's attendant? But I don't want to be the Dragon Duke's maid.*

"Um, will I *really* be serving you as your personal maid, milord?" I asked.

"Don't be overly formal with me. You can keep calling me Van. You don't need to humble yourself before me," Van chided me.

"But won't the people around us find that objectionable?"

"I am the most powerful person in this country, and I have allowed it. Who would dare to find my decree objectionable?" he countered.

"W-Well..." He *did* have that overprotective group of friends who were always fussing over him. I was sure that they would not accept my presence here.

"Even though I placed you in the role of a maid, I think of you as my equal. I

want you to remain casual around me. Please?”

I imagined an invisible pair of dog ears drooping atop the Dragon Duke’s head as he said that. I also envisioned his tail hanging limply in sadness. I couldn’t say no to that.

“Mille-Feuille, please?” he asked again.

“Only when it’s just the two of us,” I replied.

“All right, I’ll allow it,” Van affirmed.

And with that, I became the personal maid of the Dragon Duke Vacherin—or Van, for short.

A room in the palace had been prepared for me and Parfeil, and Van had also assigned us a maid who would grant our requests. It was a very warm welcome for both of us. Parfeil had also been officially designated as my assistant.

The room had a thick and luxurious carpet, a crystalline chandelier, and mahogany furniture. Its size put my previous room at home to shame, and it looked very comfortable.

“Milady, it’s like you’ve become a princess!” Parfeil remarked.

“A real princess’s room doesn’t look like this,” I replied.

“You say that like you’ve actually seen one.”

“I suppose you could say that.”

Charlotte’s room had been much more luxurious than this one. Thinking about its extravagance made my head spin. My past self had truly lived a fairy-tale life.

“Milady, is something wrong?” Parfeil asked.

“No, it’s nothing.”

The people who were to help with my work as the witch herbalist were about to arrive, so I had no time to be spacing out. Today was going to be a very busy day.

A group of women wearing gorgeous dresses was standing before the greenhouse. By my count, there were about twenty in all, including maids and attendants. Among them were three ladies who came from households with a higher social standing than mine. Those three were about as old as my grandmother, and they were so high in status that they wouldn't even be seen at the usual night parties.

I can't believe I'll be making these ladies work...

Parfeil appeared to be composed, but my white squirrels were shaking nervously.

First, I greeted the ladies with a curtsy. "It is a pleasure to meet you all. I am Mille-Feuille of House Forêt Noire. I'm the one known as the witch herbalist."

The three ladies gasped in surprise the moment I mentioned that title.

"So you're the witch herbalist."

"I am glad to have finally met you."

"We've been very excited ever since we heard that we would be helping you out."

One of the women, Lady Nonette, hailed from the Cake aux Fruits family, a clan well-known among socialites. They were adept users of Water Magic. Another one was Lady Tuile. She was part of House Saint-Honoré, one of the three wealthiest families in all of the duchy. The last and most distinguished woman was the Lady Marthe of House Haricot de Soissons, a branch of the royal family.

All three had one thing in common.

"My daughter was saved by your milk vetch tea," said one.

"Your caramel candies helped my mother recover from her illness."

"And I recovered from my horrible skin condition because of your ointment. We are deeply indebted to you," said the third woman.

The three ladies piled their gratitude on me one after the other. I felt rather abashed by all the compliments.

“I apologize for charging a gold coin for every request,” I said.

“Oh, no need to apologize to us.”

“I’m sure you were only worried about your medicines being resold.”

“One gold coin is a cheap price to pay for recovery.”

I felt relieved once I saw that they understood my goal.

“Um, but I’ve been declared as someone profiteering off the power to save dragonkin women,” I said.

“Please don’t mind Her Highness’s words.”

“Indeed.”

Lady Marthe whispered, “To be quite frank, the royal lady is jealous of your power.”

“Jealous?” I echoed.

“Indeed. Her Highness had been searching for a way to help dragonkin women for years. She thinks that the witch herbalist is trying to steal that honor for herself,” Lady Marthe explained.

“I-I see...”

If we were aiming for the same goal, then I would love to have Her Highness as an ally. However, it seemed that convincing her wouldn’t be easy.

“I approached Her Highness about this yesterday, but she was adamant about ‘not cooperating with a criminal,’ as she put it.”

“My!”

“Oh dear.”

Apparently, she also didn’t appreciate the Dragon Duke covering for me.

“I believe it was six months ago when Her Highness first tried to suppress the Dragon Duke’s berserk state. She fell ill and was bedridden after that...” said Lady Marthe.

Her Highness had caught word through the grapevine about the witch herbalist while she was bedridden, so it must have felt especially humiliating to

her.

“Remember how she sneaked out of the castle to look for her? She collapsed in exhaustion along the way, and the witch herbalist herself had to save her.”

“Then, shouldn’t Her Highness feel indebted to the witch?” I asked.

“Indeed, and yet she’s now calling the witch herbalist a criminal...”

From what I had been hearing, it seemed that Lady Marthe had been correct in calling out the royal lady’s feelings as jealousy. That being the case, I decided I should avoid Her Highness until things settled down.

Will her feelings calm down once a hundred years have passed?

Thinking about the royal lady made me feel uneasy. Even now, I had no idea what her relationship or standing was with respect to the Dragon Duke. Was she Van’s fiancée? His wife? Inexplicable feelings began to stir inside me. I could probably get the answers from Lady Marthe, as she was from a branch of the royal family. However, I was so afraid of finding out the truth that I couldn’t bring myself to ask her.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, is something the matter?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

That was enough dawdling around—it was time to get to work.

I addressed the ladies. “Today, we will be tilling the plots in this greenhouse while mixing in this special substance called ‘magicstone fertilizer.’ Once we finish that, we will be sowing these milk vetch seeds and watering the plots.”

The three ladies rolled up their sleeves to signify that they were ready to work. They put on aprons worn by the castle maids and began their tasks. I should have told them to wear the same dresses that the maids did because their gorgeous dresses became soiled even after just a bit of work. Still, the ladies didn’t seem to mind the dirt one bit and looked to be enjoying the work of tilling the plots.

Once the magicstone fertilizer had been mixed in, we worked on sowing the milk vetch seeds. The white squirrels were a big help in doing that. After seeing the clever, agile squirrels sow the seeds, the three ladies learned from their

movements and went to work.

Next came watering.

“Leave the water to me!” Lady Nonette, an expert in Water Magic, used her powers to make it rain. The plots were completely soaked in an instant.

“Lady Nonette, your magic is splendid!”

“Why, thank you for the compliment!”

The garden work turned out to be more enjoyable than I had expected.

The next day, the milk vetch seeds had bloomed into splendid flowers. Upon seeing this, the three ladies were ecstatic.

“The magicstone fertilizer did wondrous work!”

“I heard the Dragon Duke created this based on old texts and monographs!”

“The lives of numerous dragonkin women will be saved once we are able to produce this en masse!”

All that was left to do was to dry the flowers and expose them to the light of the moon. The Dragon Duchy of Éclair would then purchase the dried flowers and send them to a medical institute for study. The physicians there would then be able to provide the right dosage based on someone’s diagnosis. That way, medicines would reach all troubled dragonkin women equally.

My busy days continued and the seasons changed—the chilly winter had passed and spring was now in full bloom. Every day was a lot of work, but I felt invigorated and fulfilled. Even though I was treated as being on leave from the academy, I was now doing work that only I could do.

One morning, I was summoned to the audience chamber. I put on a dress that Van had given me and headed down the long corridor to the chamber with Parfeil.

Once I entered the room, I felt like I had stepped into a minefield. Someone was glaring at me—one of Van’s friends who had been vehemently against me

being hired as Van's personal attendant. I returned his gaze, and he quickly turned his head away.

The man who had been openly hostile to me was Roche Chic Profiterole, the heir of one of the Four Great Nobles. He was the one who had openly provoked us when we had run into Van that first time. His well-trimmed copper-red hair contrasted well with the gleam of his golden eyes. It was said that his dragon form was the most imposing in all of the Duchy.

"Milord! I cannot accept this! This woman is your attendant, and yet she is nowhere to be found by your side! Worse than that, the royal lady is accusing her of being a criminal!" Roche appealed to Van.

"I have ordered Mille-Feuille to focus on a certain task that only she can do," Van replied. "I cannot reveal what this task is yet. Besides, I can guarantee you that she is not a criminal. If the royal lady continues to insist she is, then I wish for the two of them to talk it out."

"Milord, you are being deceived by that witch—"

"Roche, enough." Duchesse, the head of House Langue de Chat, had stepped in to hold back the hotheaded Roche. He placed his hand over Roche's mouth and, with the help of the other escorts, dragged him out of the room.



“Mille-Feuille, I’m sorry about Roche’s behavior,” Van apologized to me once the storm in the room had passed.

“No, I can’t blame him, seeing as a stranger with low social status like myself showed up out of nowhere,” I replied.

“I think he has too much blind faith in me.”

I wouldn’t have called it that. Roche worshipped and revered the Dragon Duke, like all of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. Roche must have disliked the idea of me being the Dragon Duke’s personal maid.

“I think that I would have less hostility directed at me if you removed me from being your personal attendant. Could you at least, um, put that under consideration?” I asked.

“Your role as my personal attendant is exactly the thing that is protecting you, so that’s not something I’m considering,” Van explained. If he were to remove me from my post, it was possible that people other than his friends would voice their dissatisfaction and tell me to stay away from the Dragon Duke. Being the Dragon Duke’s personal attendant protected me from being attacked by the rabble.

“Still, I would rather not serve as the Dragon Duke’s maid,” I mumbled under my breath.

“Did you say something?”

“No, nothing.”

Van told me that it was only a matter of time before Roche would stop being hostile to me. He was convinced that once I had proved my abilities to the world, he wouldn’t be able to complain anymore.

“Our supply of the milk vetch flowers has yet to stabilize, so we’re still only giving them out to those with serious conditions. Mille-Feuille, once we have a continuous supply of the flowers to provide to our women, I will publicly announce you as the savior of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said. “I’m not doing this because I want to be recognized.”

I really wanted Van to rebuke the hostile naysayers among his friends, but there was no need to do that to the rest of the public.

“I also need to do this for my own sake,” Van added.

“What do you mean by that?”

His reply was cryptic. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Just what was he thinking? I couldn’t figure him out at all. But even so, there was no time to be pondering Van’s words. I had to keep working to save as many women as we could.

“We’ll have to increase our manpower more than ever before. Also, I summoned Madeleine Bâton-Maréchaux to serve as your assistant,” Van announced.

“Madeleine?!”

“Indeed. I’m sure you will feel more comfortable here if you have a trustworthy friend by your side. She was also adamant about wanting to support your work.”

It seemed that Madeleine had sent Van a letter, and he’d given her an immediate response.

“Thank you for doing all this.”

“Not like you to be this grateful,” Van quipped.

“I know how to thank people too, you know,” I retorted. Now that Madeleine was coming here, I felt like some of the stress on my mind had disappeared.

“Also, I plan on assigning guards to you.”

“Guards? I already have Parfeil,” I said.

“Your attendant, right?”

“She used to be an adventurer, so I can guarantee her abilities.”

“I see. Well, it wouldn’t hurt to have more than one guard. Make time on your schedule so I can introduce you,” Van said.

“All right then.”

I preferred not to cast doubt on others, but the royal lady was clearly hostile toward me, and Roche would prefer that I wasn't around in the first place. There was no harm in being more cautious.

I headed out to the hallway with Parfeil and immediately ran into Roche, who was on the way to see Van again.

He was thrown out of the room and yet he still wants to meet with him?

It was customary for dragonkin women to be the ones to step out of the way when encountering someone of the opposite sex in a corridor. I stayed close to the wall and waited for him to pass. I thought Roche would walk by without incident, but he jeered and tried to provoke me.

"Oh? If it isn't the Lord Dragon Duke's *honorable* personal attendant. Why are you cowering so close to the wall?" he asked.

"And what about you? You seem to have so much time on your hands just loitering around in this corridor," I retorted.

"What did you say?!" Roche snapped at me. He tried to take a step forward, but his attendants held him back. "I will get rid of you one of these days. Mark my words!"

"Oh, but I'm only here because of the Dragon Duke's invitation. If you have any problem with that, why don't you take it up with him?"

"You insolent little—!" This time, Roche tried to lunge at me, but his attendants managed to stop him and I used that moment to make my escape.

I might have said too much this time. I'll send him an apology card later.

Parfeil, who had been trailing behind me, chided me. "Milady, you seem to love picking fights."

"Only when it's appropriate. Besides, I would step back from altercations if you weren't around."

"I'm relieved to hear that."

I had only been able to mouth off because Parfeil had been right beside me and I knew that she would come to my rescue no matter what. However, I didn't want to cause any more trouble for Van either. I needed to learn how to

pick my battles.

That afternoon, I was having tea with Nonette, Tuile, and Marthe. At first, they had been quite timid and awkward, but we had managed to break the ice after a few days.

Apparently, the three ladies loved wine, and we had been discussing the idea of making medicinal wine using magic-infused herbs. Winters in the Dragon Duchy of Éclair were horribly cold, and a small amount of wine was said to help warm the body at night to aid in sleeping. Of course, there were also naysayers who thought that claim was made up by wine lovers. Nobody really knew the truth behind the claim.

Drinking in the duchy was allowed for those aged fifteen onward. Charlotte herself used to drink herbal wine, though only a spoonful at a time. It seemed that she had also been taking it as medicine.

“My toes have been so chilly lately that I can’t sleep. It’s not quite winter, so why is it so cold already?”

“In that case, I recommend yellow strawberry wine,” I advised one of the ladies. Yellow strawberries grew naturally in the forests that nobles used as their hunting grounds. They had medicinal effects such as warming the body, recovering from fatigue, improving metabolism, increasing appetite, and promoting more relaxed sleep.

“My, that sounds like a wine made for me! I will accompany my husband the next time he goes hunting so I can pick some strawberries.”

“Oh, but doesn’t the thought of your husband mistaking you for prey scare you?” another lady asked.

“I could just forage for some away from my husband.”

“Oh, that’s true.”

Yellow strawberry flowers bloomed in the spring, and their fruits matured during the rainy season. The fruit was just about ready to pick now.

“Then, shall we go out and gather strawberries together?” one suggested.

“My, what a wonderful idea! I would like to join in!”

“Yes, me too! Let’s go and forage!”

The three ladies then turned to look at me. It seemed that they wanted me to join them.

“I— Well, I should ask the Dragon Duke for permission.”

“Yes, you should!”

“I’m sure he will allow it,” another chimed in.

“But first, you have to ask!”

“Indeed,” I replied.

Will he really permit me to go on this excursion? In any case, I needed to make time to meet with Van.

I was thinking that it would be fine to contact Van with Transmission Magic through a mirror if I couldn’t find time, but I somehow ended up at a table with him, face-to-face. It was just the two of us having a meal together.

His long hair gets in the way of eating, huh.

Van’s gorgeous silver hair was neatly tied up. Just changing his hairstyle made him look more dazzling than usual.

In contrast, I had just hurriedly tied my own hair into a chignon. I regretted not braiding or going for a neater hairstyle for being before him.

In any case, I was here because I had one thing I needed to ask him.

“Um, may I have permission to leave the castle?” I opened with my request.

“Where would you like to go? I will take you there,” Van offered.

“Well, um, I was asked out...”

“By whom?!” Van bellowed. His intense emotions shook the air in the room enough to cause the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling to sway. “Who and what man would dare ask you out?!”

“I was invited out by ladies, not by men—Lady Nonette of House Cake aux

Fruits, Lady Tuile of House Saint-Honoré, and Lady Marthe of House Haricot de Soissons. That's all," I replied.

"Oh, it's that trio of friends. I see."

The tense air loosened up for the moment. I rubbed my arms—they had goose bumps all over them.

"Well, if it's the three of them, then I have no problems with letting you go. You may take my royal guards with you," Van said.

"Wait, wouldn't that leave you completely unguarded?" I asked.

"Yes, but I would rather be unguarded than expose you to danger. I *am* strong, after all."

"Van..."

He then put out a request to speed up the process of selecting guards to be assigned to me. After all, it would cause a huge commotion if the royal guards were sent out to guard a mere attendant every single time she left the palace.

"Don't you worry. I won't tie you down this time," Van mumbled.

"This time?" I echoed.

"Oh, did I say something weird just now?"

"No, never mind."

I wondered what he meant by that. "This time" implied that he'd been tying me down previously, but I had never felt that he had restricted my actions. Just what was he referring to?

"Mille-Feuille, is something wrong?"

"O-Oh, it's nothing," I replied. *I should change the topic.* "Um, will the royal lady be joining you for dinner?" I then asked Van, who was eating the main course of whitefish meunière.

"I've never once eaten dinner with her," Van answered.

"But why? Wouldn't you want to have dinner with her every now and then?"

"I can't. We'd risk being killed at the same time if our food was ever

poisoned.”

“Oh... That makes sense.”

“Besides, I don’t think I’ve ever had a proper conversation with her,” Van divulged.

What would Her Highness think if she found out that I’ve talked to Van more than she has? I was sure that she wouldn’t be pleased if she ever heard about this. From now on, I would have to keep my distance from Van. I’d have to refuse to eat dinner with him as well.

“I’m glad that I can have a meal together with you, Mille-Feuille. Food has always tasted so bland when eating alone,” Van said. His eyes gleamed with complete sincerity, which was dazzling to behold.

I couldn’t say anything back to him when he gazed at me like he did.

“If you don’t mind, I would like you to accompany me for dinner from now on,” he added.

“That’s...”

Van already had the royal lady in his life. Was it okay for me to get in between them? No, of *course* it wasn’t. To Van, I was merely a very valuable pawn...right?

Or perhaps he wanted me to be his concubine. He might’ve been the virile type, so it was possible that he wanted to pursue several women at once.

Could I accept that? I asked myself, but I couldn’t find any answer within me.

“Are you okay with that?” Van then asked. His eyes looked sad, like a puppy who had been abandoned in the rain. I wished that he wouldn’t look at me with those sorrowful eyes—I wanted to refuse him, but my desire to do so had completely vanished.

“That’s... That’s okay with me,” I said. “I will join you when time allows.”

“Really?! Fantastic!” Van exclaimed with joy. There was a pure, childlike smile on his face.

I felt my heart ache, yet at the same time, questions piled up in my head. The

Dragon Duke Charlotte had known was not someone who would have grinned ear to ear like this. He had never laughed, and at best he would have given a faint smile.

How could the same person show such different ways of smiling? As long as I had no idea who had killed Charlotte, I couldn't ask Van any of my questions. There was nothing I could do right now, so I just had to accept these feelings for the moment.

I changed the topic. "Oh, I just remembered. How are your headaches? I remember you being troubled about them."

"Oh, that? Duchesse told me that they're caused by the waxing and waning of the moon," Van replied. When the moon was full, the land became flooded with mana. Conversely, once the moon waned, mana became scarce.

"It was a new moon that day and the mana in the air was scarce, so my head started to hurt...or so it was explained to me."

"I see." Today was the thirteenth night of the lunar cycle. In two days, the moon would be full. Mana would be abundant by then, so he wouldn't need to worry about headaches.

"Then, how about you drink some milk vetch tea on the twenty-sixth night?" I suggested.

"Since I can't absorb mana from my surroundings, I should supplement it with the tea... I see. That might be a good idea."

"I will prepare tea for you that night, then."

"Please do. Thank you," Van replied.

"You're welcome."

Whenever I talked to Van like this, my heart kept on pounding and I couldn't relax. I felt that my heart wouldn't be able to take it if this went on every night.

Perhaps I really should just avoid having dinner with him...

I needed to find the will to say no to his requests from now on.

How do I learn to refuse him? Maybe I should make time to ask Duchesse

about this...

Several days passed, and there was now a full moon. Mysteriously, even though it was raining out, the moon was shining brightly through the downpour.

Van had sent me an apology card saying that he wouldn't be able to eat dinner with me tonight because he was busy. I felt a mix of relief and loneliness wash over me and fade away.

"Um, milady, there's another letter for you here," Parfeil said with a puzzled look on her face.

"Hm?"

Parfeil handed me a letter that appeared to have just arrived. The letter was signed by someone named "Opera," and next to the signature was the seal of the royal family. The only ones who were allowed to use that seal were Van and the royal lady. Of course, if the letter were from Van, it would be signed with his name, so...

"That means...this is from the royal lady?!"

"Most likely," Parfeil replied.

What could she want from me? I nervously took out a letter knife and opened the envelope. Written on it was a most unexpected invitation.

"This is terrible," I sighed.

"Milady, what did the royal lady say?" Parfeil inquired.

"It's an invitation to dinner tonight."

"W-Wow!"

A sudden invitation to dinner in this downpour? My gut was telling me not to go, but I couldn't find a reason to refuse the invitation. I began to write an eloquent note back, expressing my joy at being invited to dinner.

"I hope this reply doesn't sound too brazen."

"I-I'm sure it's fine!" Parfeil assured me.

I handed her the letter to send to the royal lady. As I waited for Her

Highness's reply, I quickly began preparing for the dinner. I had Parfeil prepare an evening dress for me to wear. I got dressed, did my makeup, and styled my hair. I somehow managed to finish all that within an hour.

We rode in a carriage to the royal lady's palace. I was so nervous that I didn't have an appetite, and I worried if I would even be able to eat in this state.

The carriage kept trudging along despite the evening's downpour.

"I wonder why Her Highness suddenly decided to invite you over for dinner," Parfeil mused.

"I have no idea," I replied. "I just know that she's not doing this merely to exchange pleasantries."

"Huh..."

It had been a month since I'd arrived at the castle to serve as Van's personal maid. I had been thinking about how to make contact with the royal lady since then, but I hadn't expected that it would happen *now*.

We arrived at the castle where the royal lady had previously held her party. A butler had been sent to guide us inside, and I tried to calm my nerves as we followed him. Parfeil was even more nervous than I was. Somehow, we mustered up the energy to keep on moving forward.

"Parfeil, we'll be fine. Don't worry," I reassured her.

"Y-Yes, of course, m-milady!" Parfeil stammered.

The royal lady was waiting in the dining hall, and she smiled upon seeing me. "Welcome, Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire. I am glad to finally meet you! My name is Opera."

I was completely captivated in an instant—before me was a young woman with dazzling silver hair and coral-pink eyes. Though she looked youthful, she was over a century old—far older than I was. Her skin was as smooth and pale as porcelain, and her small stature fostered a protective instinct in those who laid eyes on her.

She was indeed the royal lady, Opera. No one in the room could raise their bowed heads before her regal presence.

“You may raise your heads.”

I followed her command, and once I met her gaze, I imagined Van’s visage overlapping with hers.

“Huh...?” I mumbled.

“What are you spacing out for? I am hungry. Be seated. Quickly!” she called out.

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!”

I headed to the dining table and sat down on the chair prepared by the butler. We offered up our prayers and began our meal.

The waiters brought the first dish to the table—it was...*something* preserved in gelée. Lady Opera must have noticed me staring at the food in bewilderment as she then announced our meal.

“Our hors d’oeuvre is large-winged grasshopper preserved in gelée.”

Her Highness should praise me for not screaming my head off.

Large-winged grasshoppers were crop-destroying pests, and I’d encountered them a few times at our estate. The folks there insisted that they were delicious when fried until crispy, but I had always adamantly refused.

“I heard that these were abundant at the Forêt Noire family estate. They seem to be a nutritious local delicacy, so I have graciously had them prepared for you,” Lady Opera said.

“I humbly accept your grace, Your Highness.”

“Please, eat as much as your stomach allows.”

The royal lady’s intent to harass me couldn’t be any clearer. She already didn’t think well of me, so my having gotten Van’s approval must have incensed her further.

Though it’s not like I don’t understand how she feels...

Unlike me, Lady Opera was having a colorful vegetable gelée for this course. In other words, this grasshopper gelée was prepared specifically for me. Showing disgust or rejecting the food would mean I was snubbing the royal

lady's hospitality.

So, is this your game, Your Highness? Then I shall accept your challenge. I braced myself and shoved a spoonful of the gelée into my mouth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Parfeil—she looked positively shocked as I ate the food. She had been an adventurer once, so I wished that she wouldn't look so appalled at the sight of me eating bugs.

Now that I've taken a bite, I might as well enjoy the meal.

I took my time chewing the food, making sure to savor every last bit of it. The grasshoppers were fried in batter, making them crispy. With each bite, the flavor of the consommé gelée mixed in with the crispy texture. It was honestly not as bad as I'd expected. It had a pleasant taste that reminded me of shrimp, and it blended well with the gelée.

"Mille-Feuille, how is the food?" Lady Opera asked.

"Quite delicious, Your Highness," I replied.

"Excuse me?"

"The flavors are exquisite, and it reminds me of life at the estate. It has a nostalgic taste."

Lady Opera was hiding her face behind a fan, but I heard her click her tongue from behind it. She was clearly glaring at me as well.

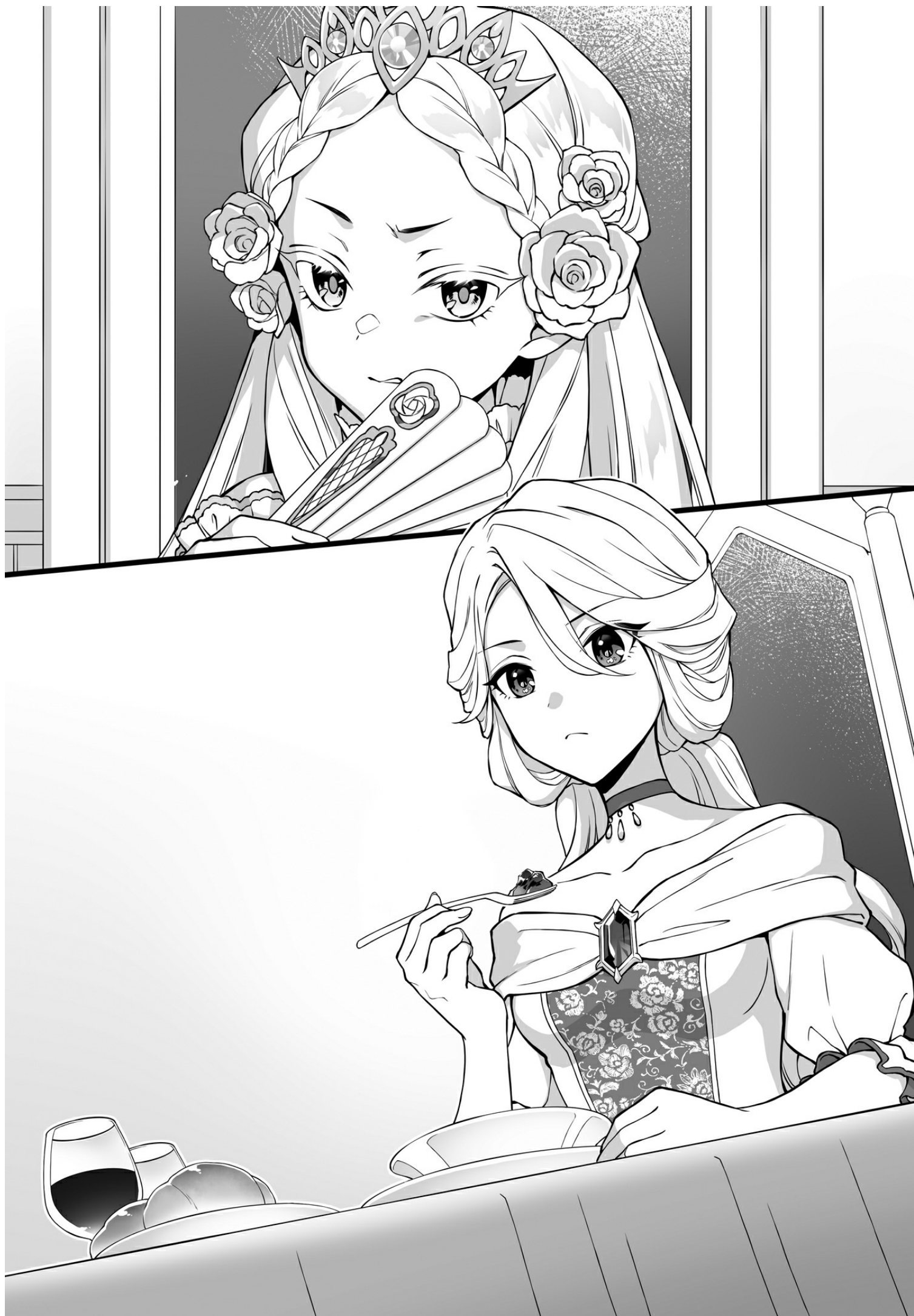
Next, the soup arrived. It had the color of mud, which only served to reduce my already dwindling appetite. I was curious as to what kind of soup this could possibly be; however, I was about to put it in my mouth regardless. In this case, ignorance might have been bliss.

"Mille-Feuille, you are having grassland viper soup," Lady Opera then explained.

I mustered up a reply. "Oh, I see."

The grassland viper was a venomous snake. During the summers and throughout autumn each year, there would be several sightings of them reported at the Forêt Noire estate. Men would capture them and soak them in alcohol. I shot a sideways glance at Parfeil again—she had turned pale and was

shaking her head rapidly. I'd heard that adventurers ate wild snakes as emergency food sometimes, but it seemed that hadn't been the case for Parfeil.



“I had also heard that this is a specialty of the Forêt Noire estate,” Lady Opera remarked.

“No, well—I-I suppose it might be,” I stammered.

Like the grasshoppers, this was no delicacy at our estate. I felt my energy depleting as I looked at the food.

“Worry not. The vipers have been detoxified and marinated in alcohol before serving.”

“Thank you for your concern,” I replied.

Snake venom could generally be classified into two types: neurotoxins and hemotoxins. Neurotoxins generally showed their effects when they came into contact with skin or when ingested. In contrast, hemotoxins only caused symptoms when injected into the body and coming into contact with blood. Grassland viper venom was a hemotoxin, so there shouldn’t be a problem with this as I wouldn’t be getting bitten. The viper used in this soup had already been submerged in water while alive to purge the filth in its body and subsequently marinated in alcohol. In fact, the resulting medicinal wine was said to help boost a weakened constitution.

I’d learned all of this from Charlotte’s memories. But of course, even she hadn’t gone as far as making viper wine herself.

Lady Opera was, as expected, not having the viper soup either. She had been served a normal carrot potage. Her Highness gazed at me, expecting me to display disgust at the food. I wasn’t about to let her have the satisfaction, however, and I nervously sipped down the mud—or rather, the viper soup.

“Well, how is it?” Lady Opera asked.

“Ah, how kind of you, Lady Opera,” I said. “The medicinal taste of the soup helped relax my nerves. The viper meat was somewhat tough, but it tasted like chicken. Quite delicious!”

The royal lady shook silently as if holding back her feelings of humiliation. I was not going to let her blatant harassment get the better of me.

The main course that came next was continental alligator steak. The meat was

hard to chew, but it tasted like a regular steak and was even tasty.

Dessert was mousse topped with the eyeballs of a maddened beast. It *looked* terrifying, but that was all. The mousse itself was a delicious, exquisite mix of woodland strawberries and white chocolate.

In the end, I had somehow survived Lady Opera's monstrous full-course meal.

"Lady Opera, I thank you for this feast. It was much too luxurious for a lowly subject such as myself," I told her.

"I-I am glad that you enjoyed this banquet."

However, this event wasn't over quite yet. I needed to teach her a lesson about harassing others.

"Actually, the Dragon Duke has requested that I come up with a multicourse menu for a banquet," I started. "I was thinking of submitting Your Highness's ideas from tonight to him."

"Huh?"

"I'd like to suggest the name 'The Opera Selection: An Extravagant Full-Course Meal,'" I said. "Would that be all right with you, Your Highness?"

"Of course not!!!" Lady Opera bellowed in response. Her voice was loud enough to make the chandeliers above us tremble.

I had thought that she was a calm and composed woman, but it seemed that she had quite a temper. If word got to Van that she had fed me this *extravagant* banquet, it would certainly cause an incident. From her reaction, it seemed that she hadn't even considered that possibility.

"I see... That is quite a shame," I said politely. "I was overjoyed by the way Your Highness showed such a *deep* appreciation for my homeland and welcomed me with such *warm* hospitality."

"Ah, well, er—I had great difficulty in obtaining the ingredients for your meal today. I would not want you to go through such pains just to prepare for a banquet," the royal lady replied.

"I see. I had not considered that. I will think of a different menu to suggest."

Lady Opera looked relieved, but I wasn't quite done yet—I then struck her with a finishing blow to make sure this didn't happen again.

“Perhaps I should regale the Dragon Duke with the tale of your *wonderful* selection of dishes for this banquet instead. Would that be all right?”

“I will *not* allow that!!!” she screeched, even louder this time. Her voice once again shook the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

The royal lady was now visibly agitated. She only needed one more push to stop her from harassing me again.

“Then, Your Highness, shall we keep my *luxurious* dinner tonight a secret between us?”

“Y-Yes, of course. This will be our secret.”

With that, I now had the royal lady indebted to me. She then invited me to relax and have some tea with her. I took a moment to think about it, and she added that we could do this another time if I were too full. I was sure that this was her way of suggesting that I could just refuse her request, but I was too curious as to what kind of person the royal lady truly was.

I accepted her invitation, and she furrowed her brow upon hearing my response.

She could've just refrained from inviting me if she really didn't want me around.

We moved into a tea room. This time, we were both served nonmonstrous snacks and perfectly normal drinks. Lined up before us were cups of fragrant black tea and a variety of confectioneries.

Parfeil was, unusually for her, just lazing around. The only thing she had been doing tonight was waiting nearby for me, but it seemed that today's events had completely sapped her energy.

After seeing that Lady Opera had gracefully partaken in her tea, I followed suit. The brown tea had a sweet fragrance and a deep but gentle taste. In other words, it was delicious.

It was my first time seeing a particular adorable type of little sweets lined up

on the table. I asked the royal lady about them. “Your Highness, are all these foreign confectioneries?”

“Why, yes, indeed. They are sweets made to be eaten in one bite called petit fours,” explained Lady Opera.

“Petit fours...” Apparently, this was an idea that Lady Opera had come up with while talking with a foreign pâtissier friend of hers.

“So, these are sweets made just for you, Your Highness,” I said.

“Yes, indeed.”

“May I have some?”

“They are here for you to enjoy. Have as many as you like.”

“All right, then.” I picked up one that was cut in the shape of a shell. When I popped it into my mouth, it crumbled into sweet powder on my tongue.

“How is it?”

“Delicious, Your Highness.”

“Good. Here, have some more.”

The royal lady offered me sweets one after the other. I was already full from the monstrous full-course meal I’d just had, but the size of the sweets made them easy to consume. I ate until I was satisfied, and it was only then that I realized Lady Opera’s aim here—this was her way of apologizing to me. Perhaps she’d realized that she had done something wrong and was reflecting on her actions.

I felt Lady Opera’s gaze on me, so I turned to face her. She had actually been looking at me as if she had seen a pile of garbage.

I take everything back. She hadn’t been feeding me because she felt bad. She had acknowledged me as her enemy and was plotting my downfall—nay, she had been feeding me to get me to lower my guard. I was sure of it.

“What is it?” Lady Opera asked.

“Oh, nothing, Your Highness.”

I imagined a white tiger—a phantasmal beast—hissing at me from behind

Lady Opera's serene smile.

If she's a white tiger, then I'll fight her with my white squirrels. I refuse to lose to her!

"Oh, yes," she began. "Mille-Feuille, I can't help but notice that you've been getting along quite well with my brother."

I felt like time had completely stopped when I heard Lady Opera's words. *Brother?* Wait... Lady Opera wasn't Van's wife or fiancée but his *sister*? How could people hear that the royal lady was part of the Dragon Duke's family and not even consider that she might have been his sister? I suspected that this was because the Dragon Duke's potential marriage had been the talk of the town. I'd even thought that they looked alike earlier...

"Why have you fallen silent? Speak," Lady Opera demanded.

"My apologies, Your Highness." I decided to be frank about my misunderstanding. "To be honest, I had mistaken you for the Dragon Duchess consort. I am shocked to learn that you are actually his sister..."

"Wh-What?! How could you make that mistake?!"

"Once again, I apologize."

I downed the tea that Lady Opera had ordered her attendants to serve me and managed to regain my composure. Why had I been so agitated about this? And why was I so relieved upon learning that Lady Opera was Van's sister? Perhaps it was because of Charlotte's memories. Yes, that must've been the case.

I returned to the topic at hand—about how I had been getting along with the Dragon Duke. "To tell you the truth, I have only become friends with him through several coincidences. I had no idea that I had been interacting with the Dragon Duke himself."

"You speak as if it is a simple matter to converse with him."

"Is having a conversation with the Dragon Duke a difficult matter?" I asked Lady Opera sincerely.

Lady Opera bit her lip and appeared to struggle to find the right words. "Ever

since I could remember, the Dragon Duke—my brother—had already been s—”

Lady Opera’s words were interrupted by the loud commotion of footsteps rapidly approaching the guests’ receiving chamber. It was then followed by aggressive knocking on the door.

“Announce yourselves!” Lady Opera’s commanding voice rang throughout the room.

The knocks were from the royal guards. “Your Highness, the Sealing Enforcers have failed to seal the Dragon Duke. He is showing signs of turning berserk, and we would like to request your aid in suppressing him. Would you please accompany us?”

“Wh-Why is this happening?” Lady Opera cried out. “Langue de Chat assured me that there was nothing to worry about with the ritual!”

“Normally, there would be no problem. However, tonight is the first Raining Moon in a century!” said the royal guard.

A Raining Moon was a phenomenon where the moon still shined brightly through thick rain clouds during the rainy season. The moon was also referred to as a gigantic magicstone, and during this time, it would have gathered a larger amount of mana than usual and shine even brighter than normal. This phenomenon was said to occur once every hundred years.

Lady Opera was biting her lip. Her face was deathly pale, and she appeared to be highly perturbed.

“Lady Opera, please accompany us!”

“Be quiet!!!” she yelled. “You need not repeat yourselves! I am already aware of the situation!”

The room went quiet, and the only sound that could be heard was the sound of the downpour outside echoing inside the room.

Suddenly, a memory flashed in my mind.

Charlotte... Charlotte...!

The Dragon Duke was desperately shouting Charlotte's name as he was drenched by heavy rain. It was a scream of rage. And on that night, the moon had been shining bright.

A century ago, Charlotte was killed during the Raining Moon. A knife had been thrust deep into her chest. It was a fatal wound.

I tried to remember more, but a splitting headache stopped me.

"Ugh—!"

"Lady Mille-Feuille!" I was about to lose consciousness, but Parfeil managed to catch me before I collapsed. "Milady, I think we should head home," Parfeil said.

I tried to nod in agreement, but Lady Opera grabbed my arm.

"Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire! You are *not* going anywhere! You are coming with me!" she cried.

"Y-Your Highness, she is not feeling very well!" Parfeil protested.

"Be quiet, you bunny!"

"B-Bunny?!"

The royal lady yanked my arm and forced me to stand up.

"I want to sear into those beady eyes of yours the sight of my brother—the Dragon Duke's true form."

Lady Opera dragged me along like a limp marionette. Parfeil kept trying to stop her, but the royal lady only yelled at her with every attempt.

"Parfeil...I'm all right..." I mumbled weakly.

"But...!"

"Please, just...hold my hand..."

"Yes, milady!"

We rode in Lady Opera's personal carriage and headed to the castle.

"This is such a disgrace. How did no one notice that tonight was a Raining Moon?" Lady Opera fumed.

The royal guards could only nod at her with teary eyes. It seemed that not even Duchesse had thought to take the Raining Moon into consideration.

Apparently, the Dragon Duke—Van—was unable to resist the influence of the full moon's mana and would forcefully transform on those nights. If the Dragon Duke were to go berserk, the entire nation would be destroyed in an instant. Before that could happen, the Dragon Duke would be sealed away in his dragon form in a dome-shaped structure called the Temple of Sealing.

Were tonight a regular full moon, there wouldn't have been any problems controlling him. However, tonight was a once-in-a-century Raining Moon. Sealing Enforcers from all over the Dragon Duchy of Éclair had gathered to attempt to seal the Dragon Duke, but their attempts at casting magic were all repelled by him.

"Once my brother goes berserk, nobody will be able to stop him. When I, a family member, tried to suppress him, I became bedridden for months despite my Suppression Magic having little effect on him," Lady Opera said. She was gripping her hands tightly on her lap. She must have known that she would be of little assistance even if she rushed in to help.

Just in case, I gave Lady Opera's attendant one of my caramel candies to help her recover her mana. I was sure that the royal lady would just refuse it if I were the one to hand it to her.

"Mille-Feuille. You must lay your eyes on my brother and decide whether you are fit to be by his side," Lady Opera said to me.

Charlotte had never seen the Dragon Duke's dragon form in her lifetime. She had promised her future to him without knowing anything about dragon transformations or the suffering of dragonkin women. What would have happened if they had gone on to get married? She would've grown old on her own while her husband had remained beautiful forevermore. There was no way they would've lived a happy life together.

And what would I think of Van once I'd seen him transformed and out of control? I was not strong enough to declare beyond any doubt that I would be fine with him.

The carriage slowed down and eventually came to a halt. We had arrived at

the Temple of Sealing. Lady Opera's attendant cast a spell to ward off the rain. Outside, knights bearing magicstones were lined up in an orderly fashion.

I couldn't fully see the structure of the temple in the darkness, but I could make out the mysterious glow of the spells carved on its facade. The ghostly sight made a chill run down my spine.

Lady Opera grabbed the hem of her skirt and ran toward the temple. Parfeil and I followed her.

The Temple of Sealing was an extravagant structure with walls, floors, and ceilings made wholly of marble. This structure hadn't been present during Charlotte's time, so it must have been constructed within the last century. Spells were carved all over its inner walls, and they glowed with a red light. A large-scale magic spell had been cast to tranquilize the transformed Van.

A surprising sight sat at the end of the long hallway that we had traversed—enormous steel bars to imprison the frenzied Van. From here on, we needed to enter an underground passage, as it was impossible to pass through the steel.

We descended a staircase into a dimly lit passage before going up another set of stairs. We entered a room to find a gigantic dragon bound with chains inside. On the floor, a magic circle had been drawn—a Sealing Magic circle.

The dragon was covered in beautiful silver scales—this must have been Van's true form. He was surrounded by Sealing Enforcers clad in white cloaks, chanting some kind of incantation. I spotted Duchesse and Roche among them.

Van, in his dragon form, was shedding tears of blood from his sky-blue eyes. He let out a pained roar. The air in the room shook, and those with low resistance to magic fell to their knees. I felt my consciousness threatening to fade away, but I barely managed to keep standing on my own feet. Meanwhile, Parfeil had covered her ears and was crouching on the ground.

"Parfeil, are you okay?" I asked her.

"Y-Yes, milady. I think I can handle it by crouching like this."

"You should leave if you can't take it anymore," I instructed her.

"Yes, milady."

Lady Opera was also barely able to stand, and she was being supported by her attendant. Only Roche, Duchesse, and I were able to stay upright on our own in this state.

Van let out another roar. This time, the structure itself trembled and shook. The ceiling began to crack, and fragments of marble began raining all over.

“Your Highness!!!”

It appeared that Lady Opera had fainted from that roar. Her attendant, who’d been supporting her, had also collapsed. About half of the Sealing Enforcers had also lost consciousness.

One by one, the chains holding Van began to vanish. Duchesse had joined in on the chanting, but Van writhed more and all the chains disappeared.

“Duchesse!!! What are we supposed to do now?!”

“Roche, calm yourself. I will use the tablet on him,” Duchesse replied.

“But that was used to seal away the berserk Dragon Duke for a hundred years!”

“This is an emergency.”

The Dragon Duke...was sealed for a hundred years?

Van had crushed the Kingdom of Sacristain after Charlotte was killed. Had he been sealed away after that because no one could stop his berserk state?

If this went on, he’d be sealed away again. All I could do now...was to use Suppression Magic to try and suppress him.

I walked past all the people writhing on the ground and leaped in front of Van.

“H-Hey! Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire! What are you trying to do?!” Roche shouted.

“You’re in danger!!!” Duchesse yelled.

The remaining magic circles were only strong enough to pin Van to the ground. Blood flowed from the wounds inflicted by the chains that had been wrapped around him. He must have been hurting.

The poor thing.

Dragons could not escape the power of the moon—only dragonkin women were able to suppress its power. Lady Opera had tried to use Suppression Magic to calm Van, and as a result, she'd ended up bedridden for a long time. A normal person like me would be unable to bear that burden.

I already knew all that. And yet I couldn't bear to see Van suffer like this.

This was the first time I would be using Suppression Magic on a dragon that had gone berserk. I began to chant the incantation that would free him from his suffering as soon as I could. It was a kind of magic that had been passed down since ancient times to all dragonkin women.

When the memories of my past life had returned, I was filled with indignation at how only women were made to suffer like this. But in reality, the men were also hurting and suffering. Dragonkin women must have used Suppression Magic to offer themselves up and ease the pain of the men they loved.

I wouldn't put myself through this suffering if I had no feelings for Van. It was then that I realized that these were no simple emotions I was having—this was love. I *loved* Van. If I hadn't, the thought of bearing the pain of Suppression Magic wouldn't have even crossed my mind.

Charlotte had nothing to do with my love for Van. I knew that because the Dragon Duke that she had met and the Dragon Duke that I loved now were two completely different people. I didn't love the Dragon Duke—I loved the man who had called himself Van Citron.

I poured all my love into my magic and cast the spell, just as I had learned in class. Once I sensed a connection with Van's mana, I felt as if every single drop of blood in my body was beginning to boil.

"Ngh!"

I felt dizzy. It hurt. I couldn't breathe.

But I knew Van was hurting even more.

Casting Suppression Magic was like pouring cold water into a boiling pot. Slowly but surely, I cooled down the boiling hot mana inside his body.

I felt something hot making its way up my throat. I started coughing, but I couldn't stop the incantation now. I must have been coughing up blood, but this was no time to be minding that.

I heard someone shout my name, but I couldn't tell who it was. All that was just noise to me now. Only Van's roars could reach my heart.

Just a bit more. It'll be okay. I used magic to communicate my feelings to Van.

The magic circle beneath us began to shine bright, enveloping Van's body with a gentle light.

The screams of pain vanished. I had succeeded in suppressing Van.

"Wow, that woman... She actually did it," Roche muttered.

"How could she have suppressed him without the tablet?" Duchesse said.

My consciousness was fading. My head was throbbing, and I couldn't breathe properly. I was feeling the obvious symptoms of mana depletion.

The only thing I could make out with my blurred vision was Van. He had been crying, and he lent me his cheek to support me. His draconic scales were smooth and comforting and were much warmer than the skin of a human.

"Van, I'm glad you're okay..." I muttered, and he gave an unexpectedly adorable growl as a reply. I had no idea what he was thinking, but as I was about to collapse, he gave me a kiss.

"Huh?!" I was about to protest, but I realized what he had done. I felt my lost mana recover in an instant. It seemed that Van had given me his own mana. With that, the magic circle for using Suppression Magic vanished under my feet.

I was astonished. "Does this mean... Is *this* the complete form of Suppression Magic?!"

A female dragonkin would begin using Suppression Magic and calm a berserk state, and the male dragon would share some of his mana with her via a kiss. Suppression Magic was not such a one-sided ritual after all.

"I see... So that's what it was..."

The emotions that had been putting a strain on me all this time began to

loosen up. Warm feelings began to fill up my chest. Van came closer to me and gently wrapped his wings around me.

Ahh... I feel so happy right now.

I woke up to the chirping of birds outside, which I recognized as the cries of larks. It seemed that it was still dark outside, and there was probably still an hour until dawn.

“Mmm...”

“It’s still quite early. You should sleep some more.”

“Okay... Huh?!”

I suddenly noticed the warmth of another creature close to me. I sat up and lit the magicstone torch on the bedside. Its bright light revealed the profile of a sleepy Van.

“Wh-Wh-Wh—?!” I was too shocked to say anything coherent.

Van had been sleeping beside me with his upper body exposed. When he got up and removed the blanket on top of him, I found out that he was actually completely naked.

“Wh-Why are you not wearing anything?!” I exclaimed.

“I was transformed into a dragon and I only reverted this morning,” Van replied.

“I-I see...”

Van stretched out his arms and pulled me in close. “Mille-Feuille, thank you for what you did last night. I was able to turn back to my human form thanks to you.”

“Y-You’re welcome,” I stammered back.

“I heard that they were about to use the tablet to seal me away.”

“Tablet?”

“It’s some kind of stone scroll written in ancient times,” Van explained.

Thousands of years ago, sorcerers known as sages carved magic into stones. While magic from paper scrolls could be activated by tearing them up, magic inside stone tablets could be activated by breaking them. A few valuable stone tablets still remained in the hands of the dragonkin, one of them being a tablet that could seal violent dragons.

“Being sealed away by the tablet means being forced to sleep for a hundred years,” he told me. “I was about to be sealed away and leave you behind.”

I’d overheard Duchesse saying that they had used the tablet to seal Van away a century ago. I was curious about it, but I couldn’t ask Van as it definitely had something to do with Charlotte. I didn’t want to hear anything about Charlotte from Van. Even though she and I shared the same soul, we were two completely different people.

I only asked Van what I wanted to know. “So who was in charge for the hundred years you were sealed away?”

“Duchesse took care of anything that came up. I wouldn’t say he was in charge of everything, but he was managing the affairs of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair while I was gone.”

“I see.”

“Mille-Feuille, let’s continue our conversation later. Let’s get some more sleep,” said Van.

“You’re right.”

Van then snuggled up against me. Once I felt his warmth, everything else stopped mattering to me. I was still sleepy, and the sun hadn’t even risen yet.

I’m sure I could use some more sleep...

The first time I woke up today had been from the chirping of morning larks, which was a lovely way to wake up.

The second time, however, was from Roche’s screams, which were not as lovely.

“Lord Dragon Duke!!!” he screamed from outside the room. “Are you awake

yet?!”

“You’re too loud,” mumbled Van.

I nodded in agreement.

“You could at least let us sleep in on our first night together,” he continued.

I was still sleepy, but I managed to catch Van’s statement and it set off a bit of an alarm in my head. “First night together...?” I weakly echoed.

I finally surveyed my surroundings and noticed that this wasn’t my room. Van hadn’t gotten here by sneaking in.

“Van, how did I get here?” I asked.

“Last night, you were so comfortable under my wings that you fell sound asleep, so I took you straight to my room. That’s all,” he replied.

“Th-That’s all?! Wasn’t Parfeil with us?”

“I become very possessive when I’m in my dragon form, so I flew straight to my room with you on my back.”

“And how did you get in here with that gigantic dragon body of yours?”

“There’s some leeway with my body size.”

“First time I’ve heard of that,” I said.

“Well, there’s a trick to it that not everyone can do.”

I could hardly believe it, but apparently, I had slept through the night while Van was in his dragon form.

I circled back to my original question. “Anyway, what exactly did you mean by ‘first night together’?”

“I mean, the Suppression Magic that you used last night might as well have been our wedding ceremony,” Van said.

“No way! I only did that to help you out!” I cried.

Van stared at me with a puzzled look on his face.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Oh, I was just wondering if you knew about the *true* marriage rites between dragonkin,” Van replied.

“What do you mean?”

“A long time ago, being able to suppress a dragon’s berserk state was proof that you were married to the dragon.”

“First time I’ve heard of *that*!”

“It looks like that tradition has faded away during this last century,” he said. “But, well, it’s still a binding wedding ceremony, even today.”

“B-But this is all so sudden...!”

It seemed that Van had only recalled this fact just now. I suddenly remembered that he had also forgotten the basics of magic until recently. Perhaps his memories had begun to fade away after being alive for so long.

I suddenly became aware of Van’s intense gaze on me. “Wh-What is it?” I asked him.

“Mille-Feuille, listen to me.” Van spoke to me in a tone more serious than I had ever heard from him. “I—”

“Lord Dragon Duke! Forgive me for the intrusion!”

Roche had finally barged into the room by kicking the door open. His eyes were wet with tears. He had been banging and screaming at the door since earlier, and I almost found it impressive that Van had managed to ignore him all this time.

Roche rushed to the Dragon Duke’s side at an inhuman speed and knelt by the side of the bed. “Milord, I see that you have finally returned to your normal form!”

“Oh, Roche, you are such a—”

“Oh, I am so happy to see that you are well, milord!” Roche was sobbing, seemingly out of relief, at the sight of Van’s face. “You were able to return to your human form without using the stone tablet!”

“No, I *wasn’t* able to return on my own. Roche, listen to me. It was Mille-

Feuille who suppressed my berserk state. I hope you haven't forgotten what happened last night," Van chided Roche.

"Of course I haven't, milord!" Roche then turned to me and bowed his head deeply.

I felt uncomfortable seeing him give me such special treatment. "Roche, you don't need to do that. You may raise your head," I told him.

"How kind of you!" Roche sobbed.

I felt like my head was spinning. Roche had been so hostile to me until today, and now he was acting so subservient and respectful to me. I wished that I could've earned his respect in a different manner.

Roche then stood up and shouted something beyond my expectations. "All hail the Dragon Duke! All hail the Dragon Duchess consort!"

"Huh?!"

"All hail the Dragon Duchy of Éclair! All hail the Dragon Duchy! All hail!!!" And with that, Roche ran out of the room.

"Wait, stop cheering! Stop that!" I started to chase after Roche, but I suddenly noticed that I was in my sleepwear. "How did you change my clothes?!" I shouted at Van.

"Don't worry, I had a maid do it for you."

"O-Oh, all right, then."

"Also, your precious rabbit is sleeping in a different room," he said.

"She's not my 'precious rabbit.' Her name is Parfeil."

"Sorry about that. You hadn't introduced her to me yet. Parfeil, huh... I will remember her name."

I had someone call Parfeil over so we could meet, and I headed to my own room after changing my clothes. Once she and I were alone, she gave me a big hug.

"Waah! Lady Mille-Feuille, I'm so glad you're okay!" Parfeil sobbed.

"Y-Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry for worrying you so much."

“After the Dragon Duke took you away, I was so worried that I was able to get some sleep!”

“Well, I’m glad that you managed to sleep well.”

“Being worried about you doesn’t mean I should lose sleep, after all!”

“I’m glad that you were comfortable.” I returned Parfeil’s embrace and whispered to her. “I’m okay now. I’m really sorry for worrying you.”

“I’m so glad to hear that, milady,” Parfeil replied.

I had been able to find a solution to Van going berserk. And I was able to find out that the burden of Suppression Magic could be solved by the men providing women with some of their mana. Today, I felt like I had taken a big step toward easing the burdens of dragonkin women everywhere.

Chapter 5: Who Killed Charlotte?

It was the middle of the rainy season, but the skies were clear today, making it a great day for an outing. I had traveled by carriage to go strawberry picking—a trip I had previously talked about with my three friends. Warm sunlight filtered through the pristine forests of the Haricot de Soissons' family estate on the outskirts of the capital. Yellow strawberries naturally grew on its grounds as well. There, we would pick strawberries and deepen our friendships.

The three ladies' husbands had insisted they rest at home and save their mana instead of going on outings. It was clear that this had been the men's attempt to restrict their wives' actions so they'd save their stamina for Suppression Magic. It seemed that the women wanted to go on this outing because they could no longer bear merely being convenient tools for their husbands. I found it to be quite brave of them.

Speaking of Suppression Magic, Duchesse had begun researching it. According to him, he couldn't find any references to the part of the ritual where the woman's mana was replenished by the man redistributing it. Van kept insisting that it was "the power of love between Mille-Feuille and me!" but of course that couldn't have been the case. I heard that after the incident with Van, there were a few cases where a couple had tried kissing during the ritual, but they were unable to replenish mana as we had done. They'd asked us if there was some kind of trick to it, but we had no answer to give them.

I'd thought that we would no longer need the milk vetch tea or the caramel candies, but it seemed that they were here to stay for a while.

"I really enjoyed our time today."

"Indeed!"

"We should go out like this again!"

"Of course!" I said back to the three ladies. After making plans to go out again at a later date, we ended our outing. It had been a fun and fulfilling time.

A letter arrived from my family back at our estate. Apparently, Van had been providing them with a lot of support, and their lives had been rather comfortable. They'd even been able to repair the windmill that had been damaged by a storm last year.

The letter described my family's current goings-on. Father was apparently tired of city life and was now having a well-earned rest. Mother had invited all the women at the estate into our home and had opened a salon where they could chat daily. My brother was going around negotiating good prices for wheat harvested at our estate. He was also lamenting about how he had invited Madeleine there as well, but she had refused his invitation. Since I'd already requested Madeleine as my assistant, she must have said no because of that.

And now, she had finally arrived.

"Millefie!"

"Madeleine!"

We embraced each other immediately. It had only been six months since we'd last seen each other, but it felt more like we hadn't seen each other in years.

"Oh, Millefie, it looks like you've lost weight since I last saw you," Madeleine said.

"You must be imagining things," I replied.

"I could never make a mistake when it comes to you. Have you been working too hard lately?"

"I'm not really exhausted, no. It just took me time to get used to my new environment," I assured her.

"I see. We'll be working together from now on, okay?" Madeleine encouraged me.

"Of course! Thank you, Madeleine."

"Don't mention it."

I felt reassured just by having Madeleine at my side. I needed her in my life.

And Parfeil too, of course.

Madeleine was shy, so I was worried about whether she would get along with the three ladies, but it turned out that I had nothing to worry about. She had only needed to exchange a few words with them before they started doting on her.

“My, what an adorable young lady!”

“Your skin is as smooth as a pearl! I’m quite jealous.”

“I would love to have someone like you marry my grandchild. Oh, you’re already engaged?”

I felt relieved that Madeleine didn’t seem to be put off by all this. It looked like things would be livelier from now on.

That night, another letter arrived. The maid who brought it to me had found it stuck on the door and hadn’t seen anyone put it there. There was no sender written on its envelope.

“How unsettling,” I said.

“Shall I dispose of it, milady?” the maid asked.

“No need for that.”

If there were any trace of magic on it, I would have thrown it out on the spot, but even my Evaluation Glasses said that it was a regular letter. I dismissed the maid and opened the envelope with a letter knife. Inside was a card with only one line on it written in neat handwriting.

“The Dragon Duke already has someone he’s loved for a hundred years. You are merely a stand-in.”

“Wh-What?”

“For a hundred years” must have been referring to Charlotte. But who would write me something like this?

Parfeil had just returned from the break room, so I showed her the card.

“What a cruel thing to write!” she exclaimed.

“Right?”

“A hundred years ago... That’s referring to the princess, right?” she asked. “The one who caused the war between the Kingdom of Sacristain and the dragonkin?”

“Parfeil, you know about that?”

“Of course! I’ve been around for over two hundred years, after all!” Parfeil had been an adventurer back then, and word of the war had reached her ears. “I heard that the Dragon Duke going berserk was a sight to behold! He was *furious* when the princess was assassinated by the Kingdom of Sacristain. It was back during a Raining Moon a century ago, so the moon’s mana gave him even more power. It was a bloodbath on the battlefield!”

Apparently, there had been almost no survivors from the Kingdom’s army, and their royal family had been driven out into the countryside.

“And, of course, there was no one who could stop the Dragon Duke in his rampage...”

That must have been when he’d been sealed with the ancient tablet, just as Roche and Duchesse had said the other day.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Parfeil then added. “It’s only a rumor, but I heard that the Dragon Duke may have had a body double.”

“A body double...?”

Apparently, people in the castle’s break room were abuzz, trying to figure out certain mysteries behind the Dragon Duke. At one point, there had been books and pamphlets circulating with various rumors and stories around him, but Duchesse began restricting and confiscating them. This didn’t seem like the time to be spreading rumors about others.

“They say it might be someone from the Dragon Duke’s family like a twin. Or maybe a look-alike or some kind of magical puppet. Nobody knows if any of that is true.”

“Forget about those rumors. I’m sure there’s no basis for any of them,” I chided Parfeil.

“You’re probably right, milady!”

Van had mentioned that while he had been sealed away, Duchesse Langue de Chat had acted as regent and managed the Dragon Duchy’s affairs. I didn’t mention this fact to Parfeil, however—it might have been classified information.

Still, I could almost believe the body double rumor. The Dragon Duke in Charlotte’s memories and the Dragon Duke that I knew seemed like two completely different people. But Van’s powers and abilities were unmistakably that of the Dragon Duke. There was no way he could be a body double.

People changed over time. I was sure that something must have changed Van over the years.

“Oh, I just remembered! Lady Mille-Feuille, on your birthday, when the Dragon Duke showed himself to the public, didn’t he mention Charlotte’s name?” Parfeil asked me.

“Yes... He did,” I replied.

“To be honest, it seemed like he still wasn’t over her.”

“Indeed.”

I thought back to what the Dragon Duke had said that day. “*Why must I be reduced to a public exhibit on the day I parted with my dear Charlotte?*” he’d lamented. I just couldn’t imagine Van acting like that.

I didn’t want to just sit around with this uneasy feeling. I needed to ask Van about it myself to clear things up. Thankfully, I was going to have dinner with him later today. I simply needed to muster up my courage and solve this mystery.

And I *did* do that in preparation, but there was an unexpected visitor in the dining hall.

“Dear brother, I thank you for inviting me to supper tonight.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s good to do this sometimes,” Van replied.

For some reason, Lady Opera was here in the dining hall tonight, sitting at the table with a huge smile on her face. All the courage I had mustered vanished in

an instant.

“Um, Va—er, Lord Dragon Duke. Um, I see that Lady Opera has joined us today,” I stammered.

“Yes, indeed. After all, I caused a lot of trouble for her with all the commotion the other day. I thought to thank her by inviting her to supper,” Van replied.

Today, they had implemented some measures against poisoning. For one, we were all served different dishes coming from different kitchens. There were also poison testers on standby.

“Uh, I see that I am interrupting some quality time between siblings, so if you don’t mind...”

As I was about to leave, Van and Lady Opera shouted out in unison.

“Come join us already!”

“Enough, be seated already!”

“A-Ah, yes, of course! Then, if you’ll excuse me...”

It seemed that they found it awkward for it to be just the two of them. I wished that they wouldn’t use me as some kind of mediator.

Dinner began once I took my seat, and the dining hall remained silent. Brother and sister were gathered here together, but no conversation sprang up between them. Everyone was eating a different meal too, so that couldn’t even be a common topic between us.

This is so awkward.

I was eating such a luxurious meal, but it barely tasted like anything. It would seem that I had no choice but to strike up a conversation myself.

“Um... You two have such gorgeous hair! It almost looks like beautiful silver thread!”

Lady Opera happily preened while Van used the opportunity to talk about it. “This silver hair is unique to our lineage. Even actual silver spun into thread can’t produce this color. It’s impossible to make wigs in this shade, so we can’t have body doubles either.”

“O-Oh, really?”

“Yes. The only ones in the world who have this silver hair are me and my sister.”

“Th-That can’t...!”

In other words, there were no body doubles, twins, relatives, or look-alikes. All of those theories had just been disproved.

Suddenly, I noticed that I had attracted their attention. The beautiful pair of siblings were gazing at me.

“Um, is something the matter?” I asked.

“Well, you just shouted out of nowhere,” Van replied.

“You seem to have taken issue with something,” Lady Opera added.

Words sat stuck in my throat. It didn’t look like I could escape their curiosity. My exclamations were too loud to pass off as mere monologuing.

“Well, um, how should I say this... The Lord Dragon Duke and the royal lady’s locks are so beautiful, I was thinking of making dolls with the same hair color. I-I was so shocked to find out that it was impossible to replicate it,” I eked out in response.

Van’s and Lady Opera’s eyes narrowed at the same time, and I could tell that they were definitely siblings. They were similar not only in appearance but in personality. It seemed that they were both trying to determine whether I was telling the truth.

“I see. I had no idea that you were thinking so deeply about the color of my hair. I have let it grow too long for the last several years, so I will cut it. You may then use it to make your dolls,” Van offered.

“N-No, there’s no need for that,” I stuttered.

“Dear brother, cutting all that hair off is such a waste. You may have *my* cut hair instead,” Lady Opera proposed.

“I-I appreciate your offers, but there’s no need! I will use silver thread to make the doll hair!” I did my best to politely refuse their suggestions.

“You need not restrain yourself,” Lady Opera said.

“Really,” Van added.

I wasn’t worried about Van here, but I was afraid of what Lady Opera might do. I decided that not getting involved with her would be best.

Eventually, I finished my dessert, so I decided that it was time to leave.

“Madeleine is waiting in my room, so I shall take my leave,” I said.

Van stopped me. “Hey, wait right there. Is Madeleine more important to you than I am?”

“Yes, she is. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

I didn’t wait for his reply—I curtsied and left the dining hall. I heard Van shouting after me from behind, but I didn’t have any more energy left to deal with him. I just wanted to be with Madeleine. We’d drink some hot milk made by Parfeil, and then I’d go to bed. I was sure to have a good sleep if I did.

I told Madeleine and Parfeil about the intense dinner I’d had with Van and Lady Opera, and they praised me for toughing it out. I never wanted to have dinner with those two siblings ever again.

“Madeleine, I’m sorry for making you stay here this late.”

“Oh, Millefie, it’s all right,” she said. “I’m really glad that I could talk with you before turning in for the night.”

“That’s good to hear.”

I asked Parfeil to accompany Madeleine to her room. A knight entered, taking her place to guard me during the night. In the evenings, knights were posted in every bedroom as guards. I had my reservations at first, but shockingly enough, I hardly ever noticed their presence. I was able to get used to it within a few nights.

I closed the curtains that surrounded my bed, laid myself down, and pulled the snug covers over myself. I felt like I could rest well tonight, perhaps because of the hot milk.

As I was dozing off, I felt something writhing by my feet. Just as I lifted the

blanket to check, there was the sensation of something sharp tearing through my skin.

“Ouch!” I cried out, and the guard yanked the curtains open.

“Lady Mille-Feuille! Is something the matter?” the guard asked.

“Th-There’s something underneath the covers!”

The guard pulled back the blanket without hesitation. On my bed was a grassland viper, and its fangs were deep in my calf.

“A-Aahh!!!” I yelped.

The knight peeled the viper off me without hesitation, and she sliced it with her dagger.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, did you get bitten anywhere else?” the knight asked.

“N-No, just my calf...” I mumbled back.

The knight tied a handkerchief around an area slightly above the bite—a first aid measure to stop the venom from circulating. She then washed the wound with water.

“Milady, please stay still and rest a moment. I will call a doctor.”

I couldn’t muster up a response. A fiery pain began to spread from my wound and tears welled up in my eyes.

My breathing became labored. “Haa... Haa... Haa...”

A commotion began to grow around me. More knights entered the room, and I heard footsteps of people running in the hallway.

Everyone’s making such a big deal about this viper bite, I thought. People bitten by vipers back at our estate would’ve just been given some ointment and made to rest. They’d just laugh it off as a funny story to tell.

However, the pain in my calf was now too severe to ignore. I took a peek at the bite and found that it had turned deep purple and was very swollen. I was sweating out of every pore on my body. My head was spinning, and my entire body began to feel numb.

“H-Help...” I tried to call out, and the next moment, I heard a yell that shook

the air in the room.

“What is all this commotion?!?!?” I recognized the voice as Van’s.

One of the knights explained the situation to him. “A venomous snake was found in Lady Mille-Feuille’s bed! We are trying to get hold of a doctor!”

Van approached, asked for permission, and opened the curtain. His brows furrowed, and a terrible expression formed on his face. It was not the look someone would make while visiting a sick person, but even so, seeing his face made me feel at ease.

“Where is the snake?” Van asked the knight beside him.

“R-Right here, milord!”

“A mudtiger keelback.”

The moment I heard the snake’s species, I felt the pain assaulting me disappear. *It’s not a grassland viper? What’s going on?*

“What treatment have you given her?” Van inquired.

“I washed the wound with water,” the knight replied.

“Have you sucked out the venom yet?”

“N-No, not yet. Um, I-I shall do my duty—”

“Stand back. I’ll do it.”

I took a look at my calf, and it seemed like the swelling had gone down.

Why...? While I was thinking about what had happened, I also wondered what Van meant by “sucking the venom out.” But before I could ask, Van took action. He bit into my calf and put his mouth on the wound. He sucked out the venom and spat it out multiple times.

I watched Van’s lips touch my calf repeatedly. I knew in my head that he was trying to remove the venom from my body, but this was such an embarrassing situation for me.

Parfeil and Madeleine arrived at the room at last.

“Take care of her,” Van said to the two, and he left. I didn’t even have the

time to thank him.

“Millefie!”

“Lady Mille-Feuille!”

Madeleine held one of my hands and Parfeil wiped the sweat off my face. I felt a wave of relief upon seeing them and swiftly lost consciousness.

Apparently, I was out cold for about half a day. My injuries weren't life-threatening as I had been given proper first aid and the physician had treated me promptly.

I'd thought that the snake that bit me was a grassland viper, but it turned out that it was a mudtiger keelback—a snake with venom four times as potent. There had been an illusion cast on it to make it look like a grassland viper.

Van paid me a visit once I had regained consciousness. “Mille-Feuille, I apologize for exposing you to danger inside my castle.”

“Don't worry about it. Danger doesn't choose a time or place after all,” I reassured him.

“Still, I was right by your side, and yet...!”

Van gripped my hand tight. The knots in my mind became untangled as I felt his warmth.

“In any case, why was the keelback disguised as a viper?” Van wondered.

“Maybe to lull me into a false sense of security, knowing that I wouldn't die if it were a viper?” I replied.

“I wonder about that. A significant number of people still die every year from grassland viper bites. You can't be sure that you'll be safe from something venomous.”

“Maybe there's a deeper reason to make it look like a different snake,” I suggested.

Apparently, Van had already requested an investigation that had led to an unexpected report.

“Opera apparently bought a grassland viper from a trader,” he said.

“Oh!” I suddenly remembered Lady Opera’s invitation to that monstrous full-course meal. One of the courses had been a grassland viper soup.

“We’ve apprehended Opera and are currently questioning her,” Van then explained.

“N-No!” I cried.

“What’s wrong?”

“I-It’s just that I can’t see Lady Opera as the culprit,” I stammered out.

“Why do you say that?”

“I-It’s just a hunch...”

Van met my words with a sigh. “I will say this now: I will show no mercy, not even to my family. If I prove someone guilty of trying to kill you, I will execute them on the spot.”

On the night of the incident, they had arrested a number of suspects. Among them, Lady Opera had been found to be the most suspicious. At this rate, she’d end up getting executed.

I didn’t know why, and it was only a hunch, but I strongly believed that she couldn’t have done it.

“Wait. Lady Opera couldn’t have bought the viper to injure me,” I argued.

“What else would she use it for other than to hurt someone?” Van countered.

“For food.”

“Huh?”

“Grassland viper is actually pretty good in soup.” I then told Van about the banquet Lady Opera had held for me during the Raining Moon.

“And you say that she served the viper there?”

“She did,” I replied.

Van placed his palm on his face and shook his head. “So...is grassland viper a local delicacy at your family’s estate?”

“That’s...” I stopped myself from saying more. While I wanted to defend Lady Opera from being touted as the culprit, I wasn’t about to go as far as lying to protect her.

“Well, it *did* taste great when I tried it,” I said eventually.

“Oh, so she was just harassing you!”

“Yes, but—”

Van demanded that I tell him what other meals she had served for the banquet. As I listed the courses, he shivered.

“I *knew* she was the culprit. There’s no mistaking it!” he cried. “She put you through such an ordeal! I will execute her at once!”

“No, no no no, wait! She’s not the culprit!” I yelled.

“Why do you say that?”

First of all, the snake in my bed had been a mudtiger keelback, *not* a grassland viper. Lady Opera had ordered the latter.

“Perhaps the culprit disguised the snake as a grassland viper to pin the crime on Lady Opera?” I suggested.

“Well, it’s true that I can’t discount that possibility,” Van replied.

The culprit might have come up with this plan upon learning that Lady Opera had bought a viper.

“If you hadn’t checked the snake’s corpse, my injury would have been reported as a bite from a grassland viper,” I told Van.

I recalled that once I’d found out that the snake was a mudtiger keelback, the pain and swelling in my legs suddenly subsided. I wondered what that was about and told Van about it.

“So...what do you think happened there?” I asked.

“Hmm... It seems that whoever tried to attack you had not only cast an illusion on the snake, but they had also cast a spell to make you *think* that you’d been bitten by a viper instead,” Van answered.

“Wouldn’t that be a high-level spell for manipulating someone’s mind?”

“It is indeed.”

While a grassland viper’s bite was painful and caused swelling, a mudtiger keelback’s bite was almost painless and caused no swelling. The culprit had been quite thorough for them to cast a spell on me simply to disguise the snake as a viper.

“The culprit must be a very skilled sorcerer to pull that off,” I deduced.

“Indeed. Speaking of which, I also had Roche arrested, since he often picks fights with you.”

“Release him immediately.”

“Are you going to defend Roche too?!” Van asked.

“He is absolutely *not* the culprit! He doesn’t even fight with me anymore!” I retorted.

In actuality, Roche was even treating me as if I were already engaged to Van, much to my chagrin. He was no longer as hostile to me as he had been, so he had no reason to have me killed.

At that moment, Parfeil started clearing her throat. Hearing that, Van took out his pocket watch and was shocked to see the time.

“I’m sorry for taking up an hour and a half of your time, even though you just regained consciousness,” Van said.

“It’s all right. I don’t think I’ll be able to go back to sleep anyway.”

“No, that’s not all right at all.” Van placed a hand on my forehead. It felt nice and cool against my skin. “You’re getting feverish from thinking too hard. Get some more rest,” he said.

“I will. Thank you.”

Van waved goodbye and returned to his duties. After that, Parfeil and Madeleine continued to look after me.

The number of guards around me also increased. It seemed that the following days would remain tense. I already had my hands full with all the mysteries surrounding Charlotte, and now I had someone attempt to take my life.

Just how unlucky can I be?

At this point, there was no way I could solve all of this on my own. I decided to tell Madeleine and Parfeil everything about how I'd remembered my previous life. I wrote everything in a letter and had both of them read it so nobody could overhear.

Madeleine looked so shocked that her eyes seemed like they'd pop out of their sockets. Meanwhile, Parfeil absorbed everything quietly. Perhaps it was the wisdom of someone her age.

From here on, we had to talk about it in a way that wouldn't be a problem if strangers overheard.

"I'm, um...really surprised," Madeleine said. "I can't believe... Oh, it is so difficult to speak without mentioning the actual topic!"

"Keep trying, Madeleine," I encouraged her.

"Of course!"

Parfeil was also surprised but in a different way. "Milady, I'm so glad that you believe in me enough that you didn't accuse me of trying to kill you! I'm the one who's always the closest to you, after all!"

"Well, of course I believe in you!" I replied.

Parfeil responded to that with a big, warm smile.

"There's still so much we don't know about your past," Madeleine said.

"Indeed."

Suddenly, Parfeil raised her hand. It seemed that she remembered seeing the Dragon Duke a hundred years ago. "I was working as a mercenary before I became an adventurer, and I saw the Dragon Duke once on the battlefield."

"Parfeil, you were a mercenary?!" I asked.

"Oh, didn't I mention it?"

"This is the first time I'm hearing about this!"

"Ha ha, I am so sorry for not saying anything! I was actually really popular as a mercenary!" Parfeil boasted. Setting her past aside, I pressed Parfeil for more

details about when she'd seen Van a century ago.

"Milady, you mentioned that he seemed like a completely different person in your memories, and you're right. I thought that he was the complete opposite of how he is now," she said.

A century ago, the Dragon Duke had been serene and quiet. Today, Van was loud and lively.

"Regardless, I can say with absolute certainty that both of them are the exact same person," she then added.

"And why is that?" I asked.

"They both have the same silver hair—a color unique to the main branch of the Dragon Duke's family," Parfeil answered.

I recalled Van mentioning recently that their silver hair was unusual and that faking it was extremely difficult, if not impossible. In that case, the Van that Parfeil had seen a century ago must have been the same person.

"But if they are the same person, why are their personalities so different?" I wondered out loud.

"Well, it's been a hundred years. Maybe his personality changed over time?" Parfeil suggested.

"I mean, yes, but..." I was about to agree, but I thought of something. I remembered that Van had said he'd been sealed for the last century. "What if his personality changed because of magic?"

"Hmm, I can't completely deny that possibility," Parfeil replied.

"U-Um, I'm sorry that I can't really offer any help," Madeleine interjected.

"That's not true! I feel so relieved now that I've told you everything," I said.

"In that case, I am glad that I could be of assistance."

I burned the paper where I had written down everything regarding my past life. While my main problem had yet to be solved, I felt like a fog had cleared from my mind. I was no longer alone. Now, I had Parfeil and Madeleine by my side, and I felt fortunate to have them.

That afternoon, I had a surprise visitor—Lady Opera. It seemed that she had been released.

Is she here to spout complaints at me?

I was about to send Madeleine back to her room, but she insisted on staying. “Would I be a bother if I remained?” she asked.

“Well, if she finds you a bother, then she’ll probably say something,” I replied.

I held Madeleine’s hand and let Lady Opera in.

“Why are you two holding on to each other like that?” Lady Opera asked.

“You see, the weak band together like this to survive,” I replied.

“It would seem that you see me as your mortal enemy.”

“Are you not?” I asked.

“I would rather not be!” she said.

Lady Opera then sat on the couch and opened her fan to cover her face. I was glad that she seemed to be all right, even after being suspected of perpetrating an assassination attempt.

“Lady Opera, I thank you for gracing us with your royal presence,” I greeted her.

“You did not mean a single word of what you said.”

“I am being completely sincere.”

“You liar!” she shot back.

The royal lady was quite animated today, closing and opening her fan as she spoke. Meanwhile, Madeleine didn’t seem bothered by our banter.

“Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire,” Lady Opera began.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“Did you speak to my brother about...*that*?”

“That being...?” I asked about what she was referring to, and the royal lady

started trembling.

Is she all right? I glanced at her attendant, but they didn't seem to be concerned. *This must be a common occurrence.*

"Do *not* make a fool of me!" Lady Opera said. "I am talking about how I previously fed you grassland viper soup!"

Madeleine swallowed a shriek upon hearing this. It seemed that Lady Opera was here to complain about how I had exposed her monstrous full-course meal to Van.

"Well, yes, I spoke to your brother about it," I replied.

"Did you not promise me that you would keep quiet about it?!" Lady Opera cried.

"It was an emergency. If I hadn't told him, *you* would have been the prime suspect in the attempt on my life."

"Th-That is true... But my brother gave me an earful of a lecture about it!"

"Your Highness, we live in a society where evil deeds are punished. Though there may not be anyone to judge the righteousness of your deeds, they will certainly come back to you one way or another," I said.

"Grrr..." Lady Opera growled through gritted teeth. It was the first time I had ever seen anyone do that, and I felt somewhat privileged to have witnessed it from her. "This is *horrible*. I already failed at bullying you, and on top of that, I had to deal with a false accusation and had my misdeeds exposed to my brother! My honor has been sullied beyond repair!"

This is just you getting your just deserts, I thought. Everyone else in the room was looking away, and even Lady Opera's attendant appeared to be at a loss for words on how to comfort her charge.

Lady Opera was leaning back on the couch when her attendant whispered something into her ear.

"Oh, yes!" Lady Opera seemed like she remembered something. "Let's get to the main topic."

"Huh?!"

It would seem that her protests about exposing her monstrous full-course meal to Van were merely an appetizer. Lady Opera straightened her back...and bowed her head deeply.

“Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire, I have heard about how you saved my dear brother on the night of the Raining Moon. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. And I apologize for being this late in expressing my gratitude.”

“Um... All right. Thank you.”

I was shocked. I did not expect her to be someone who could express her gratitude so sincerely. Perhaps she was just softer when it came to the brother whom she respected so much.

“I am loath to admit it, but it would seem that you’ll be an indispensable part of my brother’s life moving forward.”

“That’s not—”

“It is.” Lady Opera kept talking with her head down. “I request that you take care of my dear brother from now on.”

She lifted her head and gave me a resolute gaze. Then, she made an unexpected declaration. “I will find whoever was plotting your assassination and give them a good kicking and a piece of my mind! Do you hear me, Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire?!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

It would seem that I had obtained an extremely powerful ally.

Interlude: The Dragon Duke Vacherin's Monologue

In the one hundred twenty years that I have been alive, I seem to have spent the last hundred of them asleep. Apparently, I had entered a berserk state and nearly destroyed the entire Kingdom of Sacristain. Even after I had reduced most of the country to rubble, my destructive rampage hadn't ceased, and I had to be sealed away with the power of the stone tablet.

When I woke up, a century had passed. I felt relaxed upon my awakening, but I was immediately faced with a big problem. All my memories from my time living in the Kingdom of Sacristain—including my sister's birth, my father's death, and my mother's right after—were missing. I couldn't even remember my family. Duchesse said that I was like a youthful eighteen-year-old who had just woken up from a nap. I'd even forgotten the most basic foundations of magic, so I ended up enrolling at the boys' magic academy.

Life at the academy, where I was surrounded by a large number of escorts, was unbearably boring. Though I hid my identity, I always had to have my companions with me. As a result, nobody wanted to approach me.

If life was going to be this boring, then it would have been better if I had stayed asleep.

During those boring days, a light shone upon me in the form of my meeting with Mille-Feuille.

When I met her, my first impression was bewilderment. *Who does she think she is?* I thought. Dragonkin women would never talk back to men. And yet she had dared to voice her opinion to me.

Strangely enough, that hadn't soured my mood. However, it was sudden and took me by surprise. I thought that I would never see her again, but somehow, I ran into her a second time. At that time, I'd been on the verge of mana depletion and had to eat something as soon as possible. I'd entered a random store and gotten myself into trouble. I hadn't been able to buy anything without sharing my family name. I had to say something, but I still had to hide my

identity. And if I couldn't say anything, I was sure to collapse on the road. It was at that dark moment that she showed up.

Mille-Feuille indebted me to her by buying me candies as sweet as her name. I would have eaten them right away, but that would've been rude. Besides, I'd wanted to thank her for her concern. I'd prioritized talking over recovering my mana and had gotten dizzy.

As I writhed in pain, she stuffed her mysterious caramel sweets into my mouth. The moment I ate the candy, I recovered so much mana that I could have transformed right on the spot. Such a miraculous, mana-recovering food surely hadn't existed before. Just who was this woman who had such a miraculous item on her? I wanted to ask her as soon as I could, but my escorts, whom I had shaken off, caught up with me. I couldn't even talk to her on my own time.

Just who was she? I had completely no clue. But ever since I'd met her, I had been dying to get answers to my questions.

She sent back the bracelet I gave her. She then gave me a strange request for milk vetch flowers and sent me a haughty challenge to see through her disguise if I wanted to have a dance with her.

Before I knew it, I was thinking about Mille-Feuille every single day.

How could I spend more time with her? I couldn't find an answer. Mille-Feuille was a viscount's daughter. If I married her, I would face resistance from everyone around me.

Once the thought of marriage crossed my mind, a voice rang out in my head.

You are not allowed to marry Charlotte.

Just who was this "Charlotte"? I had absolutely no idea. I didn't recognize the mysterious voice either.

Since then, that voice kept ringing whenever I met with Mille-Feuille. On top of that, my headaches became so bad that I wanted to do something about them.

I was sure that this voice was referring to Mille-Feuille as "Charlotte." I tried

my best to ignore it, but every time I got emotional about her, the voice would come back again and again.

It must have been some kind of magic. If I couldn't dispel it, this voice would keep echoing in my head.

My headaches had already been troubling me, and then I was cornered by Mille-Feuille's brother. I had to reveal my identity as the Dragon Duke, and he told me to never meet with Mille-Feuille again. I didn't reply, but my headaches kept getting worse.

Meanwhile, Mille-Feuille appeared to be following her brother's request and had no plans of seeing me again. After that, she started avoiding me completely. Even though I waited for her at the academy, her carriage managed to avoid us tailing her all the way. I sent her letters asking to meet up, but she ignored all of them.

My heart felt like it was about to break just from not seeing Mille-Feuille again. The days of uncertainty and unease continued until one day—she sent me a letter. I thought that she wanted to meet up with me, but it would seem that she wanted me—*specifically* me—as her business partner. And even more, the business was to sell ointment and tea for recovering mana—a completely novel venture.

If she had a successful business like that, then the people around me might have no more objections to our marriage. I thought I'd support her with all I had.

Before meeting with Mille-Feuille, I wanted to do something about the voices in my head. I searched for a forbidden tome and looked for a way to dispel the spell that had been cast on me.

And once I had, I found out something beyond my imagination—it seemed that my memories had been sealed away. And the voice that had been tormenting me was my own—my past self. Even so, I couldn't figure out the perpetrator.

A hundred years ago, I had been in love with Charlotte—Mille-Feuille's past incarnation—and had been engaged to her. It would seem that a mark had been left on her soul, so I was able to find her immediately.

My feelings for Charlotte were a thing of the past. Now, I knew that I was in love with Mille-Feuille and wanted to spend my entire life with her.

It also seemed to me that Charlotte and Mille-Feuille were completely different. We had met each other in the current day as completely different people. I was glad that we had—the past was the past, and now was now.

Still, who had sealed away my memories? Was there something inconvenient for the culprit in them? I had no idea. There were no leads on who might've been behind it.

Regardless, I believed that I should be careful. I had to keep quiet about some of my memories returning, and I had to keep doing what I needed to do.

I decided to work hard every day with the goal of marrying Mille-Feuille and living happily together.

Chapter 6: A Bridge to Peace

Not a single suspect had been apprehended since the attempt on my life.

However, I received new information from Lady Opera regarding the mystery surrounding Van, and I now had reason to suspect that he might have had a second personality.

Even to his own sister, the Van from a century ago and the Van now seemed like completely different people. We had been talking about body doubles and mind-altering magic, but we hadn't even considered the possibility of multiple personalities. Lady Opera speculated that his main personality had gone dormant due to the shock of Charlotte's death. Having this testimony from a close relative made me feel like we had gotten one step closer to the truth.

It would be faster if I could hear it straight from the Dragon Duke, but as long as I didn't know who the mastermind behind Charlotte's demise was, I couldn't risk doing so, especially because Van himself might turn out to be the culprit.

I needed to gather as much information as I could. I sent my white squirrels around the castle premises to search for any clues that might be useful.

Dinner with Van had become a daily affair. And now that Lady Opera had joined us at the dinner table, every night had become livelier.

Next month was the centennial of the founding of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. There would be many celebrations, and Van was busy day and night preparing for them. I thought that there wouldn't be any nightly suppers for a while, but Lady Opera continued to accompany me and Madeleine for dinner. It would seem that she had gotten so used to eating with company that meals eaten on her own no longer tasted the same.

"D-Do not be so presumptuous! I-It is *not* the case that I wanted to eat with you two!"

"Of course not, Your Highness."

I felt like I'd been getting along well with Lady Opera lately. I wouldn't have

imagined that we would've become this close.

"Oh, yes. I recently learned how to make yellow strawberry wine from Marthe," Lady Opera shared one night. "It was *delicious*. I feel like it has improved my health recently too. Mille-Feuille, I heard that you had also learned how to make it."

"Yes, I did. About a month ago, I went out to pick yellow strawberries with Lady Marthe, Lady Nonette, and Lady Tuile."

"What?! You learned the whole process, even harvesting?!"

"I did."

"I would also like to try that!" Lady Opera exclaimed.

"Um, the season for yellow strawberries is already over..." I began.

"Is there something else we can pick?"

"Hmm... What about mountain peaches? They should be in season right now," I suggested. Mountain peach wine was said to improve your metabolism, relieve fatigue, and improve your appetite, mood, and sleep quality. It even did wonders on your complexion. Mountain peach wine was packed with wonderful health effects for women. Upon hearing that, Lady Opera's interest was piqued even further.

"Well then, let us go pick mountain peaches and turn them into wine!"

Going out with Lady Opera sounded like a security nightmare. As it got closer to the centennial, numerous merchants and newly hired workers would be crowding the streets. We couldn't risk having Lady Opera go out in that. Thankfully, there were mountain peaches in the castle's orchard, and since the gardener had said that they were almost ripe, we would be able to pick them.

"It's decided, then. Lady Opera, we'll go pick peaches at the orchard once you're available," I said.

"Hm? Were we not going to Marthe's estate to pick them?"

"Um, well..." Even if I told her that going out in public would be dangerous, I couldn't imagine her being the type to listen to such warnings. I didn't know what to say to her, so I looked to Madeleine for answers.

“Your Highness, the mountain peaches in the forest are for the birds, squirrels, and rabbits to enjoy, which is why we’ll be doing it at the orchard,” Madeleine weighed in.

Lady Opera wouldn’t believe such a childish excuse, would she? I thought, but —

“I see. Then we shall make the wine with peaches from the orchard.”

It would seem that the royal lady really *was* satisfied with Madeleine’s explanation. I clenched my teeth to hold back a giggle.

We’d go pick mountain peaches tomorrow afternoon at a cooler hour of the day.

“I can’t wait!” Lady Opera exclaimed, but she caught herself acting unseemly. She noticed Madeleine and me grinning, so she corrected herself. “I-I look forward to our engagement tomorrow.”

We nodded in agreement accordingly.

That night, my white squirrels came back and arranged themselves before me. It seemed that they were going to report their findings for the day.

While the squirrels looked cute, their cries were far from it. The difference between the two made them even cuter.

“Squeak!”

The first squirrel handed me a key carved out of wood. It was made from a white birch tree—a tree that white squirrels enjoyed for its bark. I had never seen a key made from it before. An ancient spell was engraved into the key, and it seemed that I would need to match the spell on the key with the one on its lock to use it.

Is a key made from white birch even usable? This feels rather flimsy...

I noticed wood shavings stuck to the squirrels. “Is this a replica of the actual key?” I asked.

“Squeak!”

Could this be a key to a room where I can find some evidence? It was very clever of the squirrels to replicate the key instead of stealing it.

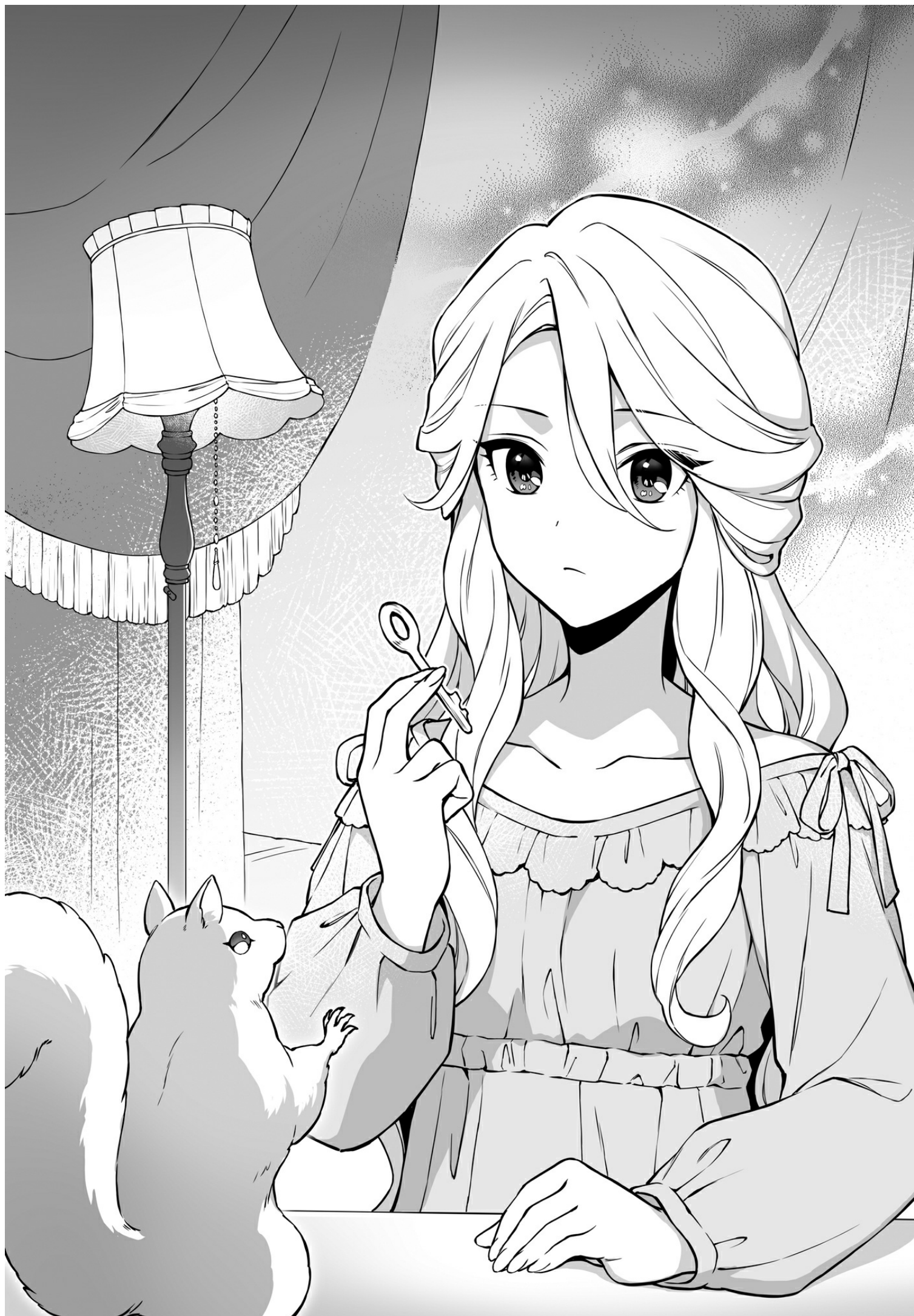
“So, what is this a key to?”

“Squeak?”

“You don’t know?”

“Squeak!” The squirrel nodded.

They might’ve been clever, but they were also kind of clumsy. Regardless, I only needed to look for suspicious rooms with locks where this could fit.



“Thank you.”

“Squeak!”

As thanks, I gave the squirrel a walnut, which it happily took with both paws.

The next squirrel brought me a torn piece of luxurious velvet cloth.

“What is this?” I asked it. I tilted my head in confusion, and the squirrel tilted its head in the same direction. It would seem that it didn’t know what it was either, but I didn’t think that it had brought it here for no reason.

The squirrels kept providing me with enigmatic clues. It would be my job to decipher the meaning of all these trinkets.

“Thank you for all your work, everyone. You may all get some rest now. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

The squirrels raised their paws and squeaked in unison.

The following day, I finished all my work and headed to the palace orchard with Madeleine and Parfeil. Trees from all over the world were growing in the orchard. There was also a greenhouse that must have contained trees from the tropics. Since mountain peaches naturally grew all over, there was no need to raise them in a greenhouse.

I heard a voice calling from a distance.

“You are all late!!!”

Lady Opera was already there. Our meeting time wasn’t for another ten minutes, but it seemed that she had arrived even earlier.

“Oh my, Her Highness seems to be quite excited for today,” Madeleine remarked.

“Indeed. Let’s hurry before she yells at us again.”

We jogged to the area where the mountain peach trees were planted.

To our surprise, Lady Opera was wearing not a dress but masculine horseback-riding attire today.

“What? Did you two expect me to wear a dress?” she asked. “I would not be able to pick peaches to my heart’s content if I did.”

“I apologize. I did not think of that,” I said.

“Neither did I...” Madeleine added.

There wouldn’t have been any problems even if she were in a dress today, but I bowed my head in apology regardless.

“In any case, teach me how to harvest the peaches,” Lady Opera commanded.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The gardeners brought over a large chair used for picking fruit. I climbed it like a ladder and sat at the top. Charlotte, on the other hand, had climbed trees and picked fruits without using a chair, but of course I wouldn’t do such a thing in front of Lady Opera. Charlotte really had been quite a tomboy princess back then.

“First, sit on the chair, and then reach out for the peaches—”

“Hold it! I am...still climbing...!” Lady Opera wheezed.

“Th-This is quite a tall chair...” Madeleine’s voice trembled.

While both Lady Opera and Madeleine struggled to climb up, I cheered them on silently.

“I-I did it! I-I am seated!”

“Wonderful work, Lady Opera.”

“Be more enthusiastic when you say that!” she cried.

“Perhaps you just couldn’t pick up on my mood because you were so far away,” I said.

At last, it seemed that both of them were ready. I began to explain how to pick mountain peaches. “It’s not too difficult. You don’t need to put too much force into picking ripe ones. Just pull on them gently.”

“I see. I shall try it.” Lady Opera held on to the chair’s armrest with her left hand and reached out with her right. However, perhaps due to the location of the chair, she was unable to reach any fruit.

“Wh-What should I do?”

“I believe you can reach it if you squat,” I suggested.

“D-Do you mean to have me squat on such unstable footing?!” she cried.

“Um... How about reaching out a bit more?”

“Then I will be unable to hold on to the armrest!”

What should we do? She needs something to hold on to...

I looked around our surroundings and caught sight of Parfeil’s long ears. I called out to her. “Parfeil!”

“You got it, milady!” Parfeil approached Lady Opera without me having to say anything. “Your Highness, please grab on to my ears!” she offered.

“Oh, the bunny! I shall borrow your ears, then.”

“Of course! Please do.”

Lady Opera held on to Parfeil’s ears and leaned forward. While doing so, she managed to grab a peach.

“I-I did it!!!”

Lady Opera had finally managed to pick her first mountain peach. Her escorts gathered and gave her a big round of applause.

After we finished gathering peaches, we washed them and would expose them to the moon’s light overnight.

“So this is the witch herbalist’s method of saving our women,” Lady Opera said.

“Indeed it is,” I replied.

“Thank you.”

“Hm?”

“I thank you for accomplishing the task that I could not,” she said. “This is a remarkable feat that will leave its mark in dragonkin history.”

Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined Lady Opera acknowledging my deeds. I didn’t know how to react.

While I stood there dumbfounded, Lady Opera bowed her head. “I also apologize for my actions. I treated you as a criminal out of jealousy and punished you for your deeds.”

“Lady Opera, I understand where you are coming from,” I said. “It must have felt like I came out of nowhere to steal all of the glory despite all your years of effort.”

“That is no excuse for my actions. You have managed to find a method to save all of dragonkin through your own efforts,” Lady Opera said. She took hold of my hands. “Will you continue to pour your efforts into helping our kin?”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“Thank you.”

Just as I thought, Lady Opera really was a person full of love for all of dragonkin. She had been working so hard for all these years to no avail. Now, we were here to help direct her efforts. Picking mountain peaches today had helped to bring us closer together than ever.

“Are the peaches sufficiently infused with mana now?” Lady Opera asked later on.

“Yes, they are.”

“Then let us begin steeping them in alcohol.”

Lady Opera’s serene attitude from earlier had completely vanished. Now, she was very excited about making the mountain peach wine.

Was her apology just something to stave off the boredom while waiting for the peaches to take in the mana? Even though that thought came to mind, I immediately shook my head and dismissed it.

The maids took us to the stillroom—a room for preparing foods such as jams and preserves. The ingredients and containers for the medicinal wine had already been prepared for us.

“Rock sugar, distilled wine, bottles... Is that everything?” Lady Opera inquired.

“Yes, that should be all. Making the wine is quite simple,” I began. The mountain peaches were to be steeped in bottles sterilized with steam. We

would pack rock sugar on top of them, and then the bottle would be filled with distilled wine.

“I see. It truly is quite simple. And how long will it be until it is ready?”

“About four months or so,” I replied.

Lady Opera, who had been all smiles until now, suddenly looked displeased.

“Huh? Not three days, not a week, but four months?!”

“Of course. Making wine takes time.”

“I *cannot* wait that long!” Lady Opera then began casting a spell on the bottles of wine. “*Enhance. Aging!*”

A bottle of mountain peach wine began to glow. Once the light subsided, the wine’s appearance was surprising—lo and behold, it was now fully matured.

“I see. You sped up the wine’s maturation,” I said.

“Indeed, I did! It should be ready to drink now, should it not?”

While the liquid was still cloudy, the wine certainly appeared fully mature. I hadn’t even thought of using magic to make it immediately drinkable. That was just how adept Lady Opera was at magic.

“The color looks a bit off. Fruit wines are usually clear, are they not?” Lady Opera asked.

“The fruit can cause some clouding if they stay in the bottle. Usually, they are removed right before the wine is completely mature,” I explained.

“I see. For the first bottle, I matured it while the fruit stayed inside. To make the next bottles more appealing, I shall remove the fruit before fully maturing them.”

“That should work.”

“Then I shall test it out on yours and Madeleine’s bottles.”

Lady Opera seemed to be quite motivated today. She went ahead and cast maturation spells on our wine bottles. The second and third bottles were a huge success. I went ahead and tested mine—the mountain peach wine that was poured into a glass was clear and amber.

“That is quite the pleasant smell,” Lady Opera remarked.

“It does smell very nice.”

I tried to take a sip first on the pretext of testing for poison, but Lady Opera snatched my glass and drank first. She downed it in a manner ill-befitting that of a royal princess.

“I-It’s delicious! What *is* this?!” she cried. “It has a slight hint of sourness wrapped in an elegant sweetness while the refreshing scent of mountain peaches tickles my nose! It has a novel taste that other wines don’t possess! What a beautiful, wonderful glass of wine!”

I was happy to see her enjoying it so much.

“Ahh, I feel so energized right now. Having my mana fully refreshed feels quite pleasant,” Lady Opera said with a blissful expression on her face. She seemed to have quite a lot to say about the mountain peach wine, and it didn’t sound like it was because she was drunk.

I took a sip of the fruit wine myself. It had a gentle mix of sweet and sour flavors and was rather pleasant. I was sure that even those who didn’t drink much wine would enjoy its flavor. I had once mentioned that Madeleine was not much of a drinker, but she seemed to enjoy drinking this. Her cheeks were turning a pale pink as she sipped hers.

The mountain peach wine was a huge success thanks to the maturation spell that Lady Opera had cast.

“Oh, why don’t we hold a party for all the dragonkin women on the night of the Founding Anniversary?” Lady Opera suggested.

Upon hearing that, I couldn’t help but smile wryly.

“What is with that reaction?” Lady Opera prodded.

“Oh, I was just reminded of that party you held for hunting the witch herbalist,” I replied.

“A-About that... I-I regret ever having held it. I apologize for my actions.”

I couldn’t just say that it was all water under the bridge. My mother had cornered me with a terrifying look on her face because of that party. I preferred

that Lady Opera reflect on her actions for a while longer.

“Isn’t there a dragon parade on the day of the Founding Anniversary?” I recalled.

“Yes, there is. After the parade, all the women will have to use Suppression Magic, will they not? I was thinking of replenishing their mana with this wine,” explained Lady Opera.

“Oh, I see! What a wonderful idea!”

“Right? Right?!”

Only men were able to enjoy the annual Founding Anniversary celebrations to the fullest. The women would be exhausted both from the preparations and from using Suppression Magic afterward. It was *that* kind of event. But this year, we would hold a women-only event to relieve the exhaustion of all dragonkin women.

How exciting! I thought. Slowly but surely, dragonkin society was changing. I hoped that in the future, we would no longer have to restrict our actions based on being male or female. I wanted us to all live happy and peaceful lives without caring about gender.

It had been a while since I’d eaten dinner with Van. Lady Opera wanted to focus on making more wine tonight, so she wasn’t joining us.

“You’ve grown quite friendly with Opera while I was busy with work,” Van said.

“I suppose I have.”

“I’m always surrounded by stuffy men, and Duchesse rejects my requests to have some time to talk with you too.”

“Did you have a hard time getting permission to have dinner with me?”

“It’s no big deal.”

I was so surprised at just how much talking with Van relieved my mind. I wished that this moment could last forever.

But I now suspected that there was a second personality inside Van. “Van” was merely the secondary personality, and the main one was Vacherin—the one that Charlotte had fallen in love with a century ago.

I had no idea when Vacherin would show up again. And once Van was overtaken by Vacherin, I would never see him again.

Should I tell him about everything? I hesitated.

Van checked up on me. “What’s wrong? You look troubled.”

“It’s nothing.” I shook my head and cleared my thoughts. I was here eating dinner with Van. Letting my mind be occupied was just rude.

“Will you have some time during the Founding Anniversary?” Van asked.

“I should. What for?”

“I will tell you at that time.”

“All right, then.”

Van’s expression looked slightly clouded. It didn’t seem like he was saying that just to leave me hanging.

What could this be about? Perhaps it was better not to ask him yet.

In any case, the rest of our time was spent talking about recent goings-on with our lives.

That night, the white squirrels approached me to give their daily report.

“Squeak!”

The first squirrel gave me a fragment of vellum parchment covered in soot. It hadn’t burned up completely after being thrown into a fireplace and had been left behind. There was nothing written on it, but a second squirrel held up an empty ink bottle. It was one that’d held magic ink.

Writing with magic ink was convenient. Just by casting a spell, you could encrypt or erase messages, and with a simple magic formula, you could even have it automatically solve mathematical problems.

It seemed that the message on the vellum had been erased with magic ink

before being burned in the fireplace. Normally, only the person who wrote with the ink would be able to manipulate what was written. However, there was also a catch. I recalled a trend that was going around the magic academy's students. Words erased with magic ink could be revealed using holy water normally used for repelling monsters. Madeleine and I had even used it to read a letter once. A student at the academy had mentioned that she was going to write a letter to the Bureau of Magic Research about the product's flaws, but I had no idea if she had ever managed to do so.

I took the bottle of monster-repelling holy water that Van had given me from the shelf. I placed the piece of vellum on a deep dish and soaked it in the holy water. Text began to appear...

"Regarding the redistribution of mana after the use of Suppression Magic. Among ten selected couples, ten of them succeeded..."

I could have sworn that the previous report said that the redistribution of mana failed. What is going on?

If I wasn't mistaken, Duchesse was in charge of this research. I figured I should ask him about this.

The text on the vellum then began to emit a faint purple glow—mana trails, usually left when writing but invisible to the naked eye. It must have been the holy water's effect.

I suddenly remembered that I'd seen the handwriting on the vellum before. I tried to think of where it had been.

Sharp letters with a hint of nervousness...

"Oh, the card!" I recalled the card I'd gotten with no sender listed. I had stuffed it deep into my drawer. "Found it!"

I removed the card from its envelope. The text written on it definitely looked similar to that on the piece of vellum. Just in case, I sprayed holy water on it, and like the vellum, the text on the card glowed purple.

I was about to finish up when a magic circle appeared on the card and a disturbing voice echoed inside my head.

"I will eliminate you!"

"Gah!" I shrieked, and the card and vellum burned away with no trace.

Parfeil and one of the guards must have heard my voice and they peeked into my room, clearly worried for my safety.

"Milady, what happened?" Parfeil asked.

"I have no idea..."

It would seem that it hadn't merely been a card after all. I had even checked with my Evaluation Glasses. How could it have activated its magic now...?

All the evidence that I'd had was gone, but now, I had a lead on the culprit.

After the night I'd used Suppression Magic, the one who had been researching the redistribution of mana was Duchesse Langue de Chat. There was no way he could not have known about the results written on the vellum, considering that he'd been in charge of the research. He had proved its success but had decided to give Van a false report.

Duchesse, the chancellor of the duchy, was an assistant to Van and had acted as regent for the hundred years that the Dragon Duke had been sealed away. He could have kept the Dragon Duke sealed away and stayed in power for longer, but he'd chosen to revive the Dragon Duke from the seal of the stone tablet.

His actions were a complete mystery to me, and it was still too early to point to him as the culprit. I couldn't yet remove the possibility of him working on someone else's behalf. It also wouldn't be wise to make contact with him without a plan since there was a possibility that he was involved in the attempt on my life.

Should I tell all this to Van? Or maybe Lady Opera?

Duchesse was Van's most trusted advisor. Even if I shared all my theories with Van, I doubted that he would believe me so easily. On the other hand, Lady Opera held little influence, and I didn't want to expose her to danger.

Other than the Dragon Duke's family, I couldn't think of anyone else to talk to

who had enough clout, connections, and experience.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, um, I’m not really sure what to say to you at a time like this, but...” Parfeil began with a worried look on her face. “Um... I’m always by your side, no matter what, and you can tell me anything. There are times when you can solve things just by talking about them, you know.”

That must have been her roundabout way of telling me not to worry about things all by myself.

“Parfeil, thank you,” I said.

“Anyway, if there’s something that’s worrying you, why don’t you try talking to the three ladies about it?”

“Oh!”

It turned out that there *were* people other than the Dragon Duke’s family who had clout, connections, and experience. Lady Marthe was descended from a branch of the royal family, Lady Nonette was part of a house prominent in high society, and Lady Tuile was from one of the wealthiest families in the duchy. It might not’ve been a bad idea to consult those three for help.

“I’ll write them a letter explaining everything,” I said.

“Then I’ll prepare the pen and stationery.”

“Yes, Parfeil, please do.”

I remembered having had no close friends to turn to other than the Dragon Duke in my previous life. But that was no longer the case. I had many allies to support me, and Parfeil, of course, was one of them.

If we can band together and push back, there’ll be nothing to be afraid of, I thought.

The next day, I ordered one of my white squirrels to get me one of Duchesse’s personal belongings.

“Squeak!” The squirrel ended up bringing me a document signed with his full name. It was crumpled, so he must have been planning to throw it away. I analyzed its remaining mana trails and they turned out to be similar to the ones I had seen yesterday. It was unfortunate that the card and vellum had burned

up, since now I had nothing to compare this new trace to. The only proof I had was my memory of them matching, which proved nothing.

I needed to find a different method. Once again, I ended up with a conundrum that I couldn't resolve on my own.

Three days later, I was accompanied by Parfeil and some guards to visit a shop Lady Nonette had told me about. It was a store that sold cosmetics, but with the use of a special card, we were shown the way to a different room.

"This way, please."

Inside the fireplace was a hidden door. From there, we were to descend a flight of stairs connecting to a different area. We only had the light of a magicstone to guide us in the darkness.

Despite being careful with my footsteps, I could still hear my heels lightly tapping against the ground. It was just my guess, but this seemed to have been constructed out of a special material to warn of unwanted visitors.

I kept descending the stairs and we eventually reached a dead end. *What should we do?* While I was wondering, a magic circle activated on the wall. While it blinked, the scenery around us changed in an instant.

The area suddenly turned into an elegant salon, well lit by crystal chandeliers that contrasted with its underground location. A pleasant fur carpet was underfoot. In the middle of the room was a round mahogany table.

The three ladies were there, all wearing gorgeous dresses and big smiles as they approached me.

"Welcome, Lady Mille-Feuille."

"Thank you for coming!"

"We have been waiting for you."

"Thank you for inviting me," I said.

"You need not be so reserved."

"Indeed."

“We are all comrades here.”

I'm blessed to have such reliable allies.

I greeted all three with a curtsy. We then broke the ice with some light conversation. Our first topic here was to be the women's party that Lady Opera was holding on the Founding Anniversary.

“I could hardly believe that Her Highness would be holding a party for all dragonkin women.”

“She has never done such a thing before.”

“It must be Mille-Feuille's influence on her.”

“Not at all. This was entirely at her own discretion,” I said.

“Oh, you're being quite modest here.”

Lady Opera had changed a lot. Once, she had been focused solely on the Dragon Duke; but now, she was paying attention to the world at large.

“She *was* always saying that she does everything for the sake of all dragonkin women,” one of them said.

“But it was always all talk.”

“She was never able to put her words into action.”

“I see... I had no idea.”

Perhaps Lady Opera had been mulling things over as she saw my work. But the motivation and effort that she was putting in now was all hers. Seeing Van's berserk state must have spurred her into action as well.

The conversation led by the three ladies shifted naturally to the topic I wished to hear about.

“Speaking of change, the Dragon Duke has undergone one as well.”

“Oh, yes, he has,” agreed another.

“A hundred years ago, he always looked displeased and was unpleasant to be around. Lately, however, he's become quite the handsome and friendly young man...”

I couldn't let this chance pass me by, so I asked the three ladies a question. "Um, Lady Opera mentioned that the Dragon Duke might have multiple personalities. Is that true?"

"Multiple personalities?"

"The Lord Dragon Duke?"

"Did Her Highness say that?"

"Y-Yes, she did," I stammered. The three ladies glanced at each other and tilted their heads in confusion.

"Rather than multiple personalities, it's more like... Hmm, how should I put this...?"

"I wonder..." mused another.

"Memory loss, perhaps?"

After the third woman said that, the other ladies looked at each other.

"Memory loss?" they both said.

"Yes. Do you remember when the Dragon Duke first showed his face in public after a hundred years? On that day, he was very distressed. I have no idea what might have caused it, though..." One of Lady Marthe's children was a secretary to the Dragon Duke, and it seemed that they had seen the Dragon Duke's state firsthand that day. "Apparently, he was shouting that he had found Charlotte and that he was on the way to look for her."

I felt my heart leap. To think that he had found me out on that very day... Suddenly, I remembered his words to my past incarnation.

"I'll find you... No matter where you're reborn, I promise that I'll find you!"

He *had* been looking for me, just as he'd said. But why?

The Dragon Duke's last words to Charlotte had been so vehement and tainted with resentment. What had happened between them? I had no memory of whatever it was. I could remember that their romance had been like two

lovebirds straight out of a fairy tale, but all the important memories were completely missing from my mind.

Lady Marthe held my hand gently. Apparently, I had been trembling without realizing it.

“I apologize. I should have explained first. Charlotte was the Dragon Duke’s fiancée who passed away,” she told me.

“I’m all right. Thank you for telling me about her.”

I had no intention of telling these three ladies about my past life. I seem to have worried them, so I apologized for doing so.

Lady Marthe kept holding on to my hand and continued. “The Lord Dragon Duke didn’t listen to the people trying to stop him and insisted that he would look for Charlotte. They tried to pin him down with magic, but...”

The Dragon Duke was the pinnacle of all dragonkin. It would be impossible to stop him with magic.

“He shook off all his restraints and tried to fly out of the castle, so Duchesse Langue de Chat tried to use a kind of Forbidden Magic on him.”

It wasn’t clear what kind of magic Duchesse had used on the Dragon Duke, but the Dragon Duke had suddenly calmed down and begun to listen to the people around him. After that, he’d never talked about Charlotte again.

“The Dragon Duke’s gloomy personality just vanished without a trace. He is a bit bratty, but he has become a dashing young man, completely different from how he used to be.”

Those close to the Dragon Duke whispered about how he was practically a completely different man.

“They talked about how he might be a body double or that he was actually the Dragon Duke’s bastard child, but I surmised that Duchesse Langue de Chat must have simply sealed away the Dragon Duke’s memories.”

At first, Lady Marthe had thought that it was unlikely, but inexplicably, the Dragon Duke had enrolled in the magic academy and started learning about politics and state affairs from Duchesse. Thus, Lady Marthe had come to the

conclusion that he must have lost his memories until that point.

“My husband once said that the Dragon Duke used to be a friendly and pleasant young man. But ever since the dragonkin became involved in wars, he became curt and gloomy,” Lady Marthe added.

“Then that means the current Dragon Duke is his real personality, right?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Everything fell into place in my head regarding Van. He had been dragged into wars and had agonized about it. Charlotte had been his only place of respite—the oasis of his weary heart.

If the Dragon Duke hadn’t killed Charlotte, then the number of suspects dwindled considerably. I’d heard that the Kingdom of Sacristain had sent an assassin to kill her, but I couldn’t think of a reason why they would murder their own princess.

“Um, do you know who might’ve wanted to kill Princess Charlotte of Sacristain?”

“It must have been someone who did not want the marriage between Princess Charlotte and the Dragon Duke to push through,” replied Lady Marthe.

The other two ladies nodded in agreement.

Lady Marthe pointed at me and continued. “Lady Mille-Feuille, I believe that person is the same one who attempted to take your life. Whoever it is does not want any woman to get close to the Lord Dragon Duke.”

My heart thudded in my chest, and my lips trembled. *Someone who wants to eliminate every single woman who gets close to the Dragon Duke...*

“You mean...”

Duchesse Langue de Chat.

I was about to utter his name when Lady Marthe placed a finger on my lips. She was telling me not to say his name out loud.

“I am sure that we are thinking of the same person,” she said to me.

“Indeed.”

“There’s no mistaking it.”

Lady Marthe smiled at me gently and reassured me. “We will be investigating him, though I don’t think that he will drop his guard quite that easily. Lady Mille-Feuille, do you think you can wait a while longer?”

Lady Marthe wouldn’t be the only one investigating him—Lady Nonette and Lady Tuile would cooperate as well.

“We will probe into him until the day of the Founding Anniversary.”

“We will solve everything so we can all enjoy Her Highness’s party.”

“Thank you very much for your help,” I told them.

That day, I returned home with three powerful allies on my side.

Half a month later, I was called to the same salon.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, unfortunately, we could not find any proof that Duchesse Langue de Chat made an attempt on your life.”

“I see...”

It was unrealistic to think that everything would go according to plan. If the assassin was trying to kill me because I was too close to Van, would everything be settled if I left the capital and moved back to my family’s estate?

Whenever I thought about Van, my heart started to ache. *Why did I have to fall in love with the exact same man as I had in my previous life?*

If Van’s memories returned, it was possible that only Charlotte would remain in his heart. He might stop caring about a lowly woman such as myself. If that happened, would I be able to accept it? I had no idea. But either way, it was cruel to keep Van’s memories sealed away like this. I believed that his memories needed to come back.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, we did not find proof of his attempt on your life, but we found a room that might be suspicious.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes indeed.”

Apparently, it was a room in a research facility that Duchesse was in charge of. They had found the building on the city's outskirts, and unauthorized personnel were forbidden from entering. They had managed to get inside and found a device that connected to a hidden room, but they'd been unable to unlock it.

"It seemed that a spell was placed on the room, and it would take an enchanted key to unlock it."

Duchesse kept said key in his possession at all times.

"We were debating whether we should attack him and steal the key, or perhaps capture him and make him confess, even though we had little proof."

The three ladies talked about these violent plans with smiles on their faces.

"If we capture him, we need proof. If Duchesse Langue de Chat plays dumb and the Dragon Duke takes his side, we'll have no recourse."

"If only it were a regular lock. One of my subordinates would be able to open it, then."

"We would never be able to open one sealed with ancient magic."

A lock sealed with ancient magic... Hearing that, I suddenly recalled something.

"Oh, right!" I exclaimed. I had brought the items the white squirrels had gathered with me in case they might be of use. Among them was a replica of the key with an engraving of an ancient spell. I took it out and showed it to the three ladies. "I believe this could be the key to the hidden room at the research facility."

Once I explained that this replica had been made by my white squirrel familiars, the three ladies widened their eyes in surprise.

"I ordered my familiars to look for suspicious items and they found this," I continued.

"May I borrow this for a while? I would like to make duplicates of it."

"Of course. Here."

The ladies said that they would resume their investigation of the facility once the spare key was complete. I decided to leave the matter to them.

“I have other suspicious points regarding Duchesse,” I said. I then told them about his inexplicable actions, such as the threatening letter and the magical contraption hidden within it, as well as the falsified reports regarding the research on Suppression Magic. I was upset that he had done all this, and yet no proof of his actions remained.

“We understand. I will order my subordinates to find proof of those deeds as well. However, I’m sure that he is aware of what we are doing by now, so we’ll need to be even more careful. It will take a while, so please take care and pay attention to your surroundings.”

“Okay,” I replied.

Our deadline was the eve of the Founding Anniversary. Duchesse would be by Van’s side during that time and would not be leaving him alone.

“Oh, that reminds me. The Dragon Duke said that he had something to tell me on the eve of the Founding Anniversary,” I recalled.

“Oh? Is he going to propose to you?”

“He is, isn’t he?”

“Oh my, I am looking forward to this!”

“Um, it’s not anything set in stone yet...” I replied.

Van’d had a grim expression on his face when he invited me, so I doubted that it was a proposal. Even so, the three ladies kept up their excitement, despite my protests.

I returned to the castle, feeling tired.

A package had arrived at my room, and my attendants happily explained what was inside. “Lady Mille-Feuille, the Lord Dragon Duke has sent you a dress to wear at the Founding Anniversary!”

I suddenly remembered that on the Founding Anniversary, I was to wear traditional dragonkin attire. That consisted of a simple dress with no

ornamentation, but I'd wear a luxurious belt with intricate patterns on top of it around my waist.

"Would you like to see the contents, milady?" the attendant asked. The others stared at me with expectant gazes, all curious about what was inside.

"Yes, I would. Could you please show them to me?"

"As you wish, milady!"

The attendants opened the lid of the wooden box. Inside was a plain, all-white dress and a belt. The belt was made of silk and had a flower pattern embroidered on it with silver thread.

What a luxurious present.

The attendants squealed in excitement. Being sent an all-white dress on the Founding Anniversary was seen as a marriage proposal. If the woman wore it on the festival held on the eve of the Founding Anniversary, it would mean that she accepted.

"Lady Mille-Feuille, I am so happy for you!"

"The Lord Dragon Duke would be overjoyed if you wore it!"

"He would, wouldn't he?" I replied.

Only five days remained until the eve of the Founding Anniversary. I could only hope that there would be no further incidents from here on out.

The eve of the Founding Anniversary had arrived. Stalls lined the city's streets, and dragonkin men and women from all over joined the festivities in their traditional attire. Tomorrow, the women would wear flower crowns, and the men would transform into dragons and join a parade.

I would typically be excited to join the festivities every year, but this year was different. Van had something to tell me this evening. Last night, Van had sent me word through his secretary that he would be unable to shake off Duchesse, so we couldn't meet in his office. Instead, we would be meeting in the cathedral's clock tower. According to him, there would be special magicstone lanterns that would only be lit during the festivities and they would be a sight to

behold. My attendants were all ecstatic about how romantic our meeting place would be.

However, I couldn't share in their excitement. Right about now, the three ladies were preparing to send their underlings to Duchesse's research facility to investigate. I was too anxious to worry much about dressing up.

Perhaps my anxieties were showing on my face because Madeleine gently held my hand. She knew nothing about today's plot, but she must have guessed that something was going on from my expression.

"Lady Mille-Feuille, it's almost time," announced one of the attendants.

"Yes, I'm getting ready," I replied.

It would be cold on top of the clock tower, so I ordered the attendants to bring me a fur mantle. "I would like to wear that snow rabbit mantle I received from the Lord Dragon Duke."

"As you wish, milady. As for the dress, would the traditional dress that the Lord Dragon Duke sent you the other day suffice?"

"That will do," I said. "Parfeil, please prepare it."

"You got it!"

I slid into the unfamiliar dress and covered myself with the all-white fur mantle. It was long enough to cover my entire body, so I would keep warm even while at the clock tower.

It was almost time for me to meet with Van. I covered my head with the hood and headed to the cathedral via carriage.

The cathedral was almost deserted. He must have made sure to keep people away.

On top of that, only members of the Dragon Duke's family were allowed inside the clock tower. Madeleine, Parfeil, and all the guards could only accompany me up to its entrance. The structure's interior was enchanted with monster-repelling charms, so there wouldn't be anything dangerous inside.

I reassured the worried Madeleine that I would be fine. Parfeil saw me off as I entered the clock tower.

Now that I was on my own, I suddenly felt anxious, even though I'd just told Madeleine that I would be fine. The high-pitched echoes of my footsteps as I climbed the stairs didn't help assuage my nerves.

I know that the city's scenery must be beautiful, but why did he call me here? Ah, whatever.

I hurried up the spiral staircase to make it there at our appointed time. I ran out of breath just as I reached the top of the staircase. I waited to calm myself before climbing up the ladder connecting to the very top of the tower.

I mustered all my remaining strength to push open the rounded door leading to the outside. I peeked my head through the doorway and saw a man with his back turned to me.

I stepped through the door at last.

This place was where the Dragon Duke relaxed and could stretch his wings. Nobody except him and his family could enter.

However, the one with his back turned to me was not Van.

I called out to the man who wasn't supposed to be here. "Why are you here?"

"Why do you think?" Duchesse Langue de Chat then turned around to face me.

"I came all the way here because Van asked me to," I said.

"And I was the one who ordered a change of venue."

"You did?"

"Indeed," he said. "Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire, I would like to have a private conversation with you."

I could feel my heart pounding. A terrible feeling was growing in my chest. I'd worked hard to avoid him over the past few months, but now, he was right before me.

"Duchesse Langue de Chat, you never liked me, did you?" I asked him.

"And why would you think that?"

"Every time we crossed paths, you always gave me a cold glare."

“Oh, I see. I had been working so hard to keep that under control too.”
Duchesse didn’t deny anything. He took a step forward, and at that moment, a loud clang rang out.

“What was that?”

“I’m just making sure that nobody interrupts our little chat.”

“What?!” I tried pulling on the door handle, but it wouldn’t budge. There shouldn’t have been any kind of lock on it.

“It’s an enchanted lock,” Duchesse said. “It locks with just a short incantation from me. The mechanism is a little different from the key your little phantasmal beasts copied.”

“How did you...?!”

He knows about the duplicated key?! I felt all the blood drain from my face and started to feel dizzy.

“Don’t you worry. Your coconspirators will be found guilty of high treason against the Dragon Duke and be publicly executed by tomorrow. It will make for quite the entertainment during the Founding Anniversary festivities.”

A twisted expression had appeared on Duchesse’s face as he talked about executing my three friends.

What a cruel, evil man. How could such a fiend be right under Van’s nose and pretend to be his friend? This is unacceptable.

“So, you were the one trying to kill me, then?” I accused him.

“Why of course. You are such an obstruction.”

“An obstruction?”

“Indeed. Women like you seduce and mislead good, chaste men like the Dragon Duke.”

According to Duchesse, Van had been an exemplary man before meeting me. But after that, he had begun running away from his attendants and secretaries, spacing out in the middle of work, and prioritizing me over everything else. His actions had become selfish.

“He was like this a century ago too. He fell in love with that princess of the Kingdom of Sacristain, and since she disliked war, he started saying that he would no longer fight. Because of that *witch*, our proud race was derided as weak, pathetic cowards with no élan, no panache! That is why—”

I cut him off. “You killed Princess Charlotte?”

“Correct.”

My vision went white, and even more of Charlotte’s lost memories began to flow into my head. There was no mistaking it—he was the one who had killed Charlotte! He’d pretended to feel sick and had stumbled in front of her, and when she had approached to check up on him, he had stabbed her through the heart.

And even though Duchesse had stabbed her, Charlotte had still been worried and kept asking him if he was okay. Perhaps she’d thought that he’d been manipulated by someone. Yet despite all that, Duchesse had pushed her away. Charlotte had rolled across the floor, and he’d left her for dead.

The Dragon Duke had promised to meet with her, but what had awaited him in their meeting place was an injured Charlotte breathing her dying breaths. He had tried to ask who had done this to her, but she couldn’t answer—Duchesse had snuffed out her voice with magic.

Then, the Dragon Duke had done something unexpected—he’d used his mana and Charlotte’s remaining life force to cast a taboo spell. It was a spell to allow someone to retain their memories upon reincarnation. Normally, when someone died, their memories would be wiped clean before they were reborn. He must have figured that there was no way to save her then, so he had offered up the remaining embers of her life so that she’d be reincarnated.

That had been when he’d screamed in lamentation.

“No matter where you’re reborn, I promise that I’ll find you!”

Pain, loss, lamentation, anger—all of these feelings upon having lost the love of his life had driven his transformation into a berserk state.

“I was right in killing that witch,” Duchesse said. “The berserk Dragon Duke burned down every last trace of that upstart Kingdom of Sacristain! All of those who ridiculed us as cowards were completely annihilated!!!”

And thus, the Kingdom of Sacristain’s army had been crushed, and the honor of the dragonkin that Duchesse so desired had been restored.

“The only thing that was not part of my calculations was how long the Dragon Duke’s berserk state would last. He had already crushed that loathsome Sacristain army, and yet his rampage hadn’t stopped.”

And that had been why he’d used such a valuable stone tablet to seal the Dragon Duke away.

“I thought that his feelings would fade away after a hundred years, and yet...”

The Dragon Duke would never forget his feelings for Charlotte. He wanted to find the reincarnated Charlotte—me—and had tried to fly out to find me.

“Back then, Roche even suggested sealing the Dragon Duke away with the tablet again, so I became desperate to find a way to stop him. That stone tablet is a very valuable item. Besides, what would the Four Great Nobles say if we sealed him again? They were very much against the idea of me acting as regent for the hundred years that the Dragon Duke was sealed away, so it took quite the effort to placate them.”

“You’re not trying to take over the duchy?” I asked.

“I have no such desire. The Dragon Duchy of Éclair must remain with the Dragon Duke at its apex and continue to be the strongest among all nations,” Duchesse replied.

“I...see...” I’d thought that his plan was to kill the Dragon Duke and rule the country in his place, but he had no such ambitions. Regardless, his actions until now were nothing short of despicable.

“No one will let you get away with such despicable crimes!” I then cried. “The Four Great Nobles won’t keep quiet when they hear about this!”

“I’m not concerned. From here on, our race of dragonkin will take a new step in our evolution!”

“A new step? Evolution? What are you talking about?”

“We will gain the power to maintain our dragon states and live life spans close to eternity!” he cried out.

“That’s impossible!”

“Oh, it’s *very* possible once we consume all you dragonkin women.”

“C-Consume?!” I stammered.

Duchesse had made a momentous discovery while researching Suppression Magic. Dragonkin women apparently possessed a great inner power which was hidden deep within each one.

“Once we consume your flesh and blood, dragonkin men will become unstoppable! We will no longer be beholden to your Suppression Magic!”

“And that’s why you were feeding the Lord Dragon Duke false reports about your research?!”

“Indeed,” Duchesse replied. His plan was to use the festivities of the Founding Anniversary to unleash a large-scale ritual forcing all dragonkin men into a berserk state. And once they had consumed all the dragonkin women, they would gain immeasurable power.

It was beyond cruel and despicable.

“Oh, but there is no need for you to worry about us,” he added. “I’ll be using magic to remove weak emotions such as love and sadness from all dragonkin men. From now on, the dragonkin will seek nothing but power. We shall become the most powerful race in the world.”

“You’re insane!”

“I am quite sane, and I believe that strength is the one true path!” Duchesse yelled. He took out a sheet of paper from his pocket—on it was a magic circle inscribed with red letters.

“What are you holding?” I asked.

“It’s a spell connected to the dress I sent you, under the Dragon Duke’s name,” Duchesse explained.

“Y-You mean that was from you?!”

“Indeed. And I see you wore it, thinking that it was proof of the Dragon Duke’s proposal!”

I gritted my teeth and glared right at Duchesse, but he stood there, unflinching.

“Once I tear up this sheet of paper, the spell will take effect. You will be unable to move your body at all.”

“How could you!” I cried.

“And then, I will eat you. With your magical talents—talents strong enough to stop the Dragon Duke’s rampage—and all your mana, I’m sure to gain a tremendous amount of power. Enough to surpass the Four Great Nobles—nay, perhaps even more power than the Dragon Duke himself!”

Duchesse cackled as he tore up the sheet of paper. “Now, kneel!!!”

A strong wind blew past me, and I braced myself so I wouldn’t get blown away.

Once the wind settled down, Duchesse tilted his head in confusion. “How are you still standing...?”

“Because I’m not wearing your stupid dress!” I removed my white mantle and revealed the dress underneath—one with a design close to the one Duchesse had sent me.

“How?! Do you mean to reject the Dragon Duke’s proposal?!” Duchesse cried out.

“Of course not. Right, Van?”

“Van?”

I pointed behind Duchesse, and there was Van in his dragon form, beating his wings. The gust of wind earlier had been from Van’s approach. Duchesse’d been so focused on his monologue that he hadn’t noticed.

Duchesse began to plead with him. “Lord Dragon Duke! Th-This is not what it looks like! Th-That woman is the root of all evil! I have done nothing wrong!” He

was desperately shambling about. “Th-The Dragon Duke will regain his sanity once that woman is gone!”

He took out another sheet of paper and ripped it up. A magic circle appeared—a *summoning* circle!

And from that summoning circle came a Corrupt Dragon, its body covered in black thorns.

“Wha...?!”

“O Corrupt Dragon, eliminate that witch!” he yelled.

The dragon bellowed deeply in reply.

Corrupt Dragons were dragons said to be the core of magic itself—the most evil and powerful creatures to exist. Their thoughts had been corrupted, and they were said to be the remnants of dragonkin who had become monsters. And one such creature was now flying right toward me.

“Aaah!!!” I gritted my teeth and braced for impact, but none came. I opened my eyes and witnessed Van biting into the neck of the Corrupt Dragon. However, its body was covered in poisonous thorns, and not even Van would remain unscathed from that.

“Van!” I shouted.

As if answering my cries, Van swished his tail. Then, he threw back his head and launched the Corrupt Dragon into the sky. He followed that up with his breath attack. A magic circle appeared in his mouth and a beam of light fired from it. The light pierced the Corrupt Dragon’s heart and it died in an instant. Its gigantic body soon burned into ashes and faded away completely.

Duchesse stood in shock at the loss of the Corrupt Dragon—his trump card.

A cold gust of wind blew past us again.

“It would seem that this is the end of the line for me. At the very least, I will...” Duchesse took out a knife, unsheathed it, and pointed it at me. And then, he rushed straight toward me.

“Nngh!”

Another gust of wind blasted us as Van descended right between me and Duchesse. He flapped his wings again and blew Duchesse away.



It was such a strong gust of wind that Duchesse was sent flying past the walls surrounding the roof of the tower. He managed to just barely hold on to the railing on the walls.

In order to transform into a dragon, one needed to recite an incantation and trace a mark with a finger. As he was now, Duchesse was unable to transform.

“M-Milord! P-Please, forgive my transgressions!” he cried. “I will commit no more schemes! P-Please, find it in your heart to forgive me!”

Van began approaching Duchesse.

“Lord Dragon Duke!!!” Roche cried.

“We have apprehended the criminal. Commence attack!” A voice called out from the darkness, and a number of knights emerged from behind the dragon. It seemed that Roche was the one who shouted.

A magic barrier was raised in front of me and the Dragon Duke. The next moment, rays of light began firing at Duchesse.

“Aaaaaah!!!”

Duchesse was enveloped in light—and at that moment, I felt someone embracing me.

“Mille-Feuille, you need not look.”

“Van...”

Van had reverted from his dragon form and was completely naked. However, since he was enveloped in a bright light, I couldn’t see anything.

Duchesse had been purged by the Dragon Duke’s royal guard.

Everything is okay. I heard Van say as much, so I felt relieved. Then, I fell unconscious.

I really went through hell there. If I hadn’t been so cautious, I would’ve fallen straight into his trap.

On the day I received my dress, I immediately wrote a reply to Van, thanking

him for the gift. However, he sent a secretary to reply to my letter instead. Van had never sent a messenger to reply to my letters before, but the secretary *did* say that Van was busy.

Still, I had already been suspicious by the time I received the dress. Van'd already said that he wanted to talk to me about something, and he would've just proposed to me in person instead of sending me a dress to do so. There was definitely something amiss. My Evaluation Glasses hadn't detected anything unusual about the dress, but I had already previously encountered magic that my glasses couldn't detect by that point.

I showed the dress to Lady Opera, and her conclusion was that some kind of spell had been cast on it, confirming my suspicions. Apparently, a complicated spell that didn't leave any trace of mana behind had been used. Only Duchesse would have been able to pull such a feat.

On top of that, on the eve of the Founding Anniversary, I received a message saying that Van had changed the venue of our meeting. Of course, I didn't take that at face value either.

Duchesse had been constantly by Van's side, so I hadn't been able to get close to him. However, he would at least leave Van's side while he was asleep. I used the magic circle that Van had given me previously to perform Transportation Magic and went to Van's room. I asked him about the change in venue, and, of course, it turned out that he hadn't ordered such a change.

Once he started pressing me about what was going on, I could no longer keep it a secret. I explained everything I knew about Duchesse and his schemes.

Van, understandably, was quite shocked upon hearing it. He couldn't simply accept that one of his closest friends was betraying him. I told him that he didn't have to believe everything yet. I would pretend to fall for Duchesse's trap and ask him what was going on. Once Duchesse thought that we were alone, he would definitely reveal his crimes.

And, just as planned, he'd revealed all his crimes and schemes to me. Van and the Four Great Nobles had heard everything, and Duchesse had been executed on the spot.

Today was finally the Founding Anniversary, a day of fun celebrations. All of the Dragon Duchy had been waiting for this event. And, since it was also the centennial of the nation's founding, the celebrations were bigger than ever before.

The death of Duchesse was hidden from the public eye so as to not put a damper on the festivities. His crimes would be revealed to the public another time.

Lady Opera's party for all the dragonkin women would also proceed as planned.

In the meantime, I did not join any of the festivities and opted to be alone with Van in this gloomy office. Bright moonlight poured in through the window, causing its frame to cast its shadow on the floor.

Van was flipping through work that he didn't have to do today—simple tasks like stamping documents. I watched as he went through it all.

"Mille-Feuille, aren't you going to the women's party?" Van asked me.

"I just wanted to stay by your side while you're depressed."

"That's very thoughtful of you."

I embraced him from behind, and Van's shoulders trembled.

"I am so confused right now. Duchesse was an evil man who tried to kill you. My anger toward him still hasn't settled down. But even so, I feel like a large hole has been left in my heart," Van lamented.

"That's only natural. Duchesse was a member of your family, a friend, and your teacher, after all."

Duchesse had certainly been a villain to me and all dragonkin women, but he hadn't been one to Van. In fact, Duchesse had guided Van along the path to becoming a proper ruler. Even if the end result would have meant that only the men would survive, there was no debating that he had done everything for Van's sake.

"No," said Van. "Duchesse was truly evil. After all, he also killed Charlotte—your previous incarnation."

Van's words shocked me. I had to take a step back. "You remember that?"

"I have for a while now, yes," he replied.

"Since when?"

"Since around the time your brother forbade me from seeing you. I kept hearing this strange voice in my head, so I suspected that some kind of spell was cast on me. I went looking for answers."

As a result, he'd found out that his memories had been sealed away. Van had used Forbidden Magic to dispel the seal and had recovered his memories.

"Mille-Feuille, in your past life, you were the woman that the past me once loved."

"The past you?" I asked.

"I was really shocked when my memories from a hundred years ago came back."

Listening to him, it seemed like the sensation he'd experienced was similar to when I'd remembered my past life as Charlotte.

"Even if my memories have returned, it doesn't change who I am," he said, continuing. "I'm no longer the man I was a century ago, so I thought I didn't have to go out of my way to tell you."

While I was unconscious, I had apparently been mumbling in my sleep while Van had been around. Most of it had been about the pain of having Charlotte's memories.

"I never imagined that having Charlotte's memories would cause you this much suffering. I am truly sorry about this."

"Apology accepted."

Van stood up and turned to face me. "Who would've thought that I would see you again after a century?"

"Well, it *was* you who cast that spell to reincarnate me," I retorted.

"Ah, I *did* do that, didn't I? I'm sorry."

At first, we'd known absolutely nothing about each other. I'd thought that

Van was a bratty rich boy from the magic academy. To Van, I'd seemed like a spoiled rich girl from the magic academy.

"You ended up helping me countless times," Van said.

"And you gave me a hand so many times too," I replied.

It was like we both filled a hole in the other's life.

"I'm glad that I can have a relationship with you on equal standing."

"Me too."

So many things had happened, but now, we were here, gazing at each other gently. It was a miraculous moment in time.

"By the way, you never told me what you were going to say on the eve of the Founding Anniversary," I reminded Van. He'd had such a gloomy expression on his face back then.

Apparently, he had thought that I would say no to him.

"Say no to what, exactly?" I pressed him.

Van took my hand and pulled me closer to him. Suddenly, he revealed a beautiful silver ring with a diamond as its gemstone in his hand.

"Mille-Feuille, will you be my wife?"

"Me?! Wh-Why me?!"

"What other reason could there be except my love for you?" Van asked, dropping such an embarrassing line with a straight face.

"Y-Your love for me..."

"I think I've been hinting at it for quite a while now."

"Well, yes, you have," I admitted. "But...you know. Don't we have a huge gap in social status? And what about Charlotte? Isn't she occupying your heart?"

"Why are you bringing up Charlotte now? I want *you* as my wife, Mille-Feuille, and nobody else," Van said, and he knelt before me on the floor. "Lady Mille-Feuille, will you marry me?"

"Ah, um... You don't have to do that, you know..."

I was flustered, but I realized that all I had to do was meet him at eye level. I lowered myself and returned his gaze. Van's expression was completely serious.

"You know, I'm very stubborn, and I might not listen to what you say at all," I said.

"And that's how you should be, Mille-Feuille."

His reply was the last thing I needed to swing the scales in my heart. I held the hand Van was using to hold the ring with both of mine. I brought it to my cheek and told him my true feelings.

"I would be glad to be your loving wife."

At that moment, Van stood up and swooped me up into the air. He swung me left and right, up and down, much like a mother playing with a baby.

"H-Hey! What are you doing?!"

"I mean, you agreed to be my wife! I'm just so happy!" he cheered.

"Your way of celebrating is so strange!"

"It is? Sorry about that, then!"

Van put me down by the window and the moonlight shone down on me. Outside, the city streets lit by the entrancing glow of magicstone lanterns looked like an otherworldly scene.

Van pulled me closer to him. Our eyes met, followed by our lips.

On the night of the full moon, Van and I swore our eternal love to one another. From now on, we would support each other as spouses and take a vow of unwavering love.

My destiny lay with the Dragon Duke, as it did in my first life. As the Dragon Duchess consort, I would live my life for the sake of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair.

Once, I had shouted that I didn't want to be the Dragon Duke's maid. But I had ended up going from maid to bride, and now I was the Dragon Duchess consort.

Later on, Parfeil would ask me what I thought of the way my life was going. I

would smile and say, “Being the Dragon Duchess consort is pretty nice.”

The path that lay ahead with my husband Van was a happy one indeed.



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I Don't Want to Be the Dragon Duke's Maid! Serving My Ex-Fiancé from My Past Life: Volume 1

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