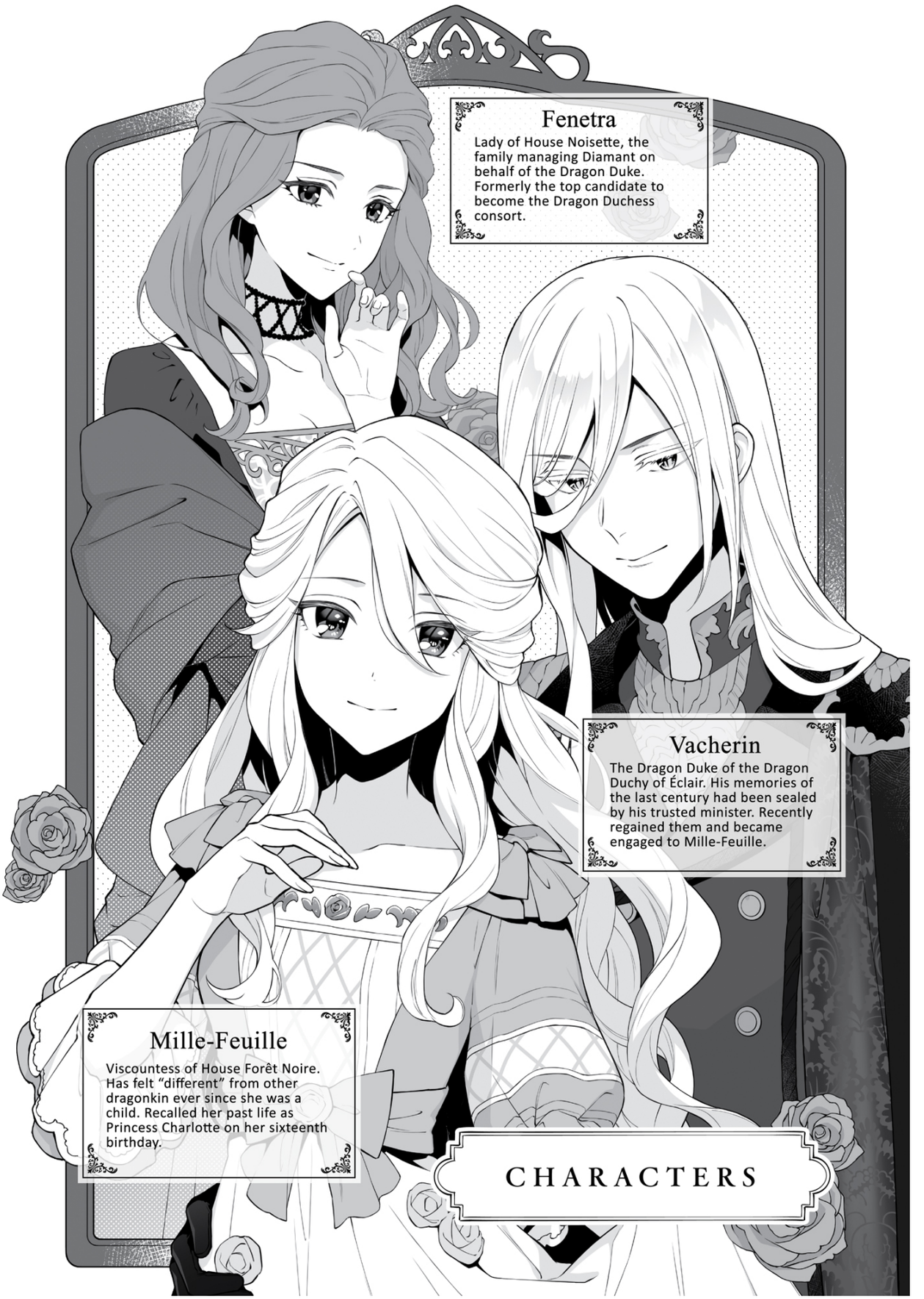

2
story by
Mashimesa Emoto
illustrations by
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I Don't Want to Be the
DRAGON
DUKE'S
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Serving My
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Fenetra
Lady of House Noisette, the family managing Diamant on behalf of the Dragon Duke. Formerly the top candidate to become the Dragon Duchess consort.
Vacherin
The Dragon Duke of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. His memories of the last century had been sealed by his trusted minister. Recently regained them and became engaged to Mille-Feuille.
Mille-Feuille
Viscountess of House Forêt Noire. Has felt "different" from other dragonkin ever since she was a child. Recalled her past life as Princess Charlotte on her sixteenth birthday.
CHARACTERS

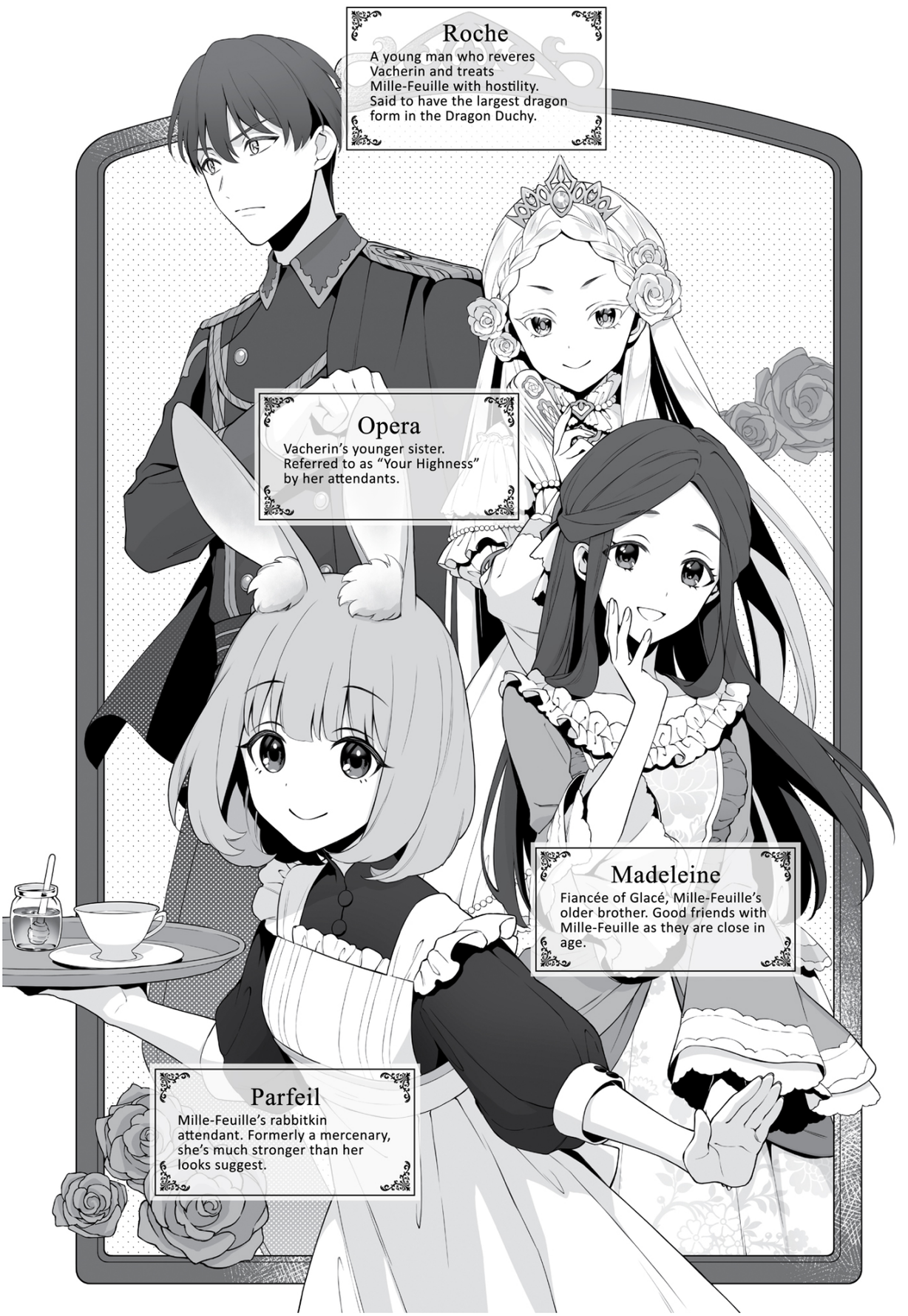

Roche
A young man who reveres Vacherin and treats Mille-Feuille with hostility. Said to have the largest dragon form in the Dragon Duchy.
Opera
Vacherin's younger sister. Referred to as "Your Highness" by her attendants.
Madeleine
Fiancée of Glacé, Mille-Feuille's older brother. Good friends with Mille-Feuille as they are close in age.
Parfeil
Mille-Feuille's rabbitkin attendant. Formerly a mercenary, she's much stronger than her looks suggest.

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Prologue: Mille-Feuille’s Trodden Path

I, Mille-Feuille, was once a lowly viscountess. But on my sixteenth birthday, my life was turned upside down.

A year ago, Vacherin—the Dragon Duke of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair—made his first public appearance in a century, and I had been dragged along to witness the event. Upon seeing the face of His Highness, I was overcome by intense dizziness and collapsed on the spot.

At that moment, I remembered everything from my previous life. A hundred years ago, I had been Princess Charlotte of the now-defunct Kingdom of Sacristain. And Charlotte had been engaged to Vacherin, a member of the long-lived dragonkin race. At the peak of their happy relationship, she had been assassinated, and their marriage was never to be.

Charlotte’s soul had ascended to heaven, and she had been reborn as Mille-Feuille Forêt Noire—me.

I was dumbfounded by the sudden return of my past life’s memories. However, Charlotte and I were completely different people. Even though I had her memories, Charlotte’s personality and feelings didn’t overwrite my own. I did not feel anything for Vacherin, the man my past self had loved so dearly.

Still, I had been murdered in my past life, and I was unable to remember who killed me. The only thing I remembered was Vacherin’s wail of lamentation.

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

To me, it sounded like he was cursing someone. It was an accusation and a condemnation. What had happened between the two of them? My past life’s memories were incomplete, so many things remained a mystery. A lover’s quarrel that had led to murder was certainly a possibility, and the thought of it made me shiver. The only thing I could do was to avoid Vacherin as much as possible.

Charlotte had been a blue-eyed, blonde-haired beauty. I, on the other hand, was a run-of-the-mill Plain Jane with green eyes, hair the color of milk tea, and a dour expression on my face. I was

confident that I wouldn't be discovered based on appearances. As long as I completely severed my ties with my past self, I could live a completely normal life.

At least that was what I had thought until I met a young student from the boys' magic academy who called himself "Van." He hid his face with a hood and acted haughtily toward me. He was always surrounded by a large group of escorts, so I surmised that he was the scion of an influential noble family.

In a twist of fate, my encounters with Van became more frequent. By sheer coincidence, I ran into an ill Van in the city one day. I could immediately tell that he was suffering from mana depletion, so I gave him some caramel candy that helped recover his mana.

Dragonkin women would use up a large amount of mana to suppress men who had gone berserk during their draconic transformations. As a result, the women would fall ill. I had been researching a way to help women recover their mana after suppressing transformations. Until then, nobody knew how to do this, but I discovered a way to enchant caramel candies with the mana from moonlight. I ended up catching Van's interest when I gave him one of those enchanted sweets.

I had no desire to keep associating with the scion of an influential noble, but I became attracted to his sincere and honest demeanor.

For a long time, I found Van to be a complete mystery. But one day, he revealed his identity to me—he was the Dragon Duke Vacherin. He had lost his memories and was enrolled at the boys' magic academy to relearn the fundamentals of magic. I had been interacting with him all that time without knowing this fact.

As for why he had lost his memories, it was the work of one of his escorts—a man named Duchesse. Van had been enraged at the death of Charlotte, and even after bringing the Kingdom of Sacristain to the brink of utter destruction, his rampage hadn't stopped. At that point, Duchesse had sealed him away using an ancient stone scroll and forced him to sleep for a hundred years.

Duchesse had thought that the Dragon Duke's wrath and grief would have faded away after such a long time, but it was not to be. Vacherin hadn't forgotten his love for Charlotte or his vengeful wrath. Duchesse had thought that Vacherin would not be able to

perform his duties if he remained that way, so he'd sealed away almost all of Vacherin's memories. All that remained in Vacherin's mind were things that happened until his adolescence. He had even forgotten how to use magic, so he'd had to enroll at the academy to relearn it.

I had fallen in love with the Van who had forgotten his dark and troubled past. I was relieved that I hadn't simply become enamored of him because of my past life.

But it was too early for relief. I began to notice Duchesse's unusual actions. He had been falsifying the results of the research Van had commissioned him to do—research on the redistribution of mana between dragonkin couples. And not only that—he had made attempts on my life.

I confronted him, and Duchesse revealed his terrible ambitions. He was plotting to consume all dragonkin women and obtain eternal life. He thought that we dragonkin women were a corrupting influence on men—including Van. That was why he had murdered Charlotte in the past and had attempted to assassinate me as well.

Though Duchesse had been the mastermind behind all these schemes, he hadn't planned to take over the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. He only wished that Van would become a fitting ruler for the duchy, and he saw me and Charlotte as obstructions to that end.

His plans were revealed to Van, and the royal guard annihilated him. It wasn't quite the happy ending we wanted.

Peace finally came to my life, and Van proposed to me. While I was overjoyed, there was one thing that still bothered me: Van had figured out that I was the reincarnation of Charlotte, but I was not the same person that I had been in my previous life. Even so, I was anxious to know whether he would still love me as I was now—as Mille-Feuille. Van's answer was that my past life didn't matter to him. He said that the sensation of his memories returning to him was similar to what I had experienced in recalling Charlotte's. He declared that he was no longer the same person as the Vacherin in his memories.

Van and I had met each other with clean slates and still became attracted to one another. We had fallen in love in spite of our previous lives. We held each other, knowing we'd experienced a miraculous encounter.

Chapter 1: An Unexpected Conundrum

The plans for my and the Dragon Duke Vacherin's wedding ceremony were becoming ridiculously extravagant.

"I want all of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair to see you in your bridal attire," Van declared.

"Are you serious?" I said, unimpressed.

"Of course I am. However, I also feel like I want to keep the sight of you in a wedding dress all to myself... It's quite a dilemma." Van happily expounded on his ideas for my dress's design. "I had about a hundred patterns drawn up. I hope you can find one you like out of all of these."

"O-Oh, thank you."

Normally, preparations for a wedding ceremony would be overseen by the bride's mother. It was rare for the groom to be this excited about being involved in the arrangements. When I expressed this thought to him, Van became indignant.

"You mean to tell me the men of the world have been heaping all the responsibilities for such an important ceremony on their better halves?! This is a travesty! I will draft a law at once penalizing men who do not participate in wedding preparations!"

"You better not do that," I chided him. After all, there were also brides out there who didn't want their grooms butting in too much. Everyone had their preferences.

"Mille-Feuille... Do you mind me being this opinionated about our wedding?" he asked.

"No, of course not. In fact, I'm really happy that you are."

Even though I thought he was being a *bit* of a pain, I would never be caught saying that out loud.

Mother joined in midway through our discussion and began running through options with Van. The two of them looked very excited, and I felt a bit left out.

I couldn't help but feel that my attitude toward my wedding ceremony differed from other women's. Wearing luxurious, eye-catching dresses had been nothing extraordinary in my previous life, and as Van's fiancée in this life, I'd already been dragged

around to all sorts of places. Dressing up and being the center of attention just didn't excite me.

Of course, I was glad that I would get to marry Van, and wearing an all-white wedding gown was also a dream of mine. But I didn't want to put the burden of preparing such an extravagant ceremony onto Van, especially when he was already busy with other work. It seemed that my mother had sensed my misgivings about the ceremony, and the plans started proceeding according to her directions. The discussion shifted from topic to topic, including transporting the guests to the wedding and reception, the catering, ordering celebratory dinnerware to be given to the duchy's citizens, and so on.

Thanks to my mother, it seemed that Van's dream wedding would become a reality.

I first saw my finished wedding gown on the day of the ceremony. I thought I was dreaming when I saw the five-meter-long train on the dress, but after pinching myself to check, I knew it was real.

Mother cried as she watched me put on the dress. "Mille-Feuille, you're gorgeous!"

"Mother, thank you for everything you've done for me."

"Yes, of course, dear! I worked so hard preparing for this ceremony!"

I thought that she was crying at the sight of her beloved daughter on her wedding day, but it seemed that she was shedding tears for her hard work instead.

Meanwhile, Parfeil, my chief attendant, was sobbing at the sight of me in my wedding dress.

"Milady, seeing you on your wedding day feels like a dream!" she cried.

Parfeil, a rabbitkin, had been serving me since I was young. Though she looked like a little girl, her actual age was over two hundred years as she was a member of another long-lived race. She was crying so much that you'd think she was about to send her own daughter off to her wedding.

"I'm so happy to see you all grown up!" Parfeil sobbed.

"Oh, Parfeil, you're exaggerating."

Beside Parfeil was Madeleine, my teary-eyed best friend.

"I also feel like I'm sending off my own daughter!" Madeleine

said.

"Oh, Madeleine, not you too!"

Madeleine was eighteen years old—a year older than me. She was an orthodox beauty, and her pure and innocent demeanor surely made her a better match for the Dragon Duke than me. However, her future partner in marriage was actually set to be my completely typical and average brother, Glacé. Their relationship was favorable, and their wedding was set to take place a year from now.

Will I also feel like a mother sending off her own daughter when Madeleine gets married? I thought about it and shook my head, dismissing the possibility.

Time passed, and in the blink of an eye, it was time for the ceremony. Parfeil and Madeleine realized this and excused themselves. In their place, Van, wearing his white suit, entered the room and saw me and the train of my wedding dress.

Van was dumbfounded at the sight. *Was the five-meter-long train on my dress too much after all?* I worried.

"Mille-Feuille," he began, "you are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes on."

"Th-Thank you," I stammered.

Van's long hair was done in a braid, which fell over his chest. His white suit looked like a military uniform, and it greatly suited him.

"I've dreamed of this day for so long," said Van.

"Me too."

Counting my previous life, I had waited for over a century. I was grateful for our miraculous meeting that had transcended my rebirth.

"I really want to keep the sight of you in that dress all to myself. What if we sneaked out and went on our honeymoon now?" he suggested.

"Don't be silly. The crowd of people that *you* invited is waiting out there," I reminded him.

"Ah, of course. Then, shall I go and brag about my beautiful bride to everyone now?" Van then took my hand and whispered into my ear. "Right now, I am the happiest man in the world."

Abashed by his words, I merely nodded in reply.



Shortly afterward, we exchanged our vows of love before the divine. We held each other close as we left the cathedral. Upon exiting, we were greeted by a large crowd and thunderous applause. My white squirrel familiars scattered flower petals as Van and I made our way down the path. We could only smile at the dreamlike scene that unfolded before us.

Thus, I married Van and became the Dragon Duchess consort.

I knew that with Van by my side, I would overcome all the challenges that stood before me. That was what I had thought, at least, but we immediately faced a difficult problem.

Once the issue of dragonkin women's mana depletion had been solved, women were no longer bedridden for long bouts. As a result, travel had become a fad within the Dragon Duchy. However, the only notable tourist destination in the duchy was a lake to the west where people could go boating. The lack of tourist destinations was a problem that had persisted since the days of the Kingdom of Sacristain. Since the kingdom had spent most of its budget on its military, there was little left for its citizens' entertainment.

Van had ordered his councillors to think about the recreational needs of the state at their next council meeting. Things like hunting grounds, horse racing, and gambling had all been suggested, but Van had rejected all of them. He wanted a tourist destination that people of all ages and genders could enjoy. Even though Van made himself clear, his geriatric councillors could only come up with places that would appeal to men. These meetings had borne no fruit, so Van had brought the topic to me.

It was now autumn, the season when colorful leaves danced through the air, but I still had no time to relax and prepare for the coming winter.

Deep wrinkles formed on Van's face as he furrowed his brow. "My council's suggestions were giving me a headache. I'll have to think about replacing everyone sitting on it soon," Van muttered.

"That's something to think about. Still, it's a difficult problem to solve," I replied.

"It is."

Duchesse, the man who had been handling the nation's political affairs, was no longer here. But even so, Van was still surrounded

by men who had been handpicked by Duchesse, and their ideas were too biased to consider.

"Things had been going smoothly until recently, but ever since Duchesse died, some of them have started becoming rebellious," Van complained.

Roche, Van's impassioned, enthusiastic friend and knight, was also adamant that Van replace all the councillors picked by Duchesse. While Van understood where Roche was coming from, such a drastic change would certainly ruffle more than a few feathers. He couldn't afford to do such a thing right now.

He had lectured Roche afterward, explaining that replacing the councillors needed to happen slowly and over a long period of time. There was no need to rush, for dragonkin lived long.

Still, whenever a problem like this came up, it only caused Van's headaches to intensify.

"When I informed the council that I wouldn't need their help, those old men all started complaining..."

Though he called them old, they all still looked quite young and were full of vitality. Van complained that he was sick of appeasing them and it took too much of his energy to do so.

"Since Duchesse has been gone, I really feel like their egos have only grown. I hope I'm only imagining things. What do you think, Mille-Feuille?"

"From what I'm hearing, I don't think it's just your imagination," I answered. I knew that there were several among the council who had opposed our wedding. They wanted Van to marry someone of higher status—a noblewoman with a robust pool of mana. While their opinions were certainly within reason, Van had gone against all of them and selected me to be his wife anyway.

My very existence weakens Van's standing. Every time that thought crossed my mind, my heart ached.

"Mille-Feuille, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing."

"It doesn't seem like nothing to me. What's wrong?" he asked again.

Now that he was prying, I could no longer hide my thoughts from him. I revealed my honest feelings to him: I had been thinking it was my fault that Van's councillors were turning against him.

“Mille-Feuille, it’s not your fault. It’s mine for being so inexperienced. I don’t have enough experience to be able to tell off those aging councillors.”

Van had left most of the daily administration of the nation to Duchesse. Now that he was in Duchesse’s position, Van surmised that his councillors were still getting used to the change.

“I do hope that it’s nothing more than needing to get used to me,” Van added.

Van then embraced me and patted my back. This must have been his way of telling me to pay those old men no mind.

“In any case, I can’t think of anything on how to boost our tourism sector. Mille-Feuille, do you have any ideas?”

“Hmm. Let me think…”

The difficulty lay in finding a tourist spot that *everyone* could enjoy, regardless of age or gender. When it came to activities that appealed to women, I thought of things like the theater, concert halls, museums and art galleries, as well as making small talk with friends over tea and shopping. But just like the councillors’ suggestions, these were not things that people of all ages would enjoy.

“Now that I think about it, this might be a pretty difficult problem to solve,” I concluded.

“Right?”

Apparently, children thought the boat rides at the lake were boring.

“Perhaps asking children to sit there and enjoy the scenery is too much,” I said.

A memory from a year ago flashed in my mind—the day when my parents had told me that we would be going to see the Dragon Duke’s glorious personage. I remembered having thought that it would be very boring and giggled to myself.

Van gave me a quizzical look upon seeing me laugh. “What’s so funny?”

“Do you remember that huge event when you first showed your face in public again?” I asked. “Frankly, that was really, really boring!”

“How rude of you. Being able to glimpse my visage is an *honor*!”

“Stop it! It’s even more hilarious when you pump yourself up like that!”

“On that note,” Van said, lowering his voice, “I’ve been secretly planning a wedding reception parade to make our marriage known to everyone.”

“That sounds like you just want to show off,” I said.

“That’s not true. I just think that it would please our subjects to see us happily married… Well, just showing our faces to the public would be boring, huh?”

Van looked dejected, so I apologized. “I’m sorry for saying that.”

“No, it’s all right. Arranging security for a parade would be very difficult anyway.”

Even before we had gotten married, I’d been surrounded by a number of indomitable female knights. Though I had felt that it was overly cautious, I hadn’t complained. Since then, however, I had needed to bring a large convoy with me wherever I went. I even had a body double who acted on my behalf for visits to facilities such as orphanages and hospices. That was how tight the security was around me.

Hearing that there were people who were vehemently against our marriage made me worry about my safety. Right now, I didn’t feel that having this much security was being overly cautious.

“I ended up restricting your freedoms by marrying you. I’m really sorry about that,” Van told me.

“No, you don’t have to feel bad about it.” It was true that I found some aspects of my new life somewhat inconvenient, but just being by Van’s side was making my life so fulfilling. “Van, I’m really happy to be with you.”

“I feel the same way, Mille-Feuille.”

Van kissed my cheek. The spot where his lips touched my skin felt warm. Even though we were husband and wife, I still wasn’t used to such displays of affection. I spent my time with Van immersed in warm feelings, doing my best to subdue my embarrassment.

The next day, I called in Parfeil and Madeleine to help me come up with types of entertainment that people of all ages and genders could enjoy. It was apparently a difficult task for them too, as they both furrowed their brows thinking about it.

“Uh…”

“Hmm…”

My white squirrels also circled around me, squeaking as they

gestured in ways that suggested they were also thinking about the problem. It was up in the air whether they actually understood the assignment, however.

How vexing. How could the duchy be so lacking in tourist spots and entertainment options? Has everyone been struggling so hard to get by that we've had no time to have fun?

Among all of us, Parfeil was the only one who had experienced life outside of the Dragon Duchy or the Kingdom of Sacristain. I decided to ask her about what she'd seen.

"Parfeil, did you encounter any entertaining places during your time as an adventurer?"

Parfeil's long ears swayed left and right as she thought about it. "Hmm… I remember that going to the circus was pretty enjoyable."

"The circus? I've never heard of that," I said.

"Me neither," Madeleine added.

According to Parfeil, circuses were very common in other countries, but she had never seen one in the Dragon Duchy of Éclair.

"What's a circus?" I asked.

"It's difficult to explain, but it's an event that takes place in a gigantic tent, much like a theater. The circus performers do various tricks for the audience," Parfeil explained.

People swung about in the air, phantasmal beasts jumped through hoops of fire and balanced on balls, jesters threw knives, and pantomimes were performed for the crowd. According to her, watching this fantastical scene unfold was thrilling and exciting.

"I do occasionally spot such performers on the city streets. Does the circus just gather those performers and make an event out of it?"

"No, that's not quite the same. I heard the circus is a group that travels all over—they don't get hired to stay in one place," Parfeil replied.

"I see… So it's like a troupe but with a group of performers who know tricks."

"That's right, milady."

Nobody knew where the circus might've been at any given time. Like migratory birds, it never stayed in one place and traveled most of the time.

"That means it'll be difficult to find them and invite them over…"

“Indeed…”

“Do you have any other ideas?” I asked.

Once more, Parfeil’s ears twitched as she racked her brain for ideas.

“Oh, yes!” she said, suddenly coming up with one. “What about swimming?”

“Swimming? What about it?”

“You know, like going into the sea and swishing about in the water.” Parfeil motioned with her arms. Madeleine and I were confused at the unusual suggestion and gave her puzzled glances. This was the first time we’d heard of people swimming for any reason other than fishing.

Madeleine seemed curious. “Um, do you mean that people swim in the ocean with their clothes on?”

“Regular clothes are too heavy and make it hard to move around, so people just swim in their underwear. In other countries, they make special underwear for swimming called ‘swimsuits.’” Parfeil then drew a picture of what a swimsuit looked like to illustrate her point. She wasn’t exaggerating when she said that it was underwear; it left most of the wearer’s chest and all of their limbs exposed to the elements.

“Wearing such clothing would certainly require some…no, a *lot* of courage,” Madeleine remarked.

I couldn’t help but nod in agreement. The Dragon Duchy of Éclair was a country where exposing one’s ankles was considered quite scandalous. Swimming in something that was basically underwear would be unthinkable.

“Also, Parfeil, aren’t there monsters in the sea? Isn’t it dangerous?” I asked.

“It is. That’s why everyone brings a harpoon while swimming.”

“Where’s the fun and relaxation in that, exactly?”

“You can harpoon edible fish, and if you encounter a monster, you just kill it,” she explained.

“That’s such a violent pastime.”

Apparently, swimming in the ocean was mostly popular with adventurers. Since it was so dangerous, regular citizens couldn’t enjoy it.

“However, there were a few nobles who had these large tanks of water called ‘swimming pools’ where they could swim,” Parfeil

continued.

“In their swimwear?”

“Of course.”

That solved the problem of monster attacks, but it would still be difficult to convince this country that still disapproved of exposing skin to anyone outside one’s family or spouse to adopt such a pastime.

I tried asking Parfeil for more suggestions, but I was met with total silence. I was about to suggest going to the library for ideas when the door slammed open.

“Knock knock!!!” Van’s sister, Lady Opera, seemed in high spirits as she barged into the room. “When I say, ‘Knock knock,’ you should all be replying with ‘Who’s there?’! That is the tradition!” she said, scolding us. She seemed upset that we were taken aback by her sudden intrusion.

“A tradition in which country?” I asked her.

“Why, a country in some other world, I suppose!” Lady Opera exclaimed.

I was so confused by her greeting as I didn’t expect it to be one from a nonexistent nation. I politely informed her that I would never have been able to respond correctly.

“Forget about all that. My attendant has brought you all some confectioneries, and I would like you all to partake in them with great enthusiasm.”

The attendant behind Lady Opera was holding a silver tray with a number of sweets on it, and she lined them up on the table. Among them were a small cake and a number of pastries filled with jams and chocolate. I was impressed that the dough used in these was fluffier than what was used for typical confectioneries.

“This is delicious! The dough is just slightly moist and very soft!” I exclaimed.

“Right? Right?!” Lady Opera nodded enthusiastically. Apparently, these sweets were the latest fad on the city streets. People were lining up for them every day, and the queues were practically five hours long.

“Lady Opera, what do they call these sweets?”

“They call them ‘steamed cakes.’ As the name suggests, they steam the dough instead of baking it,” Lady Opera explained. By being cooked with the heat from steam instead of a direct flame,

the dough became very fluffy.

"How novel," I remarked.

"I knew you would all think as much, so I decided to share some with you all."

Thanks to Lady Opera, I had discovered a new type of snack. I was grateful to her for this discovery, and we all bowed to her in gratitude.

Lady Opera covered her face with her fan. "Oh, you are all quite welcome!" she replied with great enthusiasm.

I found it to be a miracle that I was here having a normal conversation with Lady Opera. As Van's sister, she had treated me with hostility ever since she first laid her eyes on me. She'd even harassed me with a full-course meal of monstrous "delicacies." I imagined that she didn't like it when women became close to her brother.

However, that was now all water under the bridge, and our relationship had become quite pleasant. She would frequently come to visit and spend a few hours just chatting with me. Though she might not have said it out loud, she had given her blessing to my marriage with Van, and she had even become one of the people I could confide in.

"In any case, you all looked quite troubled before I came in with these steamed cakes. What have you all been talking about?" Lady Opera tilted her head in curiosity.

Parfeil and Madeleine glanced at me. It seemed they were both hoping that I would explain the situation to her.

I straightened up my posture and began to summarize our previous conversation. "We had been discussing the severe lack of tourism in the duchy and were trying to come up with some new ideas."

"A lack of tourism, eh? I see. It is indeed quite troubling that the only noteworthy destination we have is the lake..." Lady Opera said.

The lake was a scenic place—beautiful apple blossoms bloomed in the spring, verdant leaves were a refreshing sight in the summer, colorful autumn leaves were a sight to behold in the fall, and the misty lake in the winter was a scene straight out of a painting. However, word had been going around that the rapid influx of visitors to the lake had been taking its toll on the

environment. The water quality had started to suffer, and algae had been spotted on the lake's surface.

"The lake has been in a terrible state as of late. Tourists have been littering without restraint, and fishermen have been introducing foreign fish to the waters."

"This is the first time I've heard of that," I said. It would seem that the rush of tourists visiting the lake was causing tangible damage.

"I was about to suggest a lake tourism ban to the Dragon Duke," Lady Opera said, though she hadn't pushed it through as she knew that it would bring about protests from the populace. "Now that the Dragon Duke has returned to ruling directly, it would be a faux pas to announce such heavy-handed measures."

Lady Opera then praised us for contemplating new alternative destinations to the lake.

"Still, we're at a loss as to what exactly those other tourist destinations and attractions should be," I confessed.

"Hmm, let's see... Why don't you think of what attracts people to the lake and work from there?" Lady Opera suggested.

I took her up on that and started thinking about what made the lake popular. "Whenever I think of the lake, I think of its beautiful scenery and being able to relax on a boat..."

After bringing up those two points, I turned to Madeleine for her opinion.

"Hmm... I think it's popular because it's only three hours away from the capital by carriage. It's quite convenient to access," she said.

Finally, I turned to Parfeil. Perhaps because we had already offered several opinions, she seemed to be struggling to think of anything. Her brow furrowed and her ears trembled a bit.

"I think it's because people want to take a break from their daily lives," she said. "They want to experience something unusual in an unfamiliar place."

Lady Opera nodded, and Parfeil let out a sigh of relief.

"So, to summarize your opinions: the people just want to enjoy something!" Lady Opera said.

I was unsure if that was an accurate assessment of our statements, but I still nodded in agreement.

Lady Opera then asked us what we'd come up with so far, so I

told her about the circus and swimming in the ocean. While she seemed interested at first, her expression clouded over once I mentioned the kinds of performances the jesters did at the circus and again when I described the swimwear.

"We cannot go with anything too novel," she said. "The majority of our subjects are quite conservative. While the nobles are more adventurous, they are merely a small portion of our populace. Anything too unfamiliar would no longer be an attraction that everyone could enjoy."

I suddenly remembered something. The dragonkin had formerly been a minority within a larger nation and had lived in a small, close-knit community. Most of our people were slow to accept anything new and lived modest lives. Most dragonkin wouldn't be interested in novel forms of entertainment.

"Investing resources into a new tourist destination would be completely meaningless if it didn't succeed..." I muttered. If I failed, Van would certainly be reprimanded by his council. The gravity of the responsibility that I had taken on suddenly dawned on me.

"Hmm... What should we do...?"

"This is quite a difficult problem..."

The circus might be too terrifying for children. Swimming in the ocean was too dangerous and involved exposing too much skin. I had to think of something other than those two ideas that would be enjoyable and let people experience something unlike their daily lives.

I think I know about something similar to swimming in the ocean... I tried to remember what it was. Suddenly, my vision went white, and I was assaulted by a wave of dizziness.

A memory flashed before me. It was from Charlotte—my previous incarnation. I voiced it out. "Hot springs... What about hot springs?"

Lady Opera looked confused at my sudden suggestion. It was no surprise as I had never seen the words "hot springs" in the history of all dragonkin. "Mille-Feuille, what are these 'hot springs' you speak of?"

"It's a type of bath that springs up from underground. If you dig deep into the ground, hot water will come up from below. It's quite refreshing," I explained.

“Oh?” Lady Opera seemed curious.

Madeleine couldn’t seem to imagine it, but Parfeil was apparently aware of their existence. The rabbitkin’s expression brightened, and she gestured as if a thought had just fallen into place.

“Hot springs! I’ve heard people talk about those! It’s when you dig down deep and a stream of hot water wells up, right? I heard the water is good for the body too!” Parfeil seemed to have heard of them during her time as an adventurer.

“Yes, that’s right,” I replied.

“Going to hot springs was a pastime for nobles, so commoners couldn’t enter them at all,” Parfeil added. Nobles referred to those closed-off hot springs as “spas.” They were popular due to their rumored health benefits. “Wow, hot springs, huh? I’ve always wanted to go to one!”

There had been no hot springs in the Kingdom of Sacristain either, which was probably why Charlotte had been so interested in them.

“But how does hot water come out of the ground?” Madeleine asked, tilting her head in puzzlement.

“There are usually volcanoes near them,” I answered. The chambers of magma underneath volcanoes usually contained water, steam, and hot gasses. The heat warmed up those underground springs, allowing for hot springs to be made on the surface.

“There are also ones without volcanoes near them,” I continued. Those would be called nonvolcanic hot springs, and they were usually due to underground pools of water from rain or floods that were heated up by the natural heat underground.

“I see! Mille-Feuille, you sure do know a lot,” Madeleine said, impressed.

“No, these are just all things I found out from Charlotte. I didn’t learn any of that myself,” I corrected her.

“Oh, I see.”

Lady Opera didn’t know anything about my past life, but she completely ignored my explanation. I wasn’t trying to hide that my previous incarnation had been Charlotte, but I tried not to bring it up as long as it wasn’t touched upon in conversation.

Regardless, Charlotte’s memories had helped me again. She’d

had several different and unique interests, and she'd learned a lot from all of them. I was frustrated that I could never come up with any of those ideas on my own, but this time I was grateful to her.

"Hot springs, eh? That sounds quite pleasant," Lady Opera said.

"Indeed..."

A hundred years ago, Charlotte had apparently suggested digging up a hot spring to her father, the king. If they had done that, she'd wanted to set up a facility for relaxation. However, it seemed that the Kingdom of Sacristain had regarded hot springs as something foreign and unknowable, so her suggestion had been rejected and it had never gone any further. Though she'd been disappointed, she had quickly recovered and found something new that piqued her interest.

What an enviable personality. If that were me, I would have locked myself up for three whole days.

I tried to recall Charlotte's knowledge of hot springs. "If I'm not mistaken, there should be a spring source within the duchy!"

Without a word, Parfeil fetched a map that had been stored in the room and spread it open on the table.

"I think it was right here." I pointed to an area in the north. It was a region called Diamant—an area that was covered in snow all year round.

Lady Opera squinted at the map. "That area should be the property of the Dragon Duke's family. Ah... Yes, that region has been under the supervision of House Noisette, a branch family," she explained.

According to her, a Great Spirit of Snow slumbered there, causing the area to be blanketed in snow all year. The extreme cold made it difficult to raise crops or livestock there, so the region was considered to be barren. However, that hadn't always been the case.

"Diamant only turned into a cold, barren land within the last two hundred years. Back then, the Great Spirit of Snow living there fell in love with the Great Spirit of Fire that ruled the nearby volcano, but the Great Spirit of Snow was rejected. In a fit of great sorrow, it buried the volcano and its surrounding area in snow."

Now that both of the Great Spirits were asleep, they had no influence on the area other than the cold and the snow.

"That volcano used to erupt every now and then, so it is a big

help that it went dormant," Lady Opera remarked. Back during the era of the Kingdom of Sacristain, the volcano's eruptions had caused numerous casualties. The residents of the area must have been grateful to the Great Spirit of Snow for quieting it.

"However, we cannot be complacent just because the volcano will no longer explode." Whenever the anniversary of the day the Great Spirit of Snow had been rejected came close, the sky would be covered in dark clouds and the area would be battered by blizzards. This would last for about three days, and people were unable to leave their homes during that time.

"In any case, we know when that season is, so we could always just close the area down during that time," Lady Opera concluded.

"That's true," I replied.

The next problem was transportation. Travel from the capital to the region took about three days, as travelers needed to cross mountains to reach the area.

"It would only take a few hours to get there on dragonback. A woman could mount the back of her husband or fiancé to take the trip. Such an unusual method of travel would be quite a change of pace, would it not?" Lady Opera suggested.

Thanks to everyone, we were able to come up with a respectable plan. I decided to consult Van about all the various problems we might encounter with our ideas.

"Everyone, thank you for all your suggestions. I think I'll be able to give Van a satisfactory report," I announced.

Lady Opera puffed up her chest, seeming proud of her work. Madeleine shook her head and told me that she didn't do much to earn my praise. Parfeil was all smiles as she nodded in affirmation. And lastly, my white squirrels were doing a cute dance atop the map on the table—a precious sight to behold.

Our gathering ended there. Lady Opera excused herself, saying that she wanted to take a walk in the garden. Madeleine similarly told me that she would head home early since my brother was arriving for a visit. I told her to enjoy her date.

Once I bade Madeleine farewell, Parfeil served me a cup of hot milk with honey. "Milady, I'm glad that you managed to come up with some ideas," she said.

"Yes, it really is quite a relief."

I had almost been ready to concede that there was nothing fun

to do in the Dragon Duchy of Éclair, but I had managed to recall an important memory thanks to everyone actively putting forward their ideas.

"I'm looking forward to the hot springs!"

"I'm glad you are, Parfeil, but I'm still not sure if Van will approve of our plan," I said.

"Of course he will! The Dragon Duke is your greatest ally, milady!"

"I sure hope you're right."

To be honest, I still had my doubts. While I knew Van would understand my point of view, this idea had been met with fierce opposition in my previous life. Perhaps it was because people were scared of the danger posed by the Great Spirits slumbering in the land.

Later that night, I waited for Van with bated breath. He arrived earlier than I expected.

"Van, welcome back."

"Thank you," he replied.

"You're early today."

"Opera told me to hurry up and go home already, so I rushed to finish my work."

"I see. Good work out there."

Van leaned forward and turned his cheek toward me. It looked like he was asking for a kiss as a reward for his efforts, so I indulged his request.

"It feels good to have my hard work rewarded with a wonderful prize," Van said, releasing a pleased sigh.

"Does this really count as a reward?" I asked.

"Of course it does! It just gave me enough energy to work hard tomorrow!"

"All right then."

Van sat down next to me and put his arm around my shoulders. "Opera told me to come see you as soon as I could. I thought you might have been lonely, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

Van was letting his imagination run wild and setting himself up for disappointment—it was adorable. I took his hand that was resting on my shoulder and brought it to my cheek.

"Well, I *was* getting lonely," I told him.

Upon hearing this, Van's expression brightened. "I was starting to think that you were. Let's spend some quality time together tonight," he said.

"Thank you for cheering me up, Van."

We spent some time cuddling each other before Van turned to me with a serious look on his face.

"So, what's the real reason Opera told me to rush here?" he asked.

"I wanted to talk about the tourism problem. We were talking about it with Lady Opera today."

I told Van about the possibility of a hot spring in Diamant, and his eyes widened.

"Hot springs! Of course! Mille-Feuille, that's a wonderful idea!" Van exclaimed.

"Charlotte knew about the hot springs, not me," I said. "I just suddenly remembered it during our discussion. You should be praising her instead of me."

Van held my hand. "Just being able to recall her memories at this critical time is worthy of praise," he said, consoling me.

"Thanks, even though that's all I did."

Van became a big proponent of the hot springs plan. He suggested using wyverns as a method of transportation—an idea that I hadn't thought of earlier.

"I heard from Lady Opera that Diamant is under the supervision of a branch of your family," I said.

"That's correct. I've mostly corresponded with them through letters before, and I've only met the head of the house once or twice. I remember the family visited once when I was a child. My cousin Fenetra is my age, and I recall talking with her."

Fenetra was apparently a shy girl, and it had taken Van some time to get along with her. He also mentioned in passing that she had been a candidate for his bride.

"That all ended a hundred years ago though, when I got engaged to Charlotte." Suddenly, Van turned to me and apologized. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

"It's just that I noticed your voice getting lower and lower while I was talking about Fenetra."

I suddenly became conscious of it once Van pointed it out. Of

course, no woman would feel pleasant while her husband talked about a woman he had been close to.

“She might as well be a stranger to me. I don’t have any feelings for her,” Van assured me.

“I know that. You don’t need to defend yourself,” I told him. Despite that, Van still looked at me like a sad, wet puppy who had gotten caught in the rain. I ruffled his hair to cheer him up, and he suddenly burst out laughing like he was being tickled.

“Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha… Phew. We seem to have gotten off track.”

“We sure did.”

I began to bring us back to the topic with a suggestion. “Um, I was thinking of heading to Diamant to start laying out the groundwork for the plans…”

“Sure, go ahead.”

I was shocked that Van gave me permission so quickly.

“What’s wrong?” Van asked. He tilted his head and seemed confused by my reaction.

“It’s just that I thought you would say no,” I confessed.

“I’ll be going there too, of course, so there’s no need to worry about you getting into anything dangerous,” Van said. Apparently, his councillors had suggested that we go on a honeymoon. His work was finally starting to die down, so it was the perfect time for one.

“So, we’ll be going to Diamant, then,” he said.

“I suppose we are. Thank you for accompanying me, Van.”

“Anything for my beloved wife.”

After that, we spent some time happily making small talk. Our pleasant and relaxing evening continued.

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I watched a carriage set off, followed by a cohort of royal knights riding on horseback, from my window. That carriage was reserved for the Dragon Duchess consort. But since I was right here watching it from my window, its passenger certainly wasn’t me. A knight who knew magic had cast a spell on the carriage to make it appear that I was the one riding in it. In other words, a body double had been sent out in my place.

An event was being held today to celebrate the completed

construction of a new cathedral. A large crowd was free to come and go as they pleased, so I had decided to avoid the event and send out a body double in my stead. Even if there wasn't much of a crowd, there was no guarantee that it would be safe for me to attend.

I had also warned Madeleine not to go. I would be devastated if something were to happen to her because of me.

Additionally, a spell had been cast on the room I was in to repel anyone with ill intent. Van had spent three days developing this special barrier. Shutting myself off in this room was the safest course of action.

Lady Opera entered the room I was in just as the carriage went out of sight. She strutted across the room as if she owned the place and took a seat on the couch.

"Mille-Feuille, I see you have decided to skip the celebratory rites today," Lady Opera said.

"I did. I had a bad feeling about it, so I asked Van to prepare a body double for me."

"Ah, it was at your own discretion. I'd thought my brother would have been the one to issue such an order."

"Van would never force me to follow such orders," I told her. I had decided to be cautious as the event was organized by one of Van's councillors. When Van learned of that, he had approved of my decision.

"How unusual. I would have thought that my brother would take the lead in your relationship."

"There's no such power imbalance in our marriage," I told her. "If we have a disagreement, we talk it out until we reach a satisfactory solution."

"That is wonderful to hear. I wish I could show those old councillors my brother's attitude toward you."

As expected, her relationship with Van's council was also strained. It seemed that the voices opposed to Van in his council had grown louder as of late, and more and more frequently, council meetings were being forcefully cut short.

"My brother is being too stubborn, so his councillors end up crying to me for help," Lady Opera ranted. Not even Van's sister, the royal lady, could do anything about his hardheadedness. "Those old fossils in the council already know that they just need

you on their side to rein in my brother.”

“Well, most of them were against our marriage.”

“Indeed. They were pushing for that girl from our branch family __”

“Fenetra, right?”

Lady Opera had stopped herself before saying the name, and she looked shocked when I finished her sentence anyway.

“Why do you know that name?” she asked.

“I heard it from Van yesterday.”

“I’m embarrassed on behalf of my brother. How could he talk to his own wife about such a topic?”

“No, I’m glad that he talked about her,” I told her. “Thanks to that, I learned that the councillors haven’t been supporting me because they favor Fenetra.”

“Well, if you say so. I shan’t say anything further.”

A few moments later, Parfeil came in carrying two cups of hot milk.

“Ah, so this is the famed hot milk,” Lady Opera said.

“Please, have some,” I told her.

“Then I shall.” Lady Opera took the cup from Parfeil and blew on it to cool it down. Perhaps she had a sensitive tongue.

I sipped from my own cup of steaming hot milk. The gentle sweetness of the milk and honey filled my mouth. Lady Opera followed my lead and took a sip of her own.

“Th-This is simply exquisite!” she exclaimed, her cheeks slightly red as she showered Parfeil with praise. “Little bunny, you are a prodigy at making this!”

Lady Opera referred to Parfeil as a “bunny”—apparently, it was because she found the word cute and she liked the sound of it. Parfeil had never once complained about the nickname.

“Just as Mille-Feuille said, this hot milk really does calm you down. I thank you, little bunny,” she added.

“Your Highness, you flatter me too much. But I am glad that the hot milk pleases you!” Parfeil said.

I was about to relax when I noticed a commotion outside the room. It was followed by the sound of someone running down the hallway.

The door slammed open, and Van rushed inside.

“Mille-Feuille!” he cried out.

“Van, what’s going on?”

Before he answered, he rushed to embrace me. “I’m glad you’re okay,” he whispered into my ear.

Lady Opera raised her voice in protest at Van’s unusual behavior. “I would appreciate it if you two lovebirds were intimate with each other while I’m *not* in the room!”

“I wouldn’t call this ‘intimate’…” I muttered.

Just what happened? I felt Van trembling against me, so I put my arms around him in turn. I stroked his back to comfort him.

Roche entered right after Van, seemingly to explain the situation. “Lady Dragon Duchess, are you all right?!” Roche cried.

“I’m fine, as you can see. What happened?”

Roche began to explain the situation to us. “There was an explosion after the celebratory rites for the cathedral.”

“Wh-What?!”

Apparently, the incident had occurred right after the ceremony had ended, while the visitors were leaving the venue. A magic circle had been set up underneath one of the pews and had exploded.

“The explosion happened to be, uh, at the seat where the Dragon Duchess consort’s body double was sitting,” Roche continued.

“And then? What happened after that?”

“Your body double sensed that something was wrong and managed to avoid the explosion unharmed. No other injuries were reported.”

“That’s good,” I said. “I’m glad nobody was hurt.”

“If you had been there, I’d… I’d…” Van was crying as he held me. He had already known that I’d had my body double attend the ceremony instead. Still, he had been anxious enough to check whether I was all right.

Now that he was able to confirm my safety, his concern for me turned into indignation over the events.

“This is unforgivable! I will not let this stand!!!” Van roared in anger. His wrath reminded me of Vacherin’s when he learned of Charlotte’s death. I felt my chest tighten. Perhaps Charlotte’s memories inside me were crying out in sorrow. She must not have wanted to see him suffer like he once had. I felt that I had to live longer than he would, even if it were just one second more.

Roche continued his report. “We are currently looking for the culprit. We followed the mana trails at the scene and we found that the culprit might not be a dragonkin.”

The culprit might have commissioned an outside magician for the job. I want them to investigate that possibility too.

“Everyone, you may stand down. I want to be alone with Mille-Feuille,” Van ordered. Lady Opera looked exasperated as she stood up to leave. Parfeil read the room too and excused herself. Roche, after confirming the area’s safety, promptly exited as well.

Once we were alone, Van let out a long, deep sigh. “This is unthinkable. How could anyone assault the Dragon Duchess consort? Who would do such a thing?”

The air in the room was vibrating, possibly because Van’s mana was currently unstable. Some men could transform into dragons involuntarily and go on a rampage if they lost control of their mana. To prevent that from happening, I kept trying to comfort Van, telling him that everything would be fine.

Eventually, Van’s mana calmed down.

An explosion at the cathedral… It was hard to believe, but my premonition had turned out to be right.

“Van, wouldn’t it be dangerous to go to Diamant at a time like this?” I asked, voicing my concerns.

Van remained silent.

Right now, the safest place for me in the Dragon Duchy of Éclair was inside this room with Van’s protection. Hiding until the culprit was caught was the safest course of action. Of course, I also wanted to go on a trip and have fun, but perhaps it was best to just keep myself out of harm’s way.

That was what I thought, at least, but Van felt otherwise.

“No. I want to continue with our honeymoon plans.”

“Huh? But the culprit is still out there, and we don’t have any clue as to who it is!” I protested.

“I know, but I can’t stand the thought of this incident ruining your enjoyment. Besides, changing our plans out of fear of this attack is the same as admitting to the culprit that we are afraid. It would mean that we’re losing.”

“You’re right, but…”

I tried to come up with a plan to deal with this incident. If we went on ahead to Diamant, it was possible that the culprit would

follow us as well.

"What if you go to Diamant alone and survey the region without me?" I suggested.

"That's possible, but…"

Was he going to say that he didn't want to leave me alone? Van's large body hunched over, clearly expressing his sadness.

Still, this situation was out of our control. If I went to Diamant, I could expose innocent bystanders to danger.

If I weren't the Dragon Duchess consort, this incident wouldn't have happened.

If I weren't the Dragon Duchess consort…

"Wait. If the Dragon Duchess consort weren't here…" Suddenly, an idea popped into my head. "That's right! *I* just have to not go to Diamant!" I exclaimed.

"Weren't we just talking about that?" Van said, puzzled.

"We were!" *I don't have to go to Diamant as the Dragon Duchess consort.* When I repeated my thoughts to him, I was met with even more confusion.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I could go to Diamant as your personal maid!"

Van looked dumbfounded for a moment before realizing what I was saying. "Oh! Yes, we *could* do that!" he exclaimed.

"Don't you think it's a good idea?"

"It's an *excellent* idea."

Being right next to Van was much safer than staying in a room protected by his barrier. Not even the foolhardiest of fools would dare attack the pinnacle of all dragonkin.

"We'll leave your body double here and make the culprit think we're letting our guard down. They might try to exploit that opportunity to attack us," Van suggested.

"I'll feel bad for the knight tasked to play that role, though," I said.

"Don't you worry. My knights all have excellent combat capability and are flexible enough to handle unexpected situations. They were all completely unharmed in today's incident, remember?"

"Yes, they were. But still…"

As Van praised his knights, a certain detail stuck out to me.

"Sorry, did I hear that right? *Your* knights will be acting as my

body doubles? Aren't they all men?" I asked.

"That's right. The knight tasked to be your body double today was a burly young man too."

Apparently, they had also suspected that the culprit would see through illusion magic, so the body double also wore a dress for the occasion. I couldn't even begin to imagine how a beefy, muscular knight would look in a dress.

"Even if your body double were in danger, he could just transform into a dragon in a pinch," Van added. He assured me that there was no need to worry—any injuries they might sustain would be easily healed by magic while they were transformed.

"Mille-Feuille, you plan on bringing Madeleine and Parfeil with us too, right?"

"Of course," I affirmed.

"Then I'll prepare body doubles for them as well."

There were no problems with Madeleine, but would Parfeil's body double cross-dress and wear rabbit ears? I tried to imagine the three knights who would be acting as our body doubles and felt apologetic. I sympathized with their future plight.

"It seems I'll be causing trouble for your knights this time around," I said.

"Don't worry about it. It's part of their job," Van replied.

"That's right, but..." I made sure to ask Van to give extra pay to the knights who would be acting as our body doubles.

"We should head out as soon as we can," Van said.

"What about your work?"

"I can attend meetings through crystals, and there are messengers who deliver messages between here and Diamant."

Van also assured me that he had finished most of his work in preparation for heading out on our honeymoon. It seemed that he had opened up a lot of free time.

"For now, I'll leave the investigation into the culprit who attempted to kill you to the knights. Let's enjoy our honeymoon."

I responded to Van's words with a big nod.

Chapter 2: Will a Honeymoon Stir the Pot?

I had been preparing to lock myself up in my room until the culprit behind the explosion had been caught. As a result, Parfeil had been coming and going from my room to bring me food, tea, and books.

“Parfeil, I’m sorry about all this,” I said.

“Milady, please pay me no mind! We can’t afford to let too many people in here while there’s a threat to your safety!”

Parfeil was a former adventurer and mercenary, so her combat abilities were on par with the royal knights tasked with guarding the Dragon Duke. Even if she were to be attacked for being my attendant, she’d be more than able to strike back.

On the other hand, I wanted to avoid getting Madeleine into trouble, so I had asked her to stay home until we left for our trip.

Today, I was packing the things I needed for the journey. Merchants only went to Diamant once every three days, and they had to transform into dragons to head to the nearest town to buy goods. This trip made them add delivery fees to their wares, driving up their prices. All this meant that I had to know what I needed to bring with me—I wanted to avoid buying from merchants as much as I could.

Parfeil was folding linens into shockingly compact sizes and packing them into my luggage. This must have been something she’d learned as an adventurer. I watched her put her skills to work. She was also directing the white squirrels to bring my belongings into the room. I just wished the squirrels wouldn’t wave my underwear around like a banner, though…

“Packing sure takes a lot of focus!” Parfeil exclaimed.

“Everything you’re doing looks like magic to me,” I said.

Parfeil had been getting objects that I never thought would fit into my bag. I thought that it wouldn’t even close, but with a few hops from the squirrels, my luggage was sealed shut. I applauded their marvelous work.

“Parfeil, that was amazing! The squirrels were fantastic too!”

Parfeil let out an embarrassed laugh. “Thank you for the

compliment, milady! I didn't think my skills as an adventurer would come in handy here!"

"Me neither!"

I decided I should reward Parfeil and the white squirrels for their hard work. I gave the squirrels some acorns I had picked up from the garden. They were so happy they started dancing, though I wondered where they had picked up such dances in the first place. It was a complete mystery.

As for Parfeil, I gave her some high-quality chocolates. My mother had given them to me a few days earlier and told me to bring them out when Lady Opera came to visit.

"Wow! These are expensive chocolates from a really good shop! Is it okay for me to take these, milady?"

I leaned close to Parfeil and whispered a secret to her. "It's okay, you can have them. I was told to give these to Lady Opera, but she told me last night that she was trying to lose weight."

Lady Opera even had to pass on her beloved chocolate cakes. I was sure that she wouldn't want to take these.

Suddenly, the door opened with a bang. The white squirrels scurried away and hid in fear of the loud noise.

Lady Opera entered the room with large strides. "Mille-Feuille! I see you have been talking about me behind my back!"

Parfeil and I grabbed each other's hands, shocked by Lady Opera's sudden entrance.

Van opened doors like this too. I was worried that the hinges of every doorway might get blown off someday.

"I have no idea what you were talking about, but I certainly heard my name!"

"W-Well, yes..." I stammered.

And that was how I found out that Lady Opera had extremely good hearing. While dragonkin had senses several times stronger than humans did, the degree varied per individual. Van, for example, had a very good sense of smell. He could detect my scent in the library hours after I had left it. I would say that he was like a dog, but he would sulk if he heard that. And Lady Opera would certainly be quite displeased if I compared her to a dog as well. They *were* siblings, after all.

"So, what were you two talking about?" Lady Opera pried.

"Um, w-well... My mother brought me some chocolates to give

you, but last night you mentioned that you were trying to lose weight… I thought you wouldn't want them, so I gave them to Parfeil," I confessed.

"Oh! I-Is that so?" Lady Opera glanced at the box of chocolates Parfeil was holding, and I didn't miss the momentary glimmer in her eyes as she did. They must have been chocolates from a shop that she patronized.

Parfeil handed the box over to Lady Opera. The rabbitkin seemed to feel guilty about all this.

"Is that not something you received as a gift?" Lady Opera asked Parfeil.

"It is, but these were meant for you, Your Highness."

I watched them try and be generous to each other for a while before I finally stepped in with a compromise. "Why don't you two split the box between yourselves?"

"I do not need half. I will be satisfied with just one or two," Lady Opera said.

I glanced at her to see if she was really fine with that many, and she gave me a proud nod in response.

"Then should I make us all some hot milk?" Parfeil offered.

"That sounds great. Oh, why don't you make me some hot chocolate instead?" I asked.

"Wh-What is this hot chocolate you speak of?!" Lady Opera reacted with great curiosity.

"Lady Opera, have you not heard of it? It's hot milk with melted chocolate mixed in," I answered.

"This is a first for me! I would love to try some of this 'hot chocolate'!"

"You got it, Your Highness! I shall prepare two, then!" Parfeil said. Since she felt that it was a waste to use such a high-quality item to make hot chocolate, she decided to use chocolate bars from the kitchen instead.

It'd been a while since I'd had chocolate myself. Lady Opera and I excitedly waited for our drinks. After a few minutes, Parfeil returned with them in hand.

Lady Opera stared at the steaming cup with wonder in her eyes. "S-So this is hot chocolate…"

After relishing the chocolatey scent, I took a sip from my cup. I felt its gentle sweetness spread in my mouth.

Lady Opera, sensitive to hot foods as ever, followed my lead and took a sip from her cup of hot chocolate as well.

“Mmm… Wh-What is this wonderful drink?!” she exclaimed. “Little bunny, you must be some kind of genius to have come up with such a concoction!”

“Not at all! It was Lady Mille-Feuille who taught me this!”

“Mille-Feuille, so *you* were the genius all along!”

“Oh, I’m no genius either. I learned about this from Cha—rather, an old friend who used to love drinking this. Apparently, this drink was popular among nobles. I could never have come up with such a concoction on my own.”

“I see now. Still, this ‘hot chocolate’ drink is simply exquisite!”

“I’m glad it pleases your palate,” I said.

Parfeil and Lady Opera then began to divvy up the box of chocolates from my mother between them.

“I will be satisfied with two pieces,” Lady Opera said.

“Th-Then I’ll take one piece!” Parfeil replied.

“Little bunny, you may eat all of the remaining chocolates. As Mille-Feuille said, I am trying to lose weight, so I’m avoiding sweets!”

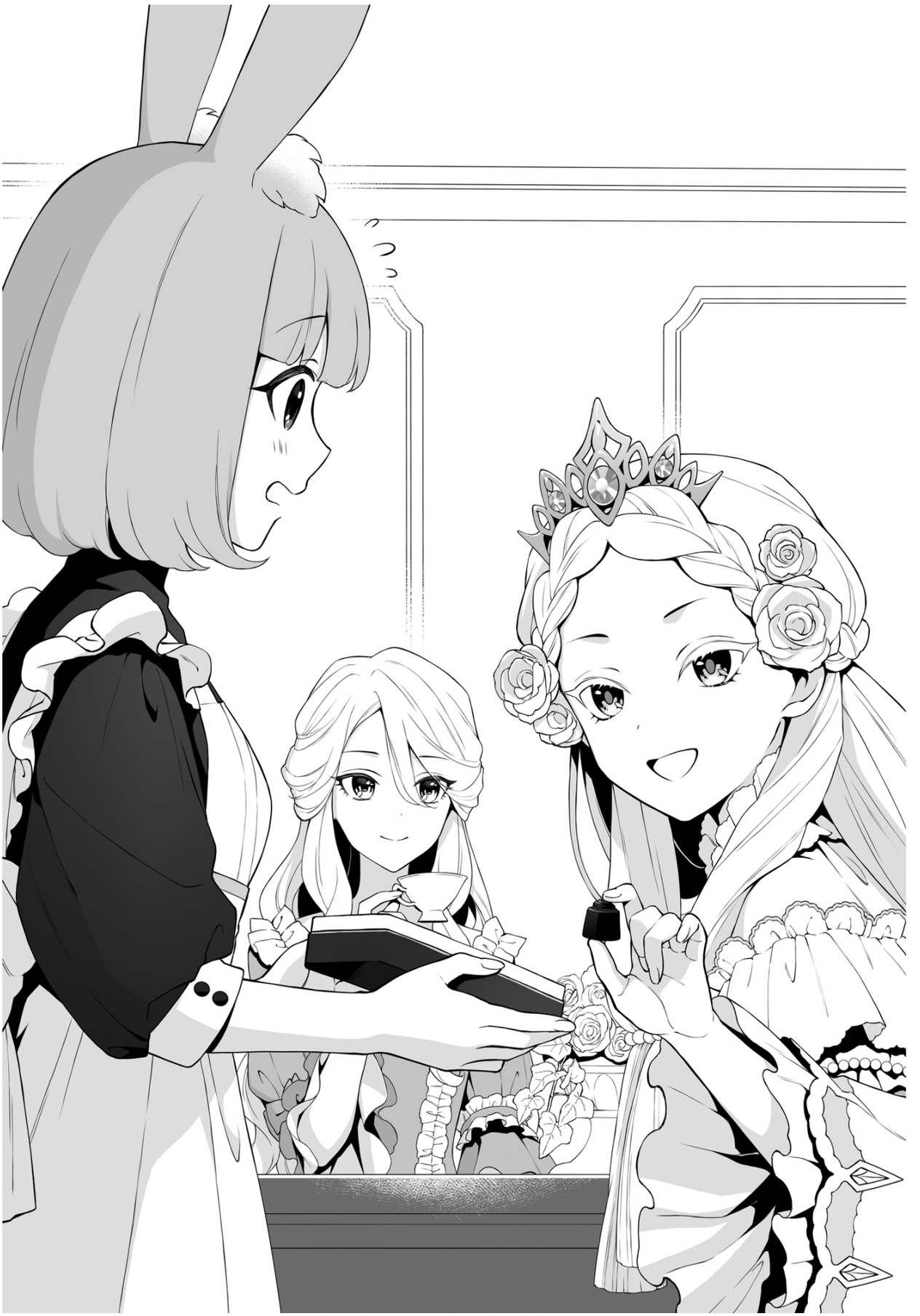
“B-But…”

“I have decreed it to be so! You need not hold yourself back.”

Parfeil looked at me with puppy-dog eyes. She was silently asking me if she could really take the chocolates.

“Parfeil, it’s fine. Lady Opera’s word is absolute. You should take them,” I assured her.

“O-Okay! I’ll be taking these, then!” Parfeil, never forgetting her manners, accepted the chocolates with a brilliant smile on her face.



Lady Opera continued to sip on her hot chocolate as she looked at the mess all over my room. “Ah yes, your honeymoon is soon, is it not?” she asked.

“Yes, it is.”

“Be sure to enjoy it.” Lady Opera was also glad that our trip hadn’t been canceled. Apparently, the royal lady wasn’t allowed to travel. “I have never gone outside of the capital. I am what you might call a ‘sheltered princess.’”

“I had no idea…”

Just as our conversation petered out, I came up with an idea and blurted it out without thinking. “If you don’t mind, would you like to come with us on our trip?”

“You mean, accompany you and my brother on your honeymoon?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Lady Opera must’ve found it to be quite the unexpected proposition, as her eyes opened wide in surprise. “Unthinkable! How could you invite your own sister-in-law on your honeymoon?!”

“Oh, but weren’t honeymoons formerly spent with each other’s family?”

In the distant past, a honeymoon was a chance for family members who couldn’t attend the wedding ceremony proper to see the couple. Family members showing up on a honeymoon was nothing unusual.

“I don’t think it’s too far-fetched for you to follow old traditions. We could take you to Diamant, where some of your relatives are,” I argued.

“B-But would you not find having your in-laws around to be an annoyance?”

“Not at all! I’m sure it would be more fun having you around. Madeleine and Parfeil would certainly enjoy it, and I know Van would too.”

“W-Would you really…?!”

Lady Opera’s cheeks were slightly red. She must have been really happy to be invited. I found it to be very cute.

“Then I shall be accompanying you on your honeymoon!” she declared, raising her fist in the air with great enthusiasm. She then sat down and softly added, “If my brother lets me…”

I could only laugh at her small addendum.

That night, after Van had finished his work, I told him about Lady Opera joining us on our honeymoon. The white squirrels joined me in making my case to him.

"Sure, I have no problems with that. I'm certain Opera would appreciate a change of scenery as well," Van said.

"Oh, thank you."

Lady Opera would still need to prepare for the trip, so it was best to let her know as soon as possible. I asked Parfeil to inform her at once.

"Are you sure you want to have an in-law around during our trip?" Van asked.

Upon hearing that, I couldn't help but giggle.

"What's so funny?"

"Lady Opera asked me the exact same question. I just thought it was funny that you two siblings are so alike, even in the things you say," I said.

"You say that like we're alike in other ways."

"You are. More than you might expect."

Van furrowed his brow, apparently unconvinced that he and his sister were two peas in a pod.

"All I'm saying is that I get along with Lady Opera because she's so similar to you."

"O-Oh, I see. Opera isn't the type to make friends with others easily, so…I'm relieved that you two are getting along."

It seemed that Van had been worrying about my relationship with Lady Opera. He'd even been wondering if he should intervene to help us get along better.

"The married men among my subordinates were telling me not to interfere with relationships between women, so I decided to just observe you two for a while. I did not expect you two to get along so well," Van shared.

"Perhaps we're friendly because we both love you."

"Ah, you're right!" Van exclaimed with confidence, but right after that… "I'm so relieved," he muttered under his breath. He and Lady Opera really *were* quite alike.

"I'm looking forward to our honeymoon," I said.

"Me too."

We started talking about what to do on our trip. Van had a pure

and innocent smile on his face as we did, just like he had during his academy days.

“Since there’s a lot of snow there, we should play in it!” I suggested.

“How do we do that?”

“My, don’t you know?” The snow at the Forêt Noire country house estate would often pile up higher than it did in the capital. During winter, my brother and I would often play in the snow. “We would make snowballs and throw them at each other, dig holes in piles of snow and make houses out of them, and make snow golems by piling one gigantic snowball on top of another.”

“I see. I didn’t know there were so many ways to play in the snow.”

“There are. It’s going to be a lot of fun fooling around with everyone.”

“I’m starting to get excited.”

“Right?”

I laughed at Van saying that he didn’t want to get hit by Parfeil’s snowballs. The thought of the pinnacle of all dragonkin being scared of the petite Parfeil’s attacks was hilarious.

“I could definitely see Parfeil unleashing a crazy snowball,” I said.

“She packs a lot of power in that small body of hers,” Van replied.

I nodded in full agreement.

As we were talking about playing in the snow, I began to feel sleepy. I’d had a lot of fun today. I ended up falling asleep while telling Van about my day.

Before leaving on our trip, we met with the knights who were to act as our body doubles. Madeleine wasn’t there yet, so Lady Opera came to meet them in her stead.

The three burly knights arrived, all wearing dresses. They were all men. One of them wore rabbit ears that swayed left and right as he walked. While I had no idea who was going to play whom, the one who would be Parfeil’s double was clear as day. If they had to go this far, they might as well have worn wigs and makeup too, though that wouldn’t have helped make their disguises more convincing.

The knights all looked like they were middle-aged. They must have been veterans within the order. All three had furrows between their brows and stoic expressions on their faces.

The white squirrels were terrified by the knights' presence. They squeaked and scurried away to hide behind the curtains. If only I could've followed their lead, I would've, but these knights were cross-dressing for my sake. I couldn't just avert my eyes.

Van began to introduce the three knights. "From right to left, this is Sir Chouquette Salée, Sir Saint-Honoré, and Sir Potiron. All of them are highly skilled, and they'll be able to repel anyone trying to attack them."

The three of them were to stay behind and continue investigating the incident. Parfeil and Lady Opera stared at me. They must have been telling me to give the knights some words of encouragement. I braced myself and picked my words carefully.

"Um... This must be a challenge for you all, but I hope you all do your duty well."

The knights all turned to me with sparkling eyes. The gazes they gave me communicated their sense of duty and loyalty. Were they inspired by my words because I was the Dragon Duchess consort? I had no idea.

In any case, I had fulfilled my obligation. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Next, I'll show you how they'll look once the illusion spell is cast," Van said. He gave orders to an attendant I didn't recognize. Apparently, she was a mage knight disguised as one of the attendants. She traced a magic circle in the air and activated it. A magic circle then appeared before the three knights and made a sound before dispersing. Immediately, the knights transformed from burly, cross-dressing men into ladies indistinguishable from me, Madeleine, and Parfeil.

"Amazing! To think that such magic exists!" Lady Opera whispered from beside me. Her next words were louder. "I see now. Well, this disguise should hold as long as no one realizes that this is an illusion."

I was surprised at Lady Opera's statement. I had thought that this magic was foolproof, but right before my eyes, their disguises suddenly began to waver. Their forms flickered, and the three returned to being burly knights in dresses.

"The illusion disappeared," I said.

“No, it hasn’t,” Lady Opera replied.

Van nodded in agreement.

That reminded me of something I’d experienced about illusion magic. Duchesse had previously cast a spell on me to make a venomous snake appear as a different kind of snake.

“So, once I recognize it’s an illusion, the spell’s effects will dull, correct?”

“That is correct. Illusions also do not work on those who possess a large amount of mana, like myself,” Lady Opera explained. Apparently, she had been able to see through the illusions from the start, so she had been nodding along and observing our reactions. “Although even I would not be immune to forbidden magic.”

Forbidden magic—magic that came with great danger upon its use. While restrictions on magic varied between countries, all of them restricted the use of dark magic. The use of those spells was forbidden except to those licensed to wield them.

“Forbidden magic aside, let us return to the topic of illusions.”

The attendant who had cast the illusion then reassured me, saying that other than Van, nobody else could hope to match the amount of mana that Lady Opera possessed. However, the illusion had wavered so quickly that I couldn’t help but worry.

Van seemed to have sensed my anxiety and offered me words of reassurance. “Mille-Feuille, there’s no need to fret. Everyone in the duchy was informed that our trip is only so that the Dragon Duke can inspect the Diamant region. Everyone believes that you’ll be staying behind in the capital.”

“Well, yes…”

Lady Opera was also going to come on the trip, so a body double for her was being prepared as well. In other words, other than a select few close to the Dragon Duke, everyone would think that only Van would be away from the capital.

***

The day of our departure arrived in no time. I began my preparations that morning even before the sun had risen. Parfeil was the only one who came to help me. I put on a frilly pinafore dress that matched hers.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, it’s the start of your honeymoon! I’m super-duper excited!”

“Me too. And Parfeil, you’re quite energetic so early in the morning.”

“Of course I am!” Parfeil exclaimed.

Last night, Van and I had gotten so carried away talking to each other that we’d ended up staying up late, despite knowing that we had to wake up early. I regretted that we hadn’t been able to stop ourselves.

We were to depart quietly before sunrise, too early for anyone to see us. Van had woken up ahead of us and was no longer in the bedroom. I had never been an early riser, so I was jealous of people like Van and Parfeil.

I had finished loading my luggage onto the carriage the day before. Still, it wasn’t like I was going to travel empty-handed right now. I called on my white squirrels to gather around me and they popped out from everywhere. One after another, they climbed all over me, running all over my arms and stuffing themselves into my pockets.

“That’s fifteen, and… Ah, there you are.”

I couldn’t carry all of them, so I asked Parfeil to help out. One squirrel cozied itself around her right ear. It must have looked comfortable, as another one curled around her left.

“Um, Parfeil, are you okay with the squirrels curling up around your ears?”

“I’m fine! But, milady, could you please ask them not to make loud noises while they’re there?”

“All right.”

I told the squirrels on Parfeil’s head about her request, and they raised their paws in response. I let out a sigh of relief that they seemed to have understood me.

I used a secret passage to leave the room without being seen. In the garden waited a carriage that would be carried by a dragon. With Parfeil’s help, we rushed to the carriage and entered. Inside, Van, Lady Opera, and Madeleine were already waiting for us.

“Mille-Feuille, you are late. I arrived here first,” Lady Opera declared.

“And I was second,” Van declared. The two siblings folded their arms, proud of their accomplishments. I tried to argue that it

wasn't even our agreed meeting time yet, but they retorted that it was better to be early for these gatherings. I let them win this time.

Lady Opera's outfit caught my attention. She was wearing a black wig and an unassuming dress. "Lady Opera, are you coming with us as an attendant?" I asked, to confirm my suspicions.

"Indeed I am! For this trip, I shall be hiding my identity and heading to Diamant as an attendant!" she announced.

Nowhere in the world would you be able to find an attendant this proud and haughty.

I glared at Van to silently ask him why he'd allowed Lady Opera to disguise herself as such, but he just averted his gaze. Perhaps he knew that it was impossible to reason with the royal lady and he'd had no choice but to let her do what she wanted.

"While we are staying in Diamant, I wish to be referred to as 'Aura,'" she said. "Do you all have pseudonyms?"

"We do. I'm 'Millefie,' Madeleine is 'Nene,' and Parfeil is 'Fel,'" I said.

"Hm? We're not calling the little bunny 'Bunny'?"

"That's..." I was ready to shoot down the idea, but Lady Opera looked so dejected. It seemed that she really liked her nickname for Parfeil.

"Um, I'm okay with that nickname!" Parfeil chimed in.

"Really?!"

"Of course!"

I asked Parfeil in a whisper if she was sure about this. She said that it was fine since it was just a fake name. I had to be thankful that Parfeil was a very kind person.

Now that *that* had been settled, I turned to Madeleine. "It's been a while."

"Yes, it really has," she replied. During her break from her duties, she'd returned to her family's home to prepare for her wedding. "Mother was upset at me for not thinking about my upcoming wedding more."

"I'm so sorry about that. I've been keeping you all to myself lately."

"No, it's not your fault. I've been putting your needs ahead too much as well."

According to Madeleine, taking a break had let her finish a

number of preparations for her wedding.

Parfeil pulled out a basket that she had stuffed under the seat and opened it up, revealing fallen leaves and fruit inside. The white squirrels jumped straight into the box, except for the ones on Parfeil's ears. They seemed to find it more comfortable up there.

Our carriage was made to fit eight people. Other than the five of us, three knights were there to accompany us.

Lady Opera looked displeased by that and sighed. "I suppose we cannot have this be a normal family outing."

Van addressed Lady Opera's complaint. "Roche says that if we don't have any guards accompanying us, he would actually be able to sleep at night."

"He is getting more than enough sleep!"

While I sat there, amused by the siblings' banter, I heard the signal for us to head out. The knight who would be carrying us in his dragon form must have arrived. I heard the flapping of wings outside. The carriage would be lifted up by a belt connected to the dragon's body. I started to feel the carriage moving upward.

Next, a number of knights riding wyverns took off into the air. They were dragoons—knights specialized in aerial combat. Roche was among them. I caught a glimpse of him from the side—his tense expression made him look rather handsome.

"I sure wish Roche could be this gallant all the time," I mumbled.

Parfeil, apparently overhearing my muttering, nodded in agreement. "He has a one-track mind for the Dragon Duke, so he really tends to ignore everything else."

"He'll never find anyone to marry at this rate."

"Ooh, I agree with that."

Roche was the eldest in his family and had no brothers. If he didn't find anyone to marry, his family would have no heirs.

"Well, if I order him to get married, I'm sure he will," Van interjected.

"That's true."

Outside, I saw Roche let out a big sneeze, seemingly in reaction to our conversation. I averted my gaze instinctively and ended up meeting Lady Opera's eyes.

"Are you talking about something fun?" she asked.

“Kind of.” I decided to ask her about something I had been wondering about instead of elaborating further. “Um, Lady Opera, what are your thoughts on marriage?”

“I would like to get married someday too. However, I still have not found an ideal partner.”

Since she’d never brought the topic up, I had thought all this time that Lady Opera had no interest in getting married. I was surprised to learn that she had been mulling it over.

“If my brother had wished for me to enter into an arranged marriage, I would have obliged him. However, it would seem that he has no such plans for me.”

Van, upon hearing Lady Opera’s words, nodded. According to him, he would approve of her getting married if she found an ideal partner. *How thoughtful of him*, I thought.

“What kind of person would that be?” I asked.

“Hmm. I would say someone strong, sincere, and loyal. It would be even better if he had an adorable side too.”

Upon hearing that, everyone else looked out the window. Roche—a strong, sincere, loyal man—was right outside, riding his wyvern gallantly. Perhaps he might’ve even had an adorable side too, one that was completely unknown to me.

“Brother, if you find someone like that, I would love to be introduced to him.”

“Well, uh, um…” Van stammered. “I *may* have a lead on one. I might introduce you to him soon.”

“Really?! Then I shall look forward to it!”

Would Van’s matchmaking for Roche and Lady Opera succeed? I couldn’t even begin to predict the outcome.

Our journey to Diamant was proceeding smoothly. I’d thought that Madeleine would shirk away from everyone, but perhaps because she had been getting along with Lady Opera as of late, she had been joining in our lively conversations.

We stopped by one of the Dragon Duke’s family vacation homes to take a break and eat. I peeked out the window and saw that snow had begun to pile up outside. There had been no sign of snow in the capital when we left. This area was in the northern part of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair, and winters could get very cold up here.

The dragoons alighted one after the other. The wyverns must

have been tired as well since they had been flying nonstop. I hoped they could all get some rest.

Immediately after the door was opened, a freezing gust of wind blew in. Van, who had disembarked ahead of us, spread his arms wide, signaling that he would cover me with his coat. I jumped straight into his chest. His coat was warm and comfortable.

“Is this warm enough for you?” Van asked.

“Yes, very much so.”

“That’s good. Let’s hurry up and get inside.”

“Indeed.”

A meal had already been prepared for us inside the vacation home. There, I was able to have foods I usually didn’t eat back home.

Lady Opera announced that she would be taking a long nap to refresh herself. She never missed her daily naps.

From here on, we would be heading into the deep snowfields. We had to change into our winter wear. I had picked out matching thick leggings and fluffy undergarments from my wardrobe, and my dress was made of warm velvet. Fur coats had also been provided for us, but we were only going to wear them once we reached Diamant.

Parfeil, Madeleine, Lady Opera, and the knights all returned to the carriage early. They hung up their fur coats on the walls for warmth.

Then Lady Opera declared that we would practice using our fake names. Madeleine and Parfeil seemed hesitant to participate, so I had to break the ice.

“Aura, how was your nap earlier?”

“I was completely unable to sleep,” she replied.

“Oh, why is that? I thought you never missed your daily naps.”

“That is true, but I have been so excited about this trip that I could not sleep at all!” Lady Opera said. She had been in a good mood the whole day and was all smiles. This was her first trip in a long time—and her first one with family or outside the capital—so I couldn’t blame her for being this elated.

“Millefie, Nene, Bunny, are you all well rested?”

I held back a giggle upon hearing “Bunny.” Normally, Lady Opera referred to Parfeil as a “little bunny,” but hearing her address Parfeil as “Bunny” had a completely different ring to it.

Even Madeleine and Parfeil were trying to hold back their laughter as they nodded in affirmation.

"Hm? Is something the matter?"

"O-Oh, Aura, it's nothing. It's just that you're quite set on that 'Bunny' name," I replied.

"But I already call her that all the time."

"You're right, but..."

Parfeil was the first to let her giggles out. I started snorting as well, and Madeleine had to cover her mouth. She was surely giggling too. Eventually, even Lady Opera couldn't stop herself from laughing.

"I am trying to be serious here, but you are all being quite rude!"

"S-Sorry, sorry!"

Van joined in on the conversation just as the talk about our fake names was winding down. "You all seem to be enjoying yourselves. Are you all having fun bad-mouthing me or something?"

"Not at all! We were just practicing calling each other by our fake names," I replied. I then warned Van not to call me "Mille-Feuille" during our trip.

"I'm not going to get that wrong," he insisted.

"You can never be too sure." I had picked "Millefie" since it was already my nickname, and it would make it easier to follow up if Van ever slipped up. "Also, I'm a lowly maid right now, so don't hang so close to me."

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

It would be awful if unwanted rumors were to spread, like people saying the Dragon Duke had a concubine disguised as a maid during his inspection of the northern lands. We had to be vigilant.

"It's almost time to leave," Van said.

The sun set early in this region and it would get dark soon. We needed to hurry, as the chances of monsters attacking us were higher while flying in the dark.

Lady Opera seemed to notice Madeleine tilting her head in wonder at that, so she asked Van a question in her stead. "Brother, why do monsters appear more often at night? Are they nocturnal?"

"No, that's not it," Van answered. While certain animals and

phantasmal beasts did become more active at night, that wasn't quite the case for monsters. "You're aware that the moon is a major source of mana and that its mana flows to the land through moonlight, right?"

"Of course."

"Monsters gain vitality from mana too, so they aren't as active unless the moon is present."

When monsters suffered from mana depletion, they attacked people. They did it for survival, since the body also contains a large amount of mana.

"That's why monster encounters are more frequent at night. Do you all understand now why we have to move quickly?"

Lady Opera nodded with a grim expression on her face. She seemed to have been spooked by the talk of monsters and leaned closer to the female knight. While we flew out into the night, she fell asleep.

We finally arrived at Diamant an hour later. We landed just as the sun was slipping below the horizon. Outside, the ground was covered with a blanket of silver and white.

"Wow, it's a field of white all the way to the mansion! It's like I walked straight into a fairy tale," I marveled.

"Those white stones were made by reworking perlite mined near the volcano," Van explained. The volcano was what we'd call a rare mont blanc—a white mountain. Rocks mined there tended to have a pearlescent sheen.

"I had no idea that Diamant had something this rare…"

Van then warned me that taking perlite from this area was forbidden so as not to invite the wrath of the Great Spirit of Snow.

"I'm so glad you told me before I took anything."

I'd been considering making the future spa's reception floor out of perlite as a selling point to visitors, so it was a disappointment to hear that it wouldn't be allowed.

"Even if you can't take the perlite, I can give you as many real pearls as you'd like."

I pretended not to hear what Van had just said. I felt like he would actually keep his word.

"Looks like our escorts have arrived," Van said.

I put on my fur coat and went outside. The doors opened with great force, and a blast of cold wind greeted me. The freezing

temperature made my exposed skin sting. *I should have prepared some earmuffs and gloves as well.* My ears felt like they were about to freeze solid. My skin was tensing up, and it felt like it was burning.

Out of desperation, I immediately clung to Parfeil as she was leaving the carriage. Parfeil, being a beastkin, had a naturally high body temperature, and her warmth was a small comfort in this severe environment. Parfeil held me in return, and now even my heart felt warm and comfortable.

Beside me, Van looked completely shocked. “Millefie, why are you embracing Bunny when your husband is right here? Are you cheating on me?” he asked in a demanding tone.

This was quite unexpected. *Does hugging Parfeil count as cheating to him? And how come he remembers my fake name but not the fact that I’m here as his attendant?*

“Lord Dragon Duke, is there a problem with the maid?” Lady Opera asked. Van seemed to be caught off guard by her question. Lady Opera continued by whispering into his ear. “Brother, you must control yourself. Please understand that she is just acting in the interest of her own survival. Our entire plan will be all for naught if we are exposed because of your overprotectiveness.”

“Y-Yes, you’re right. I will be more careful.”

Van loudly cleared his throat and headed toward our escorts—about thirty Diamant locals. None of the escorts were wearing thick fur coats like we were all wearing. Perhaps it was a sign that they were all used to the freezing cold.

The man who seemed to be spearheading the escorts walked forward. He was Marquis de Noisette, the head of his house.

Van went ahead and greeted the marquis. “I apologize for my sudden visit.”

“Please, you need not apologize! Lord Dragon Duke, all of Diamant welcomes you.”

Next, an elegant young lady with blue eyes and gray hair greeted Van. Despite the weather, she was wearing a formal dress. “Lord Vacherin, it has been a while.”

She must’ve been Lady Fenetra, the former Dragon Duchess consort candidate whom I had heard about. Her personality seemed to be the exact opposite of mine, with the extraordinary beauty to match. She appeared to be similar in age to Madeleine

and me, but a dragonkin's age did not necessarily match their appearance. I *had* heard that she was the same age as Van too.

Marquis de Noisette moved to introduce her. "Lord Dragon Duke, this is Fenetra, my daughter."

"Lord Vacherin, it is my utmost pleasure to see you again."

"Right."

Van's reply was curt, but Fenetra maintained her smile. She must have undergone training to become the Dragon Duchess consort since she was young. She then turned her gaze to me and her brows slanted, as if she had just seen something pitiful and pathetic.



Fenetra promptly whispered something in Marquis de Noisette's ear. The marquis's shoulders trembled as if he had just realized something important.

"Come, let us head inside! I am sure you are all freezing out here." The marquis then ushered us into their warm mansion, apparently feeling bad that we were freezing in the cold. We followed his lead.

Inside, the walls, floor, and even the ceiling were all made of pure-white perlite. It was almost as if we had entered the serene halls of a temple or cathedral. Now that I had looked at the perlite from up close, it seemed many times smoother and more gorgeous than it had appeared from afar. I felt even more disappointed that we couldn't bring it out of the region.

The walls and floor were dotted with polished magicstones as beautiful as gems. Magic circles were engraved all over, casting various spells that made living in this home more comfortable. Thanks to these spells, the room was neither too hot nor too cold—it was just the right temperature.

Van was walking far ahead of me. Usually, whenever I fell behind him, he would turn around and offer his hand for me to catch up, but this time he never turned around, not even once. Of course, this was something we had already talked about, but I still couldn't help but be a bit hurt by Van's cold attitude.

I can't keep going like this. I had to keep myself together, so I pumped myself up.

Fenetra kept herself away from Van and was walking with her father at a slight distance. I had only just met her, but I could tell that her manners were befitting of someone the councillors would recommend to become the Dragon Duchess consort. On the other hand, I could definitely understand why they would consider me an ill fit for the title.

Next, we were accompanied to the living room, with Van and Roche taking the lead.

Meanwhile, Fenetra took this moment to address us attendants. "I shall be showing you the room you all will be staying in. You may unpack your belongings there after a short rest."

I'll be doing as she says.

The rooms were made for three occupants. Parfeil, Madeleine, and I were to stay in one room, while Lady Opera was to be in a

different one with two guards disguised as additional attendants.

Once we were inside, a housemaid poured us some black tea. As we were about to settle down and enjoy our fragrant drinks, Lady Opera barged into the room.

She immediately regaled us with her opinion on Fenetra. “What is *wrong* with that Noisette woman?!”

“What did Fenetra do?” I asked. I thought that she had acted like a perfect lady, but Lady Opera didn’t seem to think so.

“Did you not see how she looked at us? She was looking at us like she had *won*!”

“She was?”

“Why would I lie about that?!”

I asked Madeleine and Parfeil if they had noticed such a thing, but they both shook their heads.

“Besides, why is a lady from a mere branch family giving orders to the attendants of the Dragon Duke? How insolent of her!” Lady Opera ranted.

“Oh, now that you mention it…”

While House Noisette lived in this mansion, this was still the Dragon Duke’s property. They were only tasked with managing this place.

“Did you not notice her tone?!” Lady Opera continued.

“I just thought she was being nice by guiding us to our rooms,” I replied.

“You are much too naive, Mille-Feuille.”

Now that Lady Opera had pointed it out, it *had* been strange that Fenetra had ordered us around. Maids and attendants were supposed to serve their masters. Normally, female attendants would be at the beck and call of the Dragon Duchess consort—in other words, me.

“That woman is overstepping her bounds just because the Dragon Duchess consort is nowhere to be seen. I would hope that she is not planning to steal that title.”

“You’re overthinking it. Besides, we were the ones who decided to visit in the first place,” I replied.

Lady Opera let out a big sigh. Apparently, she had a reason to be worried. “You may not know about it, but long ago, a selection process was held for my brother’s bride-to-be.”

This had taken place during the time Duchesse had sealed Van

away. “So many lives were lost in the name of becoming the Dragon Duchess consort. Many are still afraid to talk of this terrible chapter in the Dragon Duchy’s history.”

One day, about fifty years ago, Duchesse had suggested there be a process to select candidates among dragonkin women to become the Dragon Duchess consort.

“We received applications from over three hundred women, and among those, about a hundred managed to pass the initial document screening.”

The first stage had been a written examination. They’d intended to reduce the number of candidates by half, but an unforeseen incident had occurred.

“Someone had leaked the answers the day before. As a result, we had to cancel it.”

The event had gotten off to a shaky start. Apparently, even Duchesse had said something similar.

“Instead of the examination, the applicants were to undergo an interview. However, a number of applicants began quarreling among each other in the waiting room.”

The ones who had quarreled with each other had been immediately disqualified. However, the next day, an unthinkable truth had come to light. “A stimulant had been mixed into the black tea served in the waiting room.”

The drug had caused the emotions of those who had drunk it to go out of control.

“After that, a number of other incidents happened, culminating in a number of deaths.” Out of the five finalists, three of them had died unusually. It was unknown whether those deaths had truly been related to the Dragon Duchess consort selection process.

Even Lady Opera had been a victim of these incidents. “I had no involvement with the selection, but assassins and venomous snakes were also sent my way.”

The culprit behind these incidents had never been found, so it still remained a mystery to this day. Apparently, this was the entire reason that Lady Opera was unable to trust women who tried to approach her brother.

“And because of that, you served me that monstrous full-course meal to keep me away from Van,” I quipped.

“Th-That… I do feel terrible about that!”

“Still, I do understand why you would reject someone based on terrible experiences in the past.”

Besides, that meal had turned out to be delicious. I’d even suggested to Lady Opera that she make the snakes at the Forêt Noire estate a specialty dish at the capital, but she had said, “Perish the thought.”

Our conversation had gone off on a tangent, so we returned to the topic of the consort selection. “In the end, the selection was canceled,” Lady Opera said.

After all that, Duchesse had met with Van’s council, and they’d picked Fenetra as the candidate for the Dragon Duchess consort. “They tried to search for the culprit but never found them, so in the end, they picked a woman who never participated in the first place.”

Fenetra had nearly been selected as the Dragon Duchess consort, but she had stepped down on her own accord due to an illness. As a result, all talks of an engagement had been shelved.

“So that means Fenetra isn’t even trying to be the Dragon Duchess consort!” I argued.

“But that was fifty years ago! She has no reason to back down now, so she could be plotting it as we speak!” Lady Opera retorted.

“Yes, but I question why she would aim for the title of Dragon Duchess consort when he’s already married.”

In any case, Lady Opera insisted that I should be cautious around her. I decided to at least follow *some* of her advice.

“Anyway, we need to start looking for a source for the hot springs,” I said.

“And how are we supposed to find one?” Lady Opera asked.

“We’ll use this.” I took out a magical device that I had brought with me. It was a long chain with a magicstone attached at the end. The stone was cut into a hexagonal prism. “I call this my Spring Dowsing Device!”

Madeleine, Parfeil, and the white squirrels all let out cries of excitement.

A spell had been cast on the magicstone to allow it to find hot spring sources. It would have a reaction if it found one.

“An earthquake or a strong wind can’t move this device, but it *will* start swaying if it ever detects a hot spring source,” I explained.

This device was Van's handiwork. He had found time in his busy schedule to finish creating it.

"I see. My brother had been complaining about how expensive jewelry never moved you, and yet you were over the moon to receive a hastily crafted magic device. So this is the result."

"Did he really say that?"

"He surely did."

I had not expected him to complain about it to his sister. Until recently, Lady Opera had merely been venerating Van from afar and keeping her distance from him, but now they were unmistakably close siblings.

"I'll make sure to be happy whenever I receive something expensive from him," I said.

"I shall hold you to your word. Now, how exactly do we use this?"

"Hold the chain with your fingers and let the magicstone hang toward the ground," I explained. I used the device exactly as I'd explained, and it reacted strongly to the ground. "Huh? Does that mean there's a hot spring source right under our feet?"

"So it seems. Shall we start digging, then?" Opera asked.

"Absolutely not. Did you forget about the mansion that's already here?"

There must've been several places with hot spring sources in the area. I looked forward to the search. Although I wanted to head out with the expedition team as soon as I could, I knew I should work out our plans with Van.

Would he be free around dinnertime? While I was deep in thought, one of Fenetra's attendants arrived and informed us about the food. "Everyone, please head down to the third dining hall once it is time for dinner."

"Thank you for informing us," I replied.

There were still two hours before the scheduled time, so I decided to take a dip in the bath and get myself ready. Our gathering ended there, and we decided to spend time as we pleased until dinner was ready.

Two hours later, we all met up in the room once more. We all wore dresses that we had prepared for this trip. Even Parfeil had one, and the deep purple color of the dress we'd picked was a

fantastic match for her. Meanwhile, I chose an ecru-colored dress for myself. Lady Opera had said that it looked too plain, but I rather liked it. Since becoming the Dragon Duchess consort, I'd had fewer opportunities to wear something as low-key as this.

I wonder what Van would think of this dress. I'll ask for his opinion later. Or so I thought, but I was flabbergasted by what greeted us at the third dining hall. There was no grand banquet to welcome the Dragon Duke inside. Instead, servants were coming in and out of the dining hall, preparing a buffet-style meal.

"At this hour, nobody else will be entering, so you may all have as much food as you wish," Fenetra's attendant explained to us.

While I was spacing out, Lady Opera lost her temper. "Just what is the meaning of— Mmph?!"

I hurriedly covered her mouth and dragged her inside the dining hall. Parfeil and Madeleine shut the double doors behind us. The bang of the doors closing echoed throughout the room. Once I let go of the squirming Lady Opera, she let out a frustrated squeal.

"Why are we not having dinner with my brother?!" she yelled.

"That's..."

We were here at Diamant as attendants. Normally, maids and attendants would not be having dinner with the Dragon Duke. Still, the situation was different this time since we were here as guests, and many attendants to the Dragon Duke were also high-ranking nobles themselves. Treating us at the same level as House Noisette's attendants was a huge slight. Lady Opera's indignation was not uncalled for.

"I will not rest until I get to smack this Fenetra woman!"

"Aura, calm down."

"Millefie, why are you so calm and relaxed?!"

"I'm... I'm also upset."

"You sure do not look that way to me."

I had always been quite deficient in showing my emotions ever since I had been a child. Perhaps it was because of the things I had learned from my past life, but I was not the least bit shaken by these events.

Madeleine explained further on my behalf. "Millefie has always been quite emotionless, even when she was young. She never cried that one time when her father tried to carry her up high in

the air and dropped her by accident."

"Yes, that's right! Even when her father poked at a beehive and got stung in the butt, she just stared at him and watched!" Parfeil added.

"Wait, Millefie's father sounds like quite the character."

It seemed that the topic had switched from my lack of emotions to funny stories about my father.

"I have more stories to tell about him over dinner," Madeleine said. Lady Opera nodded in anticipation.

"This is the first time I have participated in a buffet," Lady Opera said. While there were indeed buffets at nighttime parties for socialites, someone as high-ranking as her would just have her attendants make a dish for her.

Parfeil explained how a buffet worked. "You see, a buffet is where you can get whatever you want from the table! It's the best way to have dinner!"

"R-Really? This is the highest class of hospitality that I just happened to not know about?"

"O-Oh, I just meant that this is amazing for us commoners!"

"I see. I understand now."

Several varieties of food were lined up on the rectangular table. Warm steam rose up from the food, and a spell had been cast on it all so it wouldn't cool off. The appetizer was duck meat terrine with small tomatoes topped by sprinkled cheese and basil. The seafood course was butter-grilled salmon, and there were meats stewed in wine as well. There were also bread and cheeses, fruit, salads, and then berry tarts for dessert. Considering that these meals were served for attendants, this was quite a luxurious buffet. Though we had our complaints about *how* we were being served dinner, I gladly ate the food.

Lady Opera, perhaps for the first time in her life, was the one putting food onto her own plate from the table. Her hands were shaking as she did so, but she managed to get delicious items cleanly onto her plate. Once she finished, she scanned the room.

"Aura, what's wrong?" I asked.

"There are no chairs or tables around here. Must we have to stand up to get our own food, but also keep standing as we eat?"

"That's right." We had to eat with our forks in one hand and our plates in the other, so all the food was cut into bite-size pieces.

“Servants have to eat in this manner to shorten the amount of time they need to eat and allow more people to use the dining hall.”

“I see. That is quite efficient.”

While we were talking, Lady Opera’s attendant had been checking the food for poisons. It was a simple task where they examined the food through a device similar to a magnifying glass. That, too, was a magical item that Van had developed.

According to the attendant’s examination, there was no poison in the food.

Once Madeleine, ever the relaxed one, had finished putting items on her plate, we began eating our dinner.

“I am still quite uncomfortable eating while standing up, but I shall persevere.” Lady Opera then began eating.

“That’s good to hear,” I said.

I started with the pure-white bread that I had been curious about, which turned out to be quite similar to the steamed cakes I’d had at the capital. It was fluffy and very tasty. A servant had just finished delivering more food to the table, so I took the opportunity to ask her about it.

“Is this bread a local specialty?”

“Yes, it is. It’s a local bread developed to save on firewood used for the oven,” she explained. According to her, it only took about ten minutes of heat to make. Normally, bread took about twenty minutes to bake, so it also conserved resources.

“I see, so it’s bread developed specifically for a freezing region such as here,” I said.

“That’s right.”

While the food was light in flavor, everything was still exquisite. Once I finished eating, I went back for dessert. The berry tarts were also amazing.

I wanted to have a talk with Van after our meal, but the servants were nowhere to be found, so I didn’t have anyone to ask to send him word. It looked like I had to give up for tonight. I was sure we’d have more chances to speak tomorrow.

There were three beds prepared for us in our room. Madeleine was a great sleeper, so she fell asleep immediately after lying down.

“Madeleine sure sleeps well,” I remarked.

“She looks like she’s having a comfortable one,” Parfeil added.

I decided that I should also get some rest since I was tired from traveling all day. Van had told me to sleep with Parfeil beside me every night. I tucked myself into bed, and Parfeil followed.

When I was young, whenever I couldn’t sleep because of nightmares, Parfeil had slept beside me like this. She was so warm and comfortable to hold that I would immediately fall asleep.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve slept together like this,” I said.

“It has! I remember being so surprised the first time you came to me crying, telling me to sleep beside you!”

“Was it because I was no longer a toddler but around seven or eight years old when I did?”

“Not at all. It was more because you let a beastkin with sketchy origins like me into your bedroom so easily,” Parfeil replied.

“I did, didn’t I? But I was never really scared of you. I don’t know why, though.”

When I was a child, I had found Parfeil collapsed in a back alley and had taken her back home. My parents had been very much against it, but I had used my special birthday privilege to keep her by my side. Parfeil, a former mercenary and adventurer, had been going from job to job. I’d thought that she would eventually tire of being my attendant, but she never had, and she’d stayed by my side to this day.

“I *did* make a pretty selfish wish to keep you with me, didn’t I? I did feel bad about that.”

“How about now? Do you still feel bad about it?”

“Not at all. Even now, I want you to stay by my side for as long as I live. But if you’re happier away from me, I will support your decision with everything that I have.”

“Milady…” Parfeil sobbed.

I had started thinking about these things ever since Parfeil had bawled as she congratulated me during my wedding. At that moment, I had decided that I should be able to encourage her to pursue her own happiness.

“Honestly, I hate the idea of living without you. But I hate the idea of you never being happy because of me even more,” I said.

“Please don’t worry about me, milady. I am very much happy being right by your side.”

“Parfeil, thank you.”

I embraced her and closed my eyes.

I think I can sleep comfortably tonight...

Grrr... My stomach rumbled.

Hearing that, Parfeil snorted. “Um, Lady Mille-Feuille, are you hungry?”

“I think so.” At dinner, we had all been responsible for the food on our plates. I had felt that it was uncouth to just pile food onto my plate, so I’d ended up eating small portions. “I guess I was just trying to save face. How embarrassing.”

“It’s okay, milady. To tell you the truth, I was too conscious of being judged, so I didn’t eat that much either.”

“I thought you were already eating quite a lot.”

“That was only two-thirds of the usual amount I eat,” said Parfeil.

There were no snacks to be found here. Even Parfeil’s stomach started rumbling. The sounds of our hunger echoed throughout the room.

“Milady, should we get some leftover cheese scraps or something in the kitchen?” Parfeil suggested.

“Cheese in the middle of the night? What are we, some sort of rodent?”

My white squirrels, hearing our conversation, woke up one by one and offered us some small fruits that they had kept for themselves. I thanked them for their generosity.

“Besides, we’ll get fat if we eat at this hour.”

“Yes, but we can’t help but feel hungry!” Parfeil countered.

I had to nod in agreement. She was right. We wouldn’t get fat from a small amount of cheese from the kitchen.

“All right, Parfeil, let’s go to the kitchen!”

“Okay!”

Madeleine was sleeping comfortably, so we made sure not to wake her up. I asked my white squirrels to act as her bodyguards. They took positions around Madeleine’s bed while they held vicious weapons like morning stars and clubs. Apparently, the squirrels had learned magic to let them store various objects, so they were able to carry around such weapons.

“I’ll leave Madeleine to all of you then,” I said.

The squirrels let out tiny squeaks in response, just barely audible so as not to wake her up.

I put on a gown, picked up a magicstone lamp, and headed out into the hallway. The lights in the hallway were off and it was completely dark. Strangely enough, I didn't feel creeped out by the darkness, perhaps because the walls, floor, and ceiling were all white. Still, this was an unfamiliar place, so I couldn't say that I wasn't scared at all. I walked while staying close to Parfeil.

There appeared to be a blizzard raging outside, but it wasn't cold inside at all. The heating magic in these hallways made use of magicstones, and the way it was set up must have been complex and high-level magic. Servants would usually be patrolling the hallways of a mansion like this, but right now, there was no one else to be found.

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen that many servants around since we arrived," I said.

"They might be running the place with minimal staff," Parfeil surmised.

We walked along the hallway with the assumption that the kitchen was close to the third dining hall. While I couldn't quite picture the layout of the mansion, Parfeil seemed to have memorized it already.

We did our best to quiet our footsteps as we proceeded down the hallway so as not to bother anyone. Then we heard voices talking in hushed tones. I tried my best to determine their conversation, but I couldn't tell who was speaking. However, Parfeil, who had good hearing, seemed to have identified them.

"Parfeil, who's talking?"

"Well, um..."

"Just tell me already," I insisted.

Parfeil looked hesitant and uneasy, but now that I had ordered her to tell me, she whispered the answer. "I believe it's the Lord Dragon Duke Vacherin and Lady Fenetra talking."

What?! I nearly shouted out my thoughts, but I managed to hold it back. *Calm down*, I silently told myself.

As I approached the source of the voices, I saw a man and a woman huddled against each other. There were no guards or servants to be found with them.

Without a doubt, it was Van and Fenetra. And to be more precise, it was more like Fenetra was pushing herself onto Van.

Fenetra then dropped an outrageous line. "Lord Vacherin,

would you like to spend time with me in my bedroom?"

A young maiden inviting Van—a *married* man—into her own bedroom was unthinkable. Even a young man and woman alone together in a room in broad daylight was already cause for scandal.

Fenetra was looking at Van with a torrid gaze. It was as if she were a completely different woman from the perfect lady she had been this afternoon.

What is Van going to do? My heart was pounding. I held my breath in anticipation.

"I'll have to decline your offer," Van replied.

"Oh, but you're here walking around this late at night. I thought you might be starving for the touch of a woman."

"Do I look like someone so desperate to be loved that I would lay my hands on anyone I could?" Van gave Fenetra a cold, unamused glare. His tone of voice was just as frigid.

At that moment, Fenetra pulled back. "I-I apologize for overstepping my boundaries! W-Well then, good night, Lord Dragon Duke!"

Fenetra then turned around and attempted to flee, but Van grabbed her arm.

"I will accompany you to your room," he said.

"Th-Thank you very much."

Though Van said that he would do that, he didn't bother to walk beside her. He instead sped off with fast strides, Fenetra right behind him, attempting to catch up.

The hallway went silent once more. I asked Parfeil what we should do now, but we no longer had the desire to grab cheese from the kitchen. Our strong feelings of hunger from earlier were now completely gone.

"I don't need cheese anymore," I said.

"What a coincidence. Me neither!"

"Let's head back, then."

"You got it, milady!"

We returned to the room and lay down, but I couldn't fall asleep. I just couldn't get that conversation between Van and Fenetra out of my mind.

I can't believe I caught Fenetra trying to seduce Van.

Was Lady Opera right? Was she really trying to take the title of

Dragon Duchess consort? Or did she just want to spend at least one night with Van?

I had no clue.

"Lady Mille-Feuille, you should get some rest. We still have things to do tomorrow," Parfeil chided me.

"I know, I know."

Unfortunately, I was now wide awake. I was trying to think of how I could go back to sleep, but Parfeil started patting my belly.

"Parfeil, are you trying to get me to fall asleep?"

"I'm doing my best, milady," she whispered. I couldn't help but giggle at her trying so hard to get me to relax. Even the white squirrels started patting my belly too, and I ended up laughing even harder. If anyone else were to see this scene, they might've thought that this was some kind of strange ritual.

"Jeez, you *all* don't have to try and make me sleep!" I cried.

"Staying up late isn't good for you, milady!" Parfeil replied, and the squirrels all went "squeak, squeak!" as if in agreement.

"All right, all right. I'll do my best to rest, so you all better go to bed too!"

I went and hugged Parfeil, and the squirrels squeezed themselves in between us. The sensation of being surrounded by fluffy creatures helped me doze off, and before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

The next day, we were all dressed to the nines as we headed for breakfast. Once again, Fenetra's servants led us to the third dining hall. Yesterday, it had been just us, but today, the house's maids were here.

"Please enjoy yourselves," Fenetra's maids said before leaving the dining hall.

I thought Lady Opera would be upset, but she just kept putting food on her plate. "It is a waste of time to be upset. We should proceed with our breakfast."

Thus, we had our second buffet meal.

Once we had returned to our room, Lady Opera could no longer hold back her anger. "What is with the way they are treating us?!" she roared.

This time, I couldn't help but agree. We had already been led to eat at a time when nobody else was, and now we had been told to

eat with the servants of the Noisette mansion. This was beyond insulting.

Lady Opera had apparently tried to protest our treatment but to no avail. “I ordered my knights to try and contact my brother, but…”

According to her knights, a large number of the Noisette household servants were stationed around Van’s guest room, so they were unable to approach him.

“No one is allowed to see my brother unless he says so himself.”

“They’re being *way* too conceited,” I grumbled.

Why are we being treated like this? I couldn’t help but be puzzled at this turn of events. Then, Lady Opera shared a ridiculous piece of information that one of her knights had obtained.

“According to my knights, House Noisette thinks that we are the Dragon Duke’s concubines.”

“What?!”

We definitely made it clear in our introductions that we are the Dragon Duke’s attendants, so how could they think that we are his concubines*?!*

Madeleine, apparently in shock, was holding her head in her hands. Parfeil stared blankly into the air. Lady Opera was furious.

“The first time she saw us, Fenetra was looking at us like we were pathetic creatures,” I recalled. Back then, I had thought that she was pitying us because we were cold. But apparently I had misunderstood—she was seeing us as pathetic, boorish concubines latching ourselves onto the Dragon Duke on this important trip.

“My brother must be keeping us at a distance because he is worried our identities will get revealed if he tries to take care of us,” Lady Opera surmised. If so, his decision had backfired, and now we were completely unable to get information from him.

“Millefie, what’s wrong?” Madeleine was worried about me.

To be frank, I did not want us to be dancing in the palms of their hands. We had to do something to get things going.

“We’ll be going out to look for hot spring sources,” I announced. I planned to take just Parfeil with me, and Madeleine and Lady Opera would stay behind at the mansion.

“I want to go as well,” Lady Opera said.

“We’re just going out to investigate for now. Once we know that

it isn't dangerous, we'll take you with us," I said.

"I understand," Lady Opera said. I thought that she would insist on going, but she was pretty compliant this time. "Madeleine, let us do some sewing."

"All right!"

We began preparing for our expedition. Just in case, I told them to inform the knights if we weren't back by sunset. I put on my thick fur coat to keep myself warm in the snow. I also wore a cap and a pair of gloves, all made of fur. My white squirrels stuffed themselves in my pockets and cap. Having the squirrels around made it even warmer than just the fur coat would've done—it turned out that they were quite useful for keeping me toasty too.

Parfeil put on a belt on top of her fur coat and sheathed a pair of short swords onto it. Normally, she would hide her weapons in her clothes, but there was a chance that we would enter an area where monsters would show up. It was safer to have them in a place she could easily reach.

"Maybe I should learn a way to fight," I contemplated.

"Don't you worry, milady. I will strike down any and all enemies who might try to do you harm!" Parfeil declared, full of confidence.

I felt relieved that I didn't have to fight her as an enemy.

Parfeil, as a former adventurer, started giving me advice on walking through the snow. "Just standing still in the cold will drain your energy. Even if you don't feel hungry, you should eat small amounts of food every now and then or else you'll find yourself collapsing on the trail."

Other than our lunch, I packed some chocolates, caramel candies, roasted nuts, cheese, and plain nuts into my bag. Parfeil brought a bottle and a magicstone so we could have warm milk at any time.

"Finally, we need to talk about how to deal with encountering monsters."

Parfeil handed me two paper scrolls. They were items that would let anyone use magic just by ripping them. She gave me one for defense and one for recovery.

"The Lord Dragon Duke handed these to me. If we ever end up in combat, please activate the defensive scroll and protect yourself. If you get hurt, please use the recovery scroll and treat your wounds."

Parfeil emphasized her next words. “Do *not* run from battle. Use the defensive scroll and stay still,” she said. “That should be everything,” she then concluded.

Sunset came early in cold, snowy places, so we had to go outside as soon as we could.

“I’m a bit worried about the weather,” I said.

Today’s weather was overcast. The wind outside also seemed to be strong, as the clouds above were moving quickly. I had heard that the weather in the snowfields was very fickle. If a blizzard was expected to come through later, we should just cancel our expedition.

“We should ask about the weather before leaving,” Parfeil suggested.

“Okay. Let’s do that.”

“You got it, milady!”

As we walked down the hallway with a map in hand, we ran into Fenetra and her attendants. When she noticed me, a faint smile formed on her face.

“My, are you heading out for a picnic?”

“You could say that.”

Fenetra was also dressed up. I asked if she was going somewhere too.

“I am about to head out with Lord Vacherin to inspect the foot of the volcano. Oh, were you not aware?” she replied.

“Unfortunately not.”

The gall of her to say that when all of House Noisette has been cutting us off from Van, I thought. However, showing my frustration would just play into her hand. I shelved my emotions deep inside my heart.

“It is overcast outside right now, but it should clear up soon. I hope you all have fun.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

The sky remained overcast outside. Was it really going to clear up today? Still, Fenetra was also about to head out, so I saw no reason for her to lie about the weather. I didn’t completely believe her, but I would rather not be cooped up in the room any further. While we were still anxious about the weather, we decided to push through with our expedition.

“Well then, I bid you a good day,” Fenetra said.

“Good day to you too.”

We parted ways with Fenetra and headed out through the back door. As we stepped out, a cold wind greeted us, and a world of white unfolded ahead.

“It’s a lot less cold than yesterday, but it’s still frigid!” I exclaimed.

“True!”

I already felt like giving up right after we had gone outside, but we had to persevere. With the Spring Dowsing Device in hand, we moved forward.

A special wax had been applied to the soles of our shoes. It was apparently made from the fat of the White Bear—a monster native to the Diamant region. Applying wax to the soles of your shoes prevented them from sinking while walking on snow. The cooks in the kitchen had given some of this wax to us.

White Bears lived around this area and occasionally attacked people, so knights were periodically assigned to hunt them down. The animal’s fur and meat had a beastly stench so they were unfit for use or consumption, but the fat was quite useful.

One of the cooks had informed us that a White Bear had been brought down about two weeks ago, so another shouldn’t appear for a while. Still, we couldn’t let our guard down. I put on a monster-repelling amulet that I had bought previously, though I had no idea if it was actually effective. The sales pitch of the jeweler I had bought it from had claimed that its gem contained a spell that monsters detested. I had no choice but to pray that it was the real deal.

We passed through the Noisette mansion’s garden and exited through the gate. Past the forest surrounding the mansion was a field full of snow.

“Wow, it’s nothing but snow, snow, and more snow!” Parfeil exclaimed.

“It really is.”

Parfeil’s ears perked up. It seemed that she had found something in the midst of all this snow. “Milady, there’s an animal right over there. I think it might be a deer.”

“Where?”

“To your north-northwest.”

“I can’t see anything.”

The creature seemed to have white fur, so I couldn't see it myself.

"Hm, its silhouette looked different from a normal deer..." Parfeil said.

"Maybe it's a species unique to the Diamant region?" I suggested.

"Oh, I see. That might be the case, then."

As we walked along our path, we encountered a small settlement. Apparently, it was a village with about three hundred residents. Of course, the houses in this village didn't use perlite for construction. Instead, wooden houses with red roofs lined the village's pathways. The fact that a place like this sat in the middle of a snowfield felt like something straight out of a fairy tale.

A number of large structures stood on the village's outskirts. It must've been a massive construction effort, judging from how many there were. I wondered what they were building here. *I should ask the villagers about it later.*

"Let's start searching around this village," I said.

"Okay."

If we found a spring near here, we could link the eventual hot spring resort with this village. However, we had no such luck. There was no response from the Spring Dowsing Device in this area.

"We sure haven't seen a single villager around here," I said.

"Yes, it sure is quiet."

In the capital, children would play around outside and enjoy the snow whenever it fell. Even the children of nobles were no different from the ones in the city proper. Everyone loved to play in the snow.

Perhaps since the snow was nothing unusual in Diamant, the children were all playing around inside their homes.

"Let's head for the forest."

"All right."

We'd only been exploring for a short while, but I was already quite tired. Parfeil seemed to have noticed this, so she suggested we take a break.

"We should have lunch too," I said.

"I've been waiting for this!" Parfeil exclaimed.

She immediately started piling up snow at a blinding speed and

flattened the surface of her pile with her swords. Eventually, she had made a dome out of the snow. Next, she used a fire magicstone to dig a hole into it. Once the inside had melted and become hollow, she once again used her swords to flatten the surface.

In the end, Parfeil had built a small igloo.

"It's been a while since you've built one, but I'm still impressed at your handiwork," I said, complimenting her.

"Thank you, milady!"

Whenever snow fell at our estate, Parfeil would build an igloo like this. We would often drink steaming hot milk while sitting inside.

Parfeil spread out a picnic blanket made of fur on the floor and beckoned for me to enter. It was a structure made of snow, so I wouldn't say it was warm, but even just keeping the wind out was already a huge improvement. All my exhaustion flew away once I sat down on the blanket.

"I'll be making some hot milk, so please wait a bit, okay? In the meantime, you can eat— Oh no!"

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

"Look at this!" Parfeil beckoned me over. The sandwich from the Noisette mansion's cooks had frozen solid. "The cold got to our food!"

"Oh well. I'll fill myself up with these chocolates for now," I said.

"No, it's fine! I'll just heat it up to defrost it."

Parfeil took out a magicstone stove and lit it outside the igloo. She then placed a rectangular bowl with a cover on it over the stove.

"This bowl lets you flip over fish and meat on the fire to cook both sides evenly, but you can also use it to toast bread and make it crunchy!" Parfeil explained.

"Really? I didn't know you had something so convenient."

"I sure did!" It seemed that Parfeil had come prepared in case our food froze. She put the sandwich into the container and started the fire.

Will this really make that frozen sandwich edible again? I stared at her as she toasted the bread over the fire.

"You spread some butter on the pan and put the bread on it. Then, you toast it like this."

“That sounds simple enough,” I said.

In just a few minutes, the sandwich had become a toasty brown color. Parfeil wrapped it in some wax paper and handed it to me.

“Milady, here you go! Have it while it’s warm,” she said.

“Thank you.”

Parfeil had also poured us some black tea, which she handed to me as well. Warm steam rose up from the cup, contrasting with our chilly surroundings. I blew on the hot tea to cool it down.

The bread’s surface was crunchy, while the sandwich’s contents were soft and gooey. The cheese sandwiched in between the bread had melted. The savory taste of the ham was also heavenly. Eating toasted sandwiches might’ve been even better than just having them normally.



“Parfeil, this is amazing!” I exclaimed.

“You think so?”

“I do! You couldn’t find anything this delicious from food stalls in the capital!”

“I had these a lot during my days as an adventurer,” she said, reminiscing a bit. Apparently, her food would often freeze when walking through snowfields like these. “I never thought these were *that* tasty back when I was eating them on my own.”

Eating during an adventure also meant that you had to let your guard down. It was best to eat discreetly so as not to attract monsters. Worrying about whether you’d be attacked by monsters was evidently not the most appetite-inducing thing.

Even the squirrels were getting hungry. They took out some nuts, cracked them open with their teeth, skewered them with fallen branches from nearby, and roasted them over the magicstone fire. The squirrels chattered happily once they could smell the roasted nuts.

They’re so clever for knowing how to roast nuts. I suppose they are phantasmal beasts for a reason.

Parfeil also stuffed her toasted sandwich into her mouth. Her expression loosened into a smile.

“Milady, you’re right! These *are* delicious!” Parfeil exclaimed. She had finally noticed the taste of her sandwiches once she was eating together with me. She thanked me for the discovery.

After taking a break and recovering our stamina, we resumed our search for hot spring sources.

We had been walking through the forest for some time when the Spring Dowsing Device suddenly reacted for the first time. We arrived at a small clearing, one just big enough that Van could land in it while transformed. The magicstone started spinning as it hung from the chain.

“Parfeil, there’s a hot spring source here.”

“Whoa!”

Judging by the degree of the reaction, it must’ve been a source that could support a very large spring. While the reaction at the Noisette mansion had been even bigger, the size of this one was more than sufficient.

We had to plant a flag here to mark the site. The flagpole was quite tall, so it wouldn’t be buried completely by the snow. Parfeil,

with her immense strength, stabbed the pole deep into the ground.

"Once we excavate the site..."

The hot spring will flow. And if it's too hot, we could use the snow to adjust the temperature.

I had thought we were going to have to travel all over Diamant to find an appropriate source, so I felt relieved that we were able to discover one before too long.

"We have to report this to Van and ask for permission to excavate the site," I said.

We had already made a few preparations for digging, but since this land was currently being managed by someone else, we couldn't just get started.

"I can't wait to see the hot springs," Parfeil said.

"Same here."

I looked up at the sky and noticed that the flow of the clouds had gotten faster. Our surroundings also seemed darker than they had before.

"Is it almost sunset already?" I asked.

"I *did* hear that at sunset, quickly gets as dark as the nighttime in cold regions," Parfeil recalled.

However, we had only just finished lunch. I couldn't believe that the daylight would be *this* short. Monsters would become more active once it got dark. We had to return to the mansion as soon as we could.

"Parfeil, we need to hurry."

"Ah?!"

Parfeil hurried to my side and held on to my hand. The moment we crouched down, a strong gust of wind blasted us.

"Ahhh!" we both cried out.

The force of the wind knocked us right over. Parfeil had moved to shield me from the gust, but I'd had no time to even check if she was okay.

A storm of wind and snow had arrived—this was a blizzard.

A chill stronger than anything I'd ever experienced before assailed us. The phrase "bitter cold" was the perfect way to describe the sensation. The whistling of the wind sounded to me like a requiem for those about to die from exposure.

We can't stay here like this. We'll die if our bodies get too cold. We'd

stop shivering first, get delirious next, and then lose consciousness.

My shivering was starting to slow. We'd be in real danger if we stayed exposed to the blizzard. Parfeil seemed to be thinking the same. She suggested that we should make ourselves get moving.

"Lady Mille-Feuille, please have some of these." She stuffed some chocolate into my mouth and then did the same for herself. The sweet taste spread in my mouth. "Milady, it's going to be rough, but we have to keep moving."

"Y-Yes, I know."

According to Parfeil, on the way here, there had been a spot with exposed rock faces. In that area, there had been an opening that looked like a cavern. Parfeil suggested that we take shelter there. I hadn't even realized that there'd been a cavern along our path. Parfeil must have been constantly taking note of every contingency as we had trekked along. Even while we had been in the forest, she had been tying red ribbons around trees so we wouldn't get lost. Because of that, we were able to find our way even in this blizzard.

We were fighting against the wind, so just walking forward was a struggle. The force of the gusts made it hard to even breathe, but I had to endure it for now.

"Milady, it's only a bit further!!!" Parfeil was encouraging me with all that she had. Thanks to her, I could move forward without despairing.

But all of a sudden, Parfeil stopped.

"Milady, you need to back away a bit and activate the defensive scroll," she told me.

I could tell that she was shaken, which was unusual for her. I tried to ask what was going on, but the moment she drew her swords, I figured it out. A monster must have appeared.

I stood back and activated the defensive scroll as Parfeil had instructed. A semicircular wall appeared and surrounded me. It seemed that it could even block the wind and cold that had been tormenting me all this time.

Parfeil didn't move a muscle. The blizzard must have been terrible for visibility, which prevented her from making a preemptive strike.

A dark silhouette appeared from the white snow. I looked up to see a gigantic White Bear standing there. Its gaze was sharper

than a normal bear's, and fangs as sharp as knives poked out of its mouth. Its claws were more like daggers.

The White Bear roared and attacked Parfeil. It raised its paws and swiped at her with great force. Parfeil dodged it gracefully. She landed in a nearby tree, adjusted her position atop a thick branch, and launched a counterattack on the White Bear. Her first strike slashed the bear's right eye, and the second rent its neck. However, its thick fur prevented her slash from making any more progress.

The White Bear began its rampage. It let out another roar and swiped its paws one after the other. Parfeil managed to dodge all of its swipes, but she dropped the sword in her right hand as she was being pushed back. Her left sword was also knocked away as she tried to parry one of the bear's attacks.

Parfeil was now cornered and empty-handed. Without mercy, the White Bear lifted its paw and slashed at her stomach. Red blood scattered in the wind of the blizzard.

"Parfeil!!!"

Without thinking, I ran straight to her side. Her coat had been ripped open and blood was flowing out of her torso. I did my best to stop the bleeding. I also grabbed my bag and tried to dig for the recovery scroll.

Then a chill ran up my spine. The White Bear was now looking down at us. The clawed paw that had slashed Parfeil was raised and ready to strike again.

It's over.

I gritted my teeth and waited for the killing blow to come.

I waited...but it never came. Instead, a strong gust of wind blew by. A large shadow passed over us, and I saw a great silver dragon flying in the sky. It circled around before descending, grabbed the White Bear with its teeth, and flew back up into the air.

The dark clouds parted, giving way to clear skies. The terrible blizzard dissipated.

That great dragon had unmistakably been Van. He had come to rescue us.

The dragon incinerated the White Bear with its breath attack and reduced the monster to ashes.

My sense of relief only lasted for a moment. I had to hurry and tend to Parfeil.

“Squeak!”

A white squirrel handed me the recovery scroll. They had dug through my bag to get it.

“Thank you!” I said and tore apart the scroll. A magic circle appeared above Parfeil’s wounds and healed them in no time. Parfeil’s eyes, which had been shut in pain this entire time, now twitched.

“Ugh…”

“Parfeil, are you okay?”

In response to my question, Parfeil opened her eyes. “Milady… Wh-What about you?”

“I’m fine, all thanks to you!”

“I see… That’s good…” Parfeil muttered before closing her eyes once more. Her pulse seemed to have stabilized. She had probably gone unconscious due to the amount of blood that she had lost. Just in case, I tore open a second recovery scroll to help her get better. I also embraced her tightly to keep her warm.

“Millefie!”

I then heard Madeleine’s voice, so I turned around. She was trudging through the snow in her dress. A number of knights had also arrived, and they took Parfeil to care for her.

I started feeling relieved, but then my vision started to waver.

“Mille-Feuille!”

I thought I heard Van, but I had no time to check and make sure.

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“Hey, you squirrels, get away from her. You’ll wake her up.”

“Squeak…”

I woke up to the sound of Van’s gentle voice and my squirrels’ sad squeaks. Light was pouring in from the window. Apparently, I had been out cold since yesterday afternoon. My awakening this morning was turning out to be quite pleasant.

“Mille-Feuille! Are you awake?!”

“I am.”

“Are you hurting anywhere?”

“I’m fine. What about Parfeil?”

“Bunny is in stable condition. She’ll be fine once she gets some

rest."

"I see. That's good to hear..."

According to Van, Parfeil had already woken up, eaten some food, and gone back to sleep. A doctor had already examined her and said that she'd recover after a full day's rest. Her wound apparently wouldn't leave a scar, perhaps because a recovery scroll had been used on her immediately. It was no longer causing her any pain either. I felt relieved once I heard all this.

"I was so surprised that you all showed up out of nowhere," I said.

"Lady Madeleine looked panicked when she came to talk to me."

Parfeil and I had been getting late in coming back, so she had apparently decided to talk to Van directly. I wondered how she'd dealt with the servants who had been blocking the way to him.

"She came in with such vigor that my knights were shocked. I thought she was a quiet girl, but she's quite reckless when she knows you're in danger."

"Yes, she is. I'm proud that she's my best friend," I gloated.

Van pouted in response to my compliment for Madeleine. "But *I* was the one who rescued you!"

"And I'm very thankful for that, Van. I'm grateful from the bottom of my heart," I replied.

"And?"

"Um... And I'm proud that you're my husband. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, it does." He nodded, pleased.

Is he really satisfied with a line that he practically made me say? Ah well, he's smiling, so it's fine.

I tried to get up, but Van tugged on my arm and pulled me into his tight embrace.

"I'm glad you're okay," he whispered into my ear.

"I'm sorry for making you worry," I replied.

I'd thought that he would be upset at me, but he just kept me in his arms. After a while, he released me.

"It's quite a feat that you managed to find us," I said.

"Mille-Feuille, you know I'll find you wherever you might be," Van replied.

"And just how exactly are you able to do that?"

“From the scent trail of your mana, of course.”

According to Van, he could detect my scent easily while I was close to him, but it became weaker the further I was. However, it was much easier to detect while he was in dragon form.

“I just sniffed around and found your trail,” Van said proudly, even though his method of finding me was exactly the same way a dog would.

“If Madeleine had been just a few seconds late in telling you, we would’ve been goners.”

“Indeed. Should I call the young lady in?”

“Yes, please do.”

“Okay. But get some rest for the rest of the day,” Van advised me before leaving the room.

A few moments later, Madeleine entered.

“Millefie!!!” She ran over to me and gave me a tight hug. “I am so glad that you’re okay!”

“I wasn’t hurt at all. I’m sorry for worrying you.”

Madeleine tightened her embrace in reply.

I patted her back to soothe her. “I’m really sorry for causing so much trouble,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you’re fine.”

It seemed that Madeleine had gallantly faced off against the servants of House Noisette. The servants had refused to budge despite Madeleine saying that she wouldn’t leave until she saw Van, so she’d tackled a man larger than her and managed to enter Van’s room.

“I went into the Dragon Duke’s room without even knocking, but I have no regrets because I knew you were in danger.”

“Madeleine, I can’t thank you enough.” She had saved my life. We would’ve been bear food by now if it hadn’t been for her.

“Oh, but weren’t you hurt back there?” I asked with concern for her.

“Yes, but I’m fine, as you can see! I have been training, after all!”

“You were *training*?”

“I am! Do you remember when I bumped into the Lord Dragon Duke and fell over? Since then, I’ve been thinking that I should get stronger!”

Madeleine had talked to her fiancé—my brother—and had asked him about ways of training her own body.

“I ran laps around the mansion, pulled on ropes tied to trees, splashed my feet around in the bath, and practiced how to land falls safely on my bed before sleeping,” she explained.

“That’s quite a serious regimen,” I said, impressed. I had imagined her training to have included more ladylike activities such as dancing or playing a heavy musical instrument, so I was surprised at the intensity she’d described.

Even more shocking was that my quiet and bookish brother had been the one to suggest it. Apparently, he had wanted to solve his lack-of-exercise problem too, so he had already been trying out a number of those techniques. I had never seen him work out before. Perhaps that was a side of him that he only showed to his fiancée.

“It seems that my training has borne fruit since I no longer get thrown aside when bumping into people,” Madeleine said with a flush as she talked about the results of her training.

“Madeleine, that’s amazing.”

“I’ve also put on some muscle lately, so I added some more exercises and have been working out for longer in general as well.” Her goal was apparently to be strong enough to protect me.

What’s going to happen if she becomes all burly and muscular from her training? If that happens, I’ll be sure to complain to my brother.

“Anyway, I heard that a White Bear had just been hunted down in the area, so why did such a huge one show up to attack us?” I wondered.

“Apparently, that wasn’t actually a White Bear that you encountered.” Madeleine relayed what she had heard from Parfeil after bringing her food. “It was probably just an albino giant bear.”

“You mean it was a regular bear? Not a monster?”

“Yes. The Lord Dragon Duke also agreed with Parfeil’s assessment.”

“But its fangs were as sharp as knives!”

“So I heard. Apparently, some townspeople in Diamant have fallen victim to it as well,” Madeleine said.

That particular violent bear had been known as one of “the Burrowless” as it didn’t hibernate in its burrow in winter and would attack and eat people instead. Even White Bears feared that creature.

“Parfeil seems to have fought it assuming that it was a White

Bear, which backfired on her," Madeleine concluded.

"I see..."

The normal way to hunt a monster involved destroying their core, where their mana was stored. For White Bears, that core was in their neck, so Parfeil had aimed for that first. However, her enemy had turned out to be a normal bear, so it would have been best to aim for its head where there was little fat. It was no surprise that attacking its neck had had little effect.

A knight brigade had encountered that bear before and they had only managed to drive it back to the forest. House Noisette was apparently incredibly grateful to Van now that he had killed the creature.

"Still, what a disaster. We got stranded in a blizzard *and* ran into one of the Burrowless," I lamented.

"Indeed. Parfeil also talked about that when she woke up. Lady Fenetra even said that it would clear up today, right?"

"She did. But the weather *is* pretty fickle in places where the snow is deep." It had been my own decision to push through with the expedition, not because I had believed Fenetra. Still, having heard that Van had gone out to inspect the volcano had been a big factor in deciding to go.

"I'm glad that Van returned safely from their expedition," I said.

"About that... The Lord Dragon Duke had no plans for an expedition and stayed at the mansion the entire time."

"What?!"

Madeleine had apparently heard this from Parfeil and confirmed it with Van. Apparently, the expedition had been canceled due to terrible weather.

"The expedition had already been canceled by the time you two went out," Madeleine added.

"That would mean that Fenetra lied to us when she said that they would be going out."

"Most likely."

"Fenetra was also dressed up when we ran into her, so I was quite convinced that she was going to head out," I recalled.

"Maybe the delay was confirmed after she had already gotten dressed?" Madeleine suggested.

"Maybe."

"Or, maybe, um... Maybe she woke up early and got dressed,

but then she heard that the trip was canceled, so she lied to you so she could feel better about herself."

To be fair, if I had woken up early, put on some makeup, and styled my hair only to find out that my plans for the day had been canceled, I would also be upset. That wouldn't excuse her taking that irritation out on other people, though.

"I'm so sorry for chatting with you so much right after you woke up," Madeleine said.

"It's fine. I wasn't hurt anyway."

So much had happened, and in such quick succession too, that my brain had been unable to keep up. I had ended up passing out. I'd been so excited about the trip to Diamant that I had barely been able to get any sleep, so I had ended up sleeping like a log.

"Are you hungry?" Madeleine asked.

"Hmm... I don't *feel* hungry," I replied.

"Then I'll get you something easy to digest, like soup. I'll ask the servants to prepare you some."

"Okay. Thank you."

"No problem!"

Once Madeleine left, my white squirrels started walking around the room to check if everything was okay this time. When I told them that there was no problem, they each raised a paw and squeaked in unison.

I felt like I'd recovered enough to walk around, but both Van and Madeleine had told me to rest for the remainder of the day. I'd caused both of them trouble, so staying put would be a way to make it up to them.

I started brushing the white squirrels to entertain myself. I combed their backs, then flipped them over to brush out their undersides. The fur on their heads was pretty short, so it was sufficient to stroke it with my fingers. The squirrels I had finished brushing out began to comb my hair with their claws too, perhaps as thanks for brushing them. I was surprised that my hair looked so refreshed and shiny afterward. I wondered if they knew some kind of advanced brushing techniques. Come to think of it, their fur was always quite shiny...

After finishing up with the last squirrel, I was left with free time once more. I'd already been sleeping since yesterday afternoon, so there was no way I could go back to bed.

I should've brought a book with me, I thought.

Suddenly, I heard some knocking coming from the glass door of the balcony. I thought it might have been a bird pecking at the glass, but I was shocked at what I saw there.

A tiny silver dragon was on the other side of the balcony door.

I could only think of one dragon with such a beautiful silver color—Van. I opened the door along with my squirrels, and the little dragon jumped straight into my arms.

"Mille-Feuille!" the little dragon cried.

"Van, why do you look like that?!"

"I thought I would check up on you and see if you were being good, so I shrunk myself to keep watch over you in secret."

"In secret? I could hear you knocking on the door with your claws."

"I might have knocked against something when I tried to peek in."

Van's adult dragon form was massive and rugged, but as a small dragon, his body was soft and mushy. His scales felt more like high-quality silk and were soft to the touch.

I'd once heard that dragonkin mothers raising children were quite fierce and vicious to protect them. Seeing Van as a tiny baby dragon *did* stoke my motherly instincts. I felt like I wanted to keep him safe.

I lifted up the tiny Van and carried him over to the couch. It felt mysteriously comforting when I placed him on my lap.

"Ho ho. I had thought that placing you on my lap felt sublime, but it's not half bad being in your lap like this," Van said.

"This is only for today."

"I know."

I could keep petting him like this forever... Oops, I can't keep playing around with him this way!

"Van, is it all right for you to be here?"

"It's not a problem. I don't have any urgent work to do."

"Weren't you going to go on an expedition?"

"It's been canceled," Van said.

"Not just delayed?" I asked.

"That's right. They've been checking for other Burrowless bears."

"I see..."

Van, bored as he was, had tried to go to my room, but one of the House Noisette butlers had told him to not wander around the place.

“They told me to stay put in my room as there were merchants coming in and out of the house. Security around the mansion isn’t perfect.”

How could a mere butler restrict the activities of their own guest? And the Dragon Duke, even? I was speechless at how brazen they were.

“This is the second time I’ve headed to your room, so I thought I’d transform into a smaller form so as not to attract attention.”

“I’m surprised that Roche let you do all this,” I said.

“Roche is right over there.”

Van pointed at the balcony. There, a small red dragon was clutching itself in embarrassment.



“Huh? Roche is that tiny dragon?! There’s no way.”

“It’s the truth.”

I picked up Van and approached the tiny red dragon, but it scurried away into the door’s shadow.

“Oh my, this dragon’s so cute!”

“L-Lady Dragon Duchess consort… Please have mercy on me!” Roche curled up into a ball to hide himself, but it only served to make him look *more* adorable.

“Come closer and talk with me.” I beckoned him.

“I-I-I must not set foot in the Dragon Duchess consort’s private quarters!” Roche stammered.

“I’m not the Dragon Duchess consort today. I am just another attendant,” I said.

“Well, it would be rude to enter the room of a lady, even if it is that of an attendant!”

Seeing Roche be this modest and reserved made the brash and belligerent Roche who had previously bickered with me feel like a distant and nostalgic memory.

While I was impressed with his upright character, his staying outside in this freezing weather might’ve ended up with him catching something more life-threatening than the common cold. Van resorted to a rough and violent method to deal with this—he carried the balled-up Roche and threw him into the room. After that, he picked Roche up once more and tossed him onto a nearby chair.

“I didn’t want to be seen like this by the Dragon Duke and Dragon Duchess consort…” Roche lamented.

“Oh, but it suits you very well,” I said.

“I think you look even better than you usually do,” Van added.

“H-How could this be…?”

Van and I were doting on the tiny Roche when we heard an energetic knock on the door. Before I could even say anything in response, the door burst open.

“Millefie! Are you well?!”

Lady Opera barged into the room. She brought with her a cart with a bowl of soup on top. Van, who had been sitting on my lap, looked shocked at the unexpected arrival of his sister. Lady Opera found him before he even had a chance to hide.

“Millefie, why is that small dragon sitting atop your lap?!”

“Oh, uh, th-this? Umm…”

Lady Opera bent over and examined Van in his tiny form. “This dragon looks completely identical to my brother!”

“He does, doesn’t he?”

“I’ve figured it out.” Lady Opera then pointed a finger at Van and announced her discovery. “This must be your child with my brother! I heard that you collapsed yesterday. Was it because you went into labor?!”

Lady Opera’s speculations left me speechless. I wondered just what exactly she had learned about pregnancy and childbirth to think that.

I lifted Van up and glared at him.

Perhaps feeling guilty, he averted his eyes. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“Whoa, it can *talk*?!” Lady Opera exclaimed.

“Aura, this is not my child with Van.”

“What?! But he looks exactly like him!”

“That’s because it *is* him,” I insisted.

“B-Brother?! Is that you?!” Lady Opera poked Van’s tummy to confirm my statement. “I could have sworn that my brother was not this squishy,” she said.

“He can change his size at will,” I explained.

“I see! How could I not have known this?” she said. Then, she quietly muttered, “I need to learn more about dragonkin…”

Forget learning about dragonkin—I think her sex education needs work, I thought.

The conversation could have ended there, but an unexpected party then weighed in on the topic.

“Only the Dragon Duke is able to change his size at will!” Roche proudly declared. Apparently, Van’s magic had let him change size too.

It seemed that Lady Opera only noticed Roche’s presence just then, and her eyes glittered as she looked at him.

“Oh, what an adorable little creature!” she said, approaching Roche with outstretched arms. She lifted him up and began rubbing him against her cheek. “This one is so squishy!” she exclaimed.

“Um! P-Please refrain from touching me! I am a proud knight of the Dragon Duke!” Roche protested.

“I did not know that there was such an adorable knight among my brother’s guards!”

Lady Opera seemed to love Roche’s tiny dragon form. She held him tightly and wouldn’t let go.

Perhaps I should tell her that it’s Roche. I glanced at Van, but he only snickered.

Oh, right. I then recalled that Van was going to introduce Lady Opera to the perfect partner. It appeared that Van had been trying to act as their matchmaker from the start.

Roche was from one of the Four Great Noble Families, so there would be no problem when it came to status. He adored Van, and he tended to become belligerent whenever anyone opposed the Dragon Duke. While he could be childish and sometimes stubborn to a fault, he had more than enough qualifications to be Lady Opera’s husband.

“In any case, Millefie, I have brought you some soup,” she told me.

On the way here, Lady Opera had encountered the maid who was supposed to bring me soup. She had volunteered to bring it to me instead and had to push a cart for the first time in her life. She pulled out the object reminiscent of a magnifying glass to check it for poison, and once she confirmed that it was safe, she handed me the bowl of soup.

“They said that this is carrot potage,” Lady Opera said.

“Thank you.”

Though I didn’t feel hungry, I decided to have some. The rich and sweet potage consisted of minced carrots, milk, cream, and bouillon, all mixed and boiled together. The moment I tasted it, I realized that my body had been wanting food all this time. It was very tasty, and I enjoyed it.

“Will you not have seconds?” Lady Opera asked.

“I’m already full, so I’ll pass. It was delicious,” I replied.

“That is good to hear.”

Van pulled on my sleeve, signaling that he wanted some too. It seemed that he couldn’t eat on his own while in this form. He *could* just return to his human shape, but he would be completely naked if he did. I would rather he didn’t do that now, so I had no choice but to feed him myself.

I put Van on my lap and spooned some soup into his mouth.

“Say ‘ahh.’”

“Ahh.”

Van wagged his tail, seemingly having enjoyed the soup.

Seeing this, Lady Opera slammed a fist into her hand. “Oh, we should feed this little red dragon some soup too!”

Hearing that, Roche shook his head so hard that it might’ve fallen off. “No, no no no!!! I could never let a princess do such a thing!!!”

“Do not fret. Today, I am a mere attendant.”

“With all due respect, that is *not* the problem!!!” he cried out. “Besides, such an act should be limited to husband and wife, like the Dragon Duke and the Dragon Duchess consort!”

“Is that true?” Lady Opera asked me, and I only tilted my head in confusion.

If I had a child, I would certainly feed them like I had Van, and if Madeleine and Parfeil asked, I wouldn’t hesitate to feed them as well. But a man and woman of marriageable age normally would not do such a thing with each other. In that sense, Roche wasn’t wrong to refuse.

“Then perhaps we should get married,” offered Lady Opera.

“Huh?!”

Roche was shocked at the sudden proposal. And who could blame him when the one it had come from was none other than the royal Lady Opera? The small dragon was clearly agitated. His eyes were spinning, and his body trembled. His tail went limp and drooped over. I had thought Roche to be quite indomitable, but right now, he was completely defenseless.

Lady Opera had said that her ideal partner was someone strong, sincere, and loyal—and it would be even better if he had an adorable side. I felt like Roche’s inability to keep his cool in moments such as these would certainly count as an adorable side of him. Perhaps he truly *was* Lady Opera’s ideal partner.

“Do you have a partner whom you have promised your future to? Someone to be by your side at all times?” Lady Opera asked.

“No, I do not,” Roche replied.

“Then there is no problem, is there? If you are truly one of my brother’s knights, then you are no average man.”

“W-Well, yes, but…”

“We of the house of the Dragon Duke live longer lives than

most dragonkin. I shall wait for you until you are of age. I am quite magnanimous, I'll have you know."

Lady Opera then took off the ring on her finger and slid it onto one of Roche's claws.

He tried to remove it, but it wouldn't budge. "Wh-What is this ring?!"

"It is a ring of protection that has been passed down in the Dragon Duke's family for generations. It has been imbued with powerful magic to protect its bearer," Lady Opera explained. According to her, it was a ring for the women of the house of the Dragon Duke that was made to be given to their future husbands.

Roche's eyes went white as he listened to all that. "I-I-I-I could never accept such a gift!!! Lady Opera, you must be the one to wear this!!!"

"There is no need to worry. You, as my future husband, will be the one to protect me, will you not?"

Roche looked at Van awkwardly. Van gestured that everything was fine with him, and Roche let out a sigh. "Lady Opera, you must not decide your future husband by mere appearances," he said.

"I am not only deciding by your appearance. By touching you, I can sense that the flow of mana within you is comforting to me. I can tell that we are quite compatible. I also liked the strong-willed glare you had when I barged into this room."

Lady Opera then declared that she would not force Roche into marriage. She would give him time to think about his answer. Roche looked relieved.

"But in any case, I shall be feeding this soup to you by hand!"

"I see you haven't forgotten..." Roche muttered.

"Of course not."

Roche seemed to have given up on resisting. He let Lady Opera feed him while she carried him.

Watching this, Van whispered into my ear. "He might look like a baby dragon now, but it's quite embarrassing to see a grown man being fed soup like this."

"Don't forget that we did this too."

Van was quiet for a moment. "I'll have some more," he conceded, and I couldn't help but laugh.

Chapter 3: Dig, Dragon, Dig!

The next day, Parfeil had fully recovered, and she came to visit me in my room. To celebrate her recovery, the white squirrels handed her a white mushroom. Apparently, it was a “snow mushroom,” and they grew all over Diamant. They were quite delicious when grilled.

“Wow! Thank you, everyone!” Parfeil said.

Next, upon seeing me, Parfeil saluted and reported on her condition. “Lady Mille-Feuille, I have arrived! As you can see, I have completely recovered!”

I was relieved that she didn’t seem to be experiencing any aftereffects. “Parfeil, I’m so happy you’re back.”

I embraced her, and we both celebrated the fact that we had returned safely.

“The Dragon Duke’s scroll really saved me back there!” Parfeil exclaimed.

“Indeed. I shiver at the thought of not having had that scroll.”

Parfeil was thankful for the quick aid as her wounds hadn’t left any scars.

“But it still hurt when you were attacked, right?” I asked.

“I actually don’t remember it! I was so focused on trying to protect you that I might not have had time to think about the pain,” she replied.

Parfeil would definitely sacrifice her own life for my sake. I had to be more careful so she wouldn’t have to do that.

“Parfeil, I’m so sorry that I put you in so much danger,” I said.

“Milady, please don’t apologize! The least I could do for you is put my own body on the line to protect you!”

“That’s not true,” I told her. “I wouldn’t be able to go on living without you, so please don’t throw away your own life for my sake. I want to live a happy life with you around.”

Parfeil giggled awkwardly. “That makes me feel a bit embarrassed,” she said. I wasn’t sure if my words had gotten to her, but all that meant was that I had to be more responsible moving forward.

As our conversation petered out, I heard someone knock on the glass door of the balcony again. I peeked out of it and I saw Roche, in his human form, carrying Van as a tiny dragon.

I let them into the room. “I see you’re not a tiny dragon today,” I said.

Roche began to explain the situation while scanning the room, presumably to see if Lady Opera was around. “Yes, milady. We got here by sliding across the mansion walls.”

“Please have a seat over there. Parfeil, could you please serve them some black tea?”

“Yes, milady!”

Van was here today, so we could discuss what to do with the hot spring source that we had discovered.

“We found the source about an hour’s walk away from a nearby settlement. It’s in a wide-open space with few trees around,” I explained.

“I see. Perhaps there are few trees there because of the spring source,” Van speculated.

The only thing left to do now was dig.

“We’ll be using this.” I brought out a magical device to use for that task. I called it “the Shovel”—a spoon-shaped tool made for digging. It was no ordinary shovel, however. While I often asked Van to make magical devices, he had been busy creating the Spring Dowsing Device, so I had instead ordered this to be made by a crafty dwarf connected to Madeleine’s family.

“With this, we could dig through even the hardest of rocks as if they were made of pudding. Even someone as weak as I am would be able to dig holes with ease.”

Van crossed his arms and had a difficult expression on his face. “I didn’t think that you would volunteer to dig,” he said.

“Well, who else is going to do it?” I asked.

“I am.”

“*You*?”

“That’s right. If the water is too hot, you might scald yourself while digging. On the other hand, I could put up a barrier over myself while I do it,” he argued.

“I see.”

Roche raised his hand to weigh in. “I’m resistant to heat, so I can tolerate the hot spring’s waters.”

“All right then. You and Van will be doing the excavation.”

Though I had to shelve my dwarf-made magic shovel, it really might have been dangerous to excavate the hot spring site by hand. There surely were other uses for a magic shovel like this, so I asked the white squirrels to hold on to it.

And with that, the matter of excavating the hot spring source was swiftly resolved. Van would consult with House Noisette regarding permissions.

“Well, this place is property of the Dragon Duke’s household, so surely they won’t complain. But I’ll still talk to them, just in case,” Van said.

This region was running smoothly thanks to House Noisette’s management. Even if this was the Dragon Duke’s land, it was only appropriate to show them some respect. In that regard, I wholly approved.

“Speaking of House Noisette, I will also file a complaint about Lady Fenetra’s behavior,” Van added.

“A complaint?”

“I heard from Opera. You’ve all been treated poorly these past few days, have you not?”

“Oh, right…” I had been so focused on the excavation of the hot springs that I had totally forgotten about Fenetra’s actions. I told Van that he should refrain from protesting if it would sour relations with House Noisette, but he insisted otherwise.

“She lied to you about the weather on top of treating you poorly. I cannot let this slide. I will need to warn Marquis de Noisette about this.”

“All right, but don’t be too harsh on them,” I told him. We needed the cooperation of House Noisette in order to make Diamant into a successful tourist spot. I asked Van to voice his objections but not to the point of burning bridges between us.

“I understand. This was partly my fault as well.” Van regretted his actions. He’d been careful not to interact with me too much to keep up the pretense of me being an attendant. But as a result, he had created an environment where we had been completely unable to communicate with each other.

Parfeil finally brought us all black tea. The white squirrels had also prepared some grilled snow mushrooms, with help from the cooks, as snacks to pair with it.

“Parfeil, these are some unique tea snacks you have here.”

“I heard from the cooks in the kitchen that these were great with tea,” she explained.

“I see.” The mushrooms had been cut into bite-size pieces and served with oyster sauce. I picked one up and popped it into my mouth. “Hmm?!”

The mushrooms were chewy, and a single bite released all the savory juices stored within. It tasted like bouillon that had been meticulously simmered and prepared over several days. The pairing of snow mushrooms and oyster sauce was simply exquisite.

“This is fantastic!” I exclaimed.

Van picked up a fork and put one into his mouth. His eyes glittered—it seemed that he also loved the mushrooms. “I did not know that there was such a delicacy here in Diamant!”

“Right?!” I turned to the squirrels and thanked them for introducing us to such a delicious treat. The squirrels shook their paws as if to be modest about their contributions.

“It might be a good idea to offer these snow mushrooms as a delicacy guests can eat at the hot springs,” Van suggested.

“That sounds great.” After all, the hot spring shouldn’t be the sole attraction—it should also feature local delicacies for visitors to enjoy. “I’ll think of some more recipes that use snow mushrooms.”

“Yes, please do,” Van said. And with that, our meeting about the hot spring excavation ended.

“I’ll be meeting with Marquis de Noisette now,” Van said. He attempted to say it in a serious tone, but he was still in his tiny dragon form and being held by Roche. I had to hold back my laughter as I saw him off.

While waiting for Van, I contacted our body doubles in the capital via crystal to hear their reports. At the appointed time, silhouettes appeared in the crystal I had. I peered into it and saw burly knights wearing dresses. Once again, I was taken aback by their appearances. The white squirrels were also terrified—they all ran and hid behind me.

Anyway.

“Sir Chouquette Salée, Sir Saint-Honoré, and Sir Potiron. Good work. How are things in the capital?”

Sir Chouquette Salée, who had been acting as my body double,

answered my question. “There are no problems in the capital, milady! The illusions have been functioning as intended, and none have seen through our disguises as of yet!”

“I see.”

According to the knights, they had been going out shopping, attending theater performances, and holding tea parties. These were all very public activities, but they had not been attacked at all.

“Just to make sure, where did you all go shopping?” I asked. I was worried that they were going out to buy things like weapons and armor.

Sir Saint-Honoré, the one taking on the role of Parfeil, answered. “Yesterday, we visited a store that sold stuffed animals and purchased a stuffed white cat.”

Sir Potiron, who was acting as Madeleine, showed me the stuffed cat. It was an adorable toy with fluffy white fur.

So they bought it at a store that sells cute toys… I felt faint just thinking about these beefy knights wearing dresses and picking out stuffed animals. I pinched the back of my hand to keep myself together.

In the afternoon, they went to see a musical performance popular with dragonkin women entitled “Twinkly Shiny Stage.”

Sir Chouquette Salée recalled the performance for me. “‘Twinkly Shiny Stage’ was a dazzling show. There were young men wearing vibrant outfits, singing and dancing on the stage.”

I tried my best not to imagine these cross-dressing middle-aged knights seated among the young ladies in the audience.

Sir Saint-Honoré continued the report. “While watching the performance, I learned a new term: ‘fan service.’”

“Fan…service?” I asked.

“Indeed. The performers would sometimes wink at or blow kisses to the audience. The patrons call this ‘fan service.’”

“I… I see…”

It seemed that the three of them had received quite a bit of “fan service” from the performers. They must have gotten wind that they were the Dragon Duchess consort and her companions.

The knights had apparently joined their fan club as well. I just couldn’t comprehend why they felt the need to do such a thing.

Finally, Sir Potiron recalled their tea party. “We talked about our

new equipment over tea."

"Equipment?"

"We discovered that young ladies wear an item called a 'corset'—a piece of equipment that is even more constricting than the armor we wear."

Upon hearing that, I screamed internally.

"I had no idea that young women wore such constricting garments to shape their bodies. While I deeply respect their commitment, I could not help but feel that such a practice should be outlawed."

Frankly, I fully agreed with them about corsets. I deeply wished that being thin and slender would cease being the prevailing standard of beauty.

"And what have the councillors been up to?" I asked.

"Nothing unusual...is what I would have liked to say. Your Highness, one of the Dragon Duchess consort's knights noticed something odd about them."

"What is it?"

"Well, it's about Count Disque Praline..."

"Ah, *that* stubborn man."

Count Disque Praline, one of the councillors who normally antagonized me and often refused to even bow his head in respect, had greeted one of my knights in the hallway. He was probably the councillor who despised me the most. I sometimes worried about him as there were days when his eyes seemed unfocused and he was spacing out. I heard that he had previously been a kind and gentle man, so it bothered me even more than it would otherwise.

"These past few days, he has apparently regained his old gentle behavior."

"That's good to hear. Still, we can't let our guard down," I said. I couldn't discount the possibility of the enemy lulling us into complacency. Then I asked them to be on alert at all times.

The three of them saluted and finished their report.

"That is all from us at the capital."

"Sir Chouquette Salée, Sir Saint-Honoré, Sir Potiron, I thank you all. Please take care of yourselves."

"We thank you for your kind words, milady."

"Milady, please take care of yourself as well."

“We are praying for your safety.”

The crystal communication line closed and the squirrels peeked out from their hiding places. At the same time, I let out a long sigh.

I had thought that someone would make a move if our body doubles at the capital were too lax, but it was completely peaceful over there. Perhaps we had been *too* obvious in luring the enemy into taking action. I needed to consult Van and come up with a new strategy.

After that, I called Madeleine over to help me think of some delicacies to serve at the hot spring resort. Madeleine was from a well-off family and she had tried countless delicious foods since she was young. She was the perfect person to consult about this.

“A specialty food for the resort?”

“Yes,” I said. “I want something that everyone—be it noble or commoner, man or woman, young or old—can enjoy.”

“Hmm… That’s a difficult request…”

Perhaps I was being too broad. I needed to narrow down my criteria.

“Millefie, have you decided on what kind of hot spring resort you want it to be?” Madeleine asked.

“What kind…? I’ve been so focused on how to get the digging started for the hot springs that… Well, I’d like to have a building as big as the palace, with a big open space and a large bath…I think.”

“I worry that a resort like that would only attract a small number of people,” Madeleine said.

“Really?”

“Millefie, have you been to the public bath at the capital?”

“I haven’t,” I told her.

“Have you ever wanted to go?”

“I never had a reason to. I mean, I already have a bath— Oh!” I then realized what Madeleine was getting at.

“I believe that we would have to make *two* resorts—one for the general public and one for nobles,” she said. “We would have to serve delicacies that would cater to both.”

“Madeleine, you’re a genius!” I exclaimed.

Madeleine flushed at my compliment. “Let’s decide on what delicacies to serve the commoners first,” she said.

“All right.” I signaled to Parfeil, and she brought some snow mushrooms and toasted sandwiches to our table.

“What are these?” Madeleine asked.

“These are the candidates we’ve found here in Diamant.”

My white squirrels had picked the snow mushrooms, which had once again been grilled and covered with oyster sauce. The sandwiches were also the same as the last time I’d had them—simple ones made with ham and cheese.

Madeleine popped a mushroom into her mouth and followed it up with a bite of the toasted sandwich. “My, these are both delicious!” she exclaimed.

Though Madeleine praised the taste of the snow mushrooms, she found them difficult to eat as the sauce was drippy. The sandwiches were also tasty, but they lacked the impact to be called a “delicacy.”

“I’m sorry. I know you thought long and hard about these options,” she said.

“No, it’s all right. I agree with both of your points.”

I considered skewering the mushrooms onto sticks, but the sauce would still drip on the visitors’ clothes and the floors of the resort. I had no rebuttal for the sandwiches. The ingredients were all items that people had on hand. Anyone would be able to make the same thing at home.

The squirrels raised some nuts that they had picked up, gesturing as if to suggest we make them into a sandwich too. *Well, at least they’re trying to help.*

“Make the mushrooms easier to eat, and give the sandwiches some more flair... Oh! What if we take the mushrooms and sauce and put that into a sandwich?”

“Millefie, that’s brilliant! That would kill two birds with one stone!” Madeleine exclaimed.

Sandwiches made with snow mushrooms—there was no doubt in my mind that they’d taste great. I immediately asked Parfeil to prepare some.

A few minutes later, Parfeil returned carrying sandwiches with a piping hot mushroom and sauce filling. She had cut them into bite-size pieces to make them easier to eat.

“One of the kitchen cooks suggested adding some cheese, so I made some with cheese and others without,” Parfeil explained.

“I see. Thank you, Parfeil.”

“You’re welcome!”

Madeleine and I tried the ones without cheese first. I also gave one to Parfeil as well.

“This is delicious!” I exclaimed. “These mushrooms taste good, even in a sandwich.”

“I love how the bread soaks up the savory flavor of the mushrooms!” Madeleine added.

Parfeil nodded vigorously in agreement.

After drinking some water, we tried the ones with cheese next. I bit into the crunchy, toasted bread, and some cheese stretched out from the portion I bit off.

“Whoa!”

The cheese added a rich flavor to the sauce, elevating its savory taste into something rich and complex. It complemented the taste of the snow mushrooms as well.

“Those cooks really *do* know their stuff. This one is a lot tastier!” I exclaimed.

“It is. I’m so surprised!” Madeleine added.

Parfeil also praised the cheesy sandwich.

“Let’s make this cheesy snow-mushroom sandwich the delicacy for the commoners’ hot spring resort,” I declared.

The other two agreed.

For the first time since we had arrived in Diamant, we were led to the first dining hall—perhaps due to Van’s complaints. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Van seated alone at the dining table.

“We’re *finally* receiving some proper treatment,” Lady Opera muttered as she sat in her chair.

Most of us had been reassigned to single rooms as well. Parfeil and I were the exception, as we would be sharing one.

“I’ve lodged complaints to Marquis de Noisette about all your problems. From now on, you will no longer be treated at the same level as the servants of this mansion,” Van declared.

Thus, today we were eating dinner with Van. He had even allowed Parfeil to sit with us, but she refused, saying, “I would be so nervous that the food wouldn’t taste like anything.” As a result, she was doing her best to eat as close to my seat as she could

without sitting.

The attendants of House Noisette were nowhere to be seen. Only Van's and Lady Opera's attendants were here to do menial tasks. Now that everyone present was in the know, there was no need to keep up our attendant act.

"Brother, what did Marquis de Noisette say?" Lady Opera asked.

"He kept apologizing to me. He says that Lady Fenetra didn't mean any harm and was only trying to provide hospitality since my wife wasn't around," Van replied.

"That is quite a dubious way of providing hospitality. I can only think of her as an attention hog trying to show off just because the Dragon Duchess consort was nowhere to be seen," Lady Opera scoffed.

"Hmm, I see... When she was young, I'd had the impression that Lady Fenetra was quite shy and reserved around crowds," Van said.

"She must have grown brazen as she grew older and learned more about society, then."

Speaking of people who had completely changed, there was also the matter of Count Disque Praline. I had been wondering if I should bring it up over dinner, but since both Van and Lady Opera were here, I decided to report it.

"By the way, Van, I received news from the knights acting as our body doubles," I began. I told the others about how they had gone shopping, seen a performance, and had a tea party, but nothing unusual had happened.

"The enemy might have been more cautious because you don't normally go out like that," Van suggested.

"It might be better for them to stay put in their rooms for now," I said.

"Indeed."

Next, I informed them about Count Disque Praline's change in behavior.

"He started showing you respect, and his belligerent personality is starting to calm down... Huh."

"He might have been annoyed by the way I normally conduct myself around him," I suggested. If that were the case, he must have deemed Sir Chouquette Salée's act as me to be worth acknowledging more than my own.

“I see. I will order my knights to do a more detailed investigation on Count Disque Praline.”

“Yes, please do.”

The topic shifted to the upcoming clear weather, and we made plans to begin excavating tomorrow.

“I will accompany all of you as well!” Lady Opera cried out and excitedly raised her hand. She seemed ready to join right in.

That night, I heard a knock on my bedroom balcony’s window. I approached it while holding a magicstone lamp, and outside, I saw Van’s tiny dragon form clinging to the glass pane. He pleaded to be let in as there was a strong wind outside. The squirrels swiftly unlocked the window and Parfeil let him in. A cold breeze blew into the room. I grabbed Van, who had been hanging onto the handle, and held him close to my chest while the white squirrels closed the window again. Roche was nowhere to be found, so it seemed that Van had come here alone.

“Brrr... I thought I was going to get blown away!” he exclaimed.

I held him near the magicstone heater to warm his freezing body.

“Ahh... I feel alive again!” he cried out.

Apparently, he had come here to sleep beside me. Parfeil took the hint and left. She would probably sleep in Madeleine’s room.

“Mille-Feuille, am I bothering you by coming here?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I’m glad you came.”

“Good to hear.”

Tomorrow, we would finally start excavating the hot springs. We needed to get a lot of rest tonight. I took Van to my bed. The white squirrels also figured out what was going on and left my bed. They piled into a basket stuffed with cotton and rolled themselves into balls.

“I was so lonely sleeping all by myself,” Van said.

“Even though you’d been sleeping all alone before getting married?”

“Now that I’ve tasted the bliss of sleeping by your side, there’s no way I could go back to sleeping by myself.”

Hearing this, I suddenly remembered Lady Opera’s words. She had said that the lifespans of the Dragon Duke’s family were much longer than those of other dragonkin. I would most likely depart

from this world earlier than Van would. Once that happened, how would Van feel? If he went berserk like he had when Charlotte was murdered, it would be a crisis for the entire nation.

For a moment, the thought of Van taking a concubine crossed my mind. It might be better for him to have another person to comfort his heart and soul.

"Mille-Feuille, what are you thinking about?" Van asked.

"Nothing in particular," I replied.

"But you *were* thinking about something. I can tell by how furrowed your brow is right now."

I touched my hands to the valley between my brows and was greeted by the feeling of wrinkles between them. It was just as he said.

"You've been thinking of something that can't be solved in the short term, haven't you?" he asked.

"How did you know that?"

"Of course I could tell. I'm your husband, after all."

Was I really thinking that deeply? It seemed that Van had read me like a book.

"So, what are you thinking about?" Van repeated.

"Well…"

"We are husband and wife. You are free to speak your mind."

Van touched his tiny hand against my finger and gazed up at me. I couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"Remember what Lady Opera said yesterday? About how your family lives longer lives than most? I was just worried about what would happen if I passed away before you did," I confessed.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that. The moment you married me, you became different from all other dragonkin. In other words, your lifespan should be about the same as that of my blood relatives."

"Really?!" I asked.

"Did I not tell you about this?"

"First I've heard of it."

"I see. I'm sorry for not telling you earlier. I didn't think you would be so worried about leaving me behind," Van said.

"I was. I even considered preparing a concubine for you for when I pass away."

The moment I mentioned a concubine, Van's brow furrowed—a

facial expression that was ill-fitting for an adorable tiny dragon.

"Mille-Feuille, are you all right with me having a concubine?" he asked.

"Of course I'm not. But I didn't have any other ideas."

"I see. So that's why you had such a serious expression on your face," he said. "You don't need to worry, then. I only have eyes for you, Mille-Feuille, so I have no need for concubines."

Van might think that way now, but he might change his mind in the future. I still need to prepare for the possibility of him having a concubine, I thought.

However, it seemed that Van thought differently.

"Eventually, we'll be blessed with children. That's why even if you leave me behind, I won't feel lonely at all."

"Oh?!"

Right. He's right. We might have children someday. Having children with Van was something that my past incarnation had never managed to do.

"Still, even if we don't have children, Opera might. And even Madeleine or Parfeil may become mothers someday. That means I'd have so many people around me. They might ask me to sing lullabies for them or have me teach them how to fly through the skies. I'll be so busy that my head will be spinning. Considering all that, do you still think I'd need a concubine?"

"No, I don't think so."

"See?"

Before I knew it, I had started to cry while I was listening to Van talk.

"Mille-Feuille, what's wrong? Did I say something strange?"

"No, not at all. I'm not crying because I'm sad," I said. Instead, imagining a future where he was surrounded by so many little dragons had made me so, so happy.

Even if I die ahead of him, Van will be fine. Unlike what had happened in my past life, Van now had so many people whom he could trust, like a real family.

"Let's go to sleep. We'll be quite busy tomorrow."

"Indeed."

I went to sleep with the little Van in my arms.

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We headed for the forest where Parfeil and I had found the hot spring source. Since it would take a lot of time to travel there by foot, we rode there on the backs of transformed dragons. I sat on Van's back, while Madeleine, Parfeil, and Lady Opera rode on the backs of knights. Meanwhile, Roche was riding on a wyvern, patrolling the skies to keep us safe.

It would have taken an hour to get there on foot, but doing this took us no time at all.

The flag I had planted was now completely buried in snow. I had even picked a long flagpole expecting that this would happen, but it would seem that it hadn't been enough. I hung my head in dismay.

I thought that I would need to use a dowsing rod to find the spot, but Van offered an unexpected suggestion.

"Mille-Feuille, don't worry. I'll look for it."

Van transformed into his tiny dragon form and crawled onto the snow. He buried his nose in the snow and started sniffing around. I recalled Van saying that he could smell mana. Dragonkin had a higher level of mana compared to regular humans, so we left mana trails on everything we touched, even when we weren't using magic. Van was searching for the flagpole by seeking out the scent of my mana trail. The way he was looking for the flagpole was exactly as I imagined—like a dog.

Upon seeing Van, Roche lamented aloud. "Oh, milord... How pitiful..."

Lady Opera, seemingly bored of the search, turned to talk to me. "Mille-Feuille, is that little red dragon not here?"

Hearing that, Roche shivered. While the little red dragon Lady Opera was referring to was indeed right here, I hesitated on whether to give that away.

"Um, Aura, are you okay with that red dragon being your fiancé?" I asked.

"I thought about it some more after that, and now I long to be with him even more," Lady Opera replied.

"O-Oh, okay then. But you know, he might be a cute and adorable little dragon, but he has a human form, and he'll grow up eventually. Are you okay with that?"

"I do not mind at all. I did not fall for him based on his appearance."

I gave Roche a sidelong glance. He was listening to Lady Opera's words and his face was beet red. It didn't look like he was opposed to Lady Opera's affections.

He should just hurry up and reveal himself as that tiny red dragon.

Suddenly, Van poked his head out from the snow. Perhaps he had found the missing flagpole.

Instead, he turned around and shouted, "Everyone, we're being attacked!"

Roche immediately sprang into action at his words. Parfeil drew her twin swords and stood in front of me. Madeleine then grabbed me and Lady Opera and pushed us low to the ground. She even activated a defensive scroll to give us a safe space.

A gigantic white bear appeared from the forest. It wasn't just a White Bear—it was a Burrowless, like the one that Van had previously defeated. In fact, this creature was even bigger than the Burrowless that had attacked us.

Roche tried to strike at the bear with his sword, but its thick fur and skin repelled his blade. The bear didn't look like it took any damage at all.

Van, still a tiny dragon, rolled away from the fighting and jumped onto my chest. "Mille-Feuille, are you okay?!" he cried.

"That's not a line for you to say while jumping into someone's chest!"

"And you are absolutely right about that!"

Van must have had a reason for retreating. I held him to warm him up—he was very cold from all the snow.

Suddenly, I figured out what Van was trying to do. He was trying to reveal the identity of the tiny red dragon to Lady Opera.

Roche, judging that he was at a disadvantage while in human form, transformed into a fiery-red dragon. When Lady Opera saw his dragon form, her mouth gaped open in shock.

"Is that not the dragon I determined to be my fiancé?!" she shouted.

Roche might have been a gigantic, fearsome dragon right now, but Lady Opera had immediately identified him.

"I see… I thought that red dragon seemed familiar. So that tiny dragon was Roche all along."

Roche's dragon form, said to be the largest in all of the Dragon Duchy, exuded strength and power. He bit the rampaging bear's

neck and flew with it high up into the sky. Up above us, he launched a breath attack reminiscent of fireworks. Soon after, he returned to the ground and reported to Van while still in his dragon form.

“Lord Dragon Duke, I have finished downing the beast!”

“Good work, Roche. You were incredible.”

“Milord, your words humble me.”

Now, how will Lady Opera react to this? But the moment I tried to look at her, I realized she was no longer beside me. She had run toward Roche and thrown her arms around his large neck.

“You have done well!!!” she cried out.

“U-Um, th-thank you,” Roche stammered.

“My future husband, you have done great work today!”

It seemed that she had completely accepted that Roche was the tiny red dragon. Van looked smug, as if to say that everything had gone according to his plan.

“Well then, let’s leave this young couple alone and get to work digging,” Van said.

“You’re right.”

According to Van, he had found the flag as he had noticed the Burrowless approaching.

Van reverted to his adult dragon form and buried his head into the ground. A short while later, he resurfaced, with the flag I had stabbed into the ground in his mouth.

“Mille-Feuille, is this the correct spot?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Can I dig now?” he asked.

“Please do.”

I left Van to dig, and Roche joined him. The rest of us stayed a safe distance away.

“Roche, let’s get started,” Van announced.

“Yes, milord.”

I had thought that they would dig using their breath attacks, but they started digging into the ground with their claws instead. It reminded me of an old folktale from another world about a dog told to dig in the ground. While the dog in the folktale was told to dig under trees for treasure, Van and Roche were here to dig for the hot springs’ water. Perhaps, if we considered that we would be making a business out of the hot springs, it could be deemed a

sort of treasure in itself.

As they dug through the snow, they finally hit solid ground.

“Nngh… This is much harder than I thought,” Van complained.

“The soil must have been pressurized by the weight of the snow,” Roche surmised.

The two of them changed their posture and angle multiple times as they attempted to dig into the hard ground.

“Roche, we can’t use brute force here! We have to be more careful!”

“Yes, milord!”

The sight of two giant dragons digging in the dirt looked quite adorable. Perhaps the others thought so too, as we all sat back and oversaw the two dragons working with warm expressions.

The hot spring source must have been quite deep under the surface, as the two dragons were now half obscured. At this point, they had been digging for about two hours without rest. While the knights insisted that they take a break, they remained stubborn, saying “We can keep going!” as they dug. The knights tried to turn to me for help too, but I knew that the two of them wouldn’t stop once they had gotten like that. I simply let them do as they wished.

While we waited, we started taste testing the snow-mushroom and cheese sandwiches. We distributed sandwiches to the knights and attendants and asked for their opinions. All of them approved of the taste. Having the approval of these knights and attendants from noble families was a relief. The sandwiches would be a hit with the common people.

“Now, we only need to think about what to serve the noble guests,” I muttered.

What would they like? Commoners would usually enjoy tastes that they were familiar with, but nobles were more interested in the unusual and exotic. We would need something unique and brand-new. Madeleine and I tilted our heads in the same direction as we considered this, but neither of us could come up with an idea.

I wanted Lady Opera’s opinion. “Aura, do you have any ideas?”

“Hmm… Perhaps something visually impressive would be good,” she suggested.

“I see… So a novel appearance is important.”

“Correct.”

Since it would be a delicacy, it should also have a connection to Diamant. White snow stretched out in all corners of this region. Another notable thing here was the white volcano with the Great Spirit of Fire living within it. There were many things in this region, of course, but since the only real information we had was the snow and the fields of white, it was difficult to think of any ideas.

"A novel food that represents the Diamant region..."

Suddenly, the ground beneath us split apart, perhaps due to the excavation. But what erupted from the cracks was not spring water but hot steam. This steam shot up toward the sky with great force.

Lady Opera, shocked by the sudden eruption, clung to me. "What is *that*?! It's not poisonous, is it?!" she cried out right by my ear.

"Aura, that's hot steam erupting from the hot springs. It's not poisonous."

The erupting steam froze in the air and fell back to the ground as frost. I had read about all this in a book before and had learned that it proved there were hot springs nearby.

A knight who had seen the cracks in the ground shouted for us to stay clear of the steam due to the high temperature.

Parfeil, hearing the knights' conversation, whispered something to me. "The water seems to be boiling hot. It's probably hot enough to steam food."

"That's it!!!" I exclaimed.

White mountains, steam hot enough to cook food, and steamed foods...

"What about a steamed cake in the image of the white volcano?" I said.

I remembered the delicious steamed cakes that Lady Opera had shared with us previously. We could make a similar cake that was decorated using themes of the Diamant region.

"What a good idea. We'll create a steamed cake in the shape of the white volcano," I suggested.

The steamed breads from the capital were yellow because of the eggs used in them. Meanwhile, the bread here in Diamant was white and fluffy. While the bread here wasn't made with sugar, it would definitely be even tastier if it was made to be as sweet as the types in the capital.

A fluffy white cake steamed to perfection… I was sure that we could make it look exactly like the white volcano of Diamant. I looked forward to making a sample.

“We could fill the white cake with jam made with berries picked in Diamant as well,” I suggested.

“Wow, that sounds great!” Parfeil exclaimed.

First, I had to learn how to make the local bread from the cooks here. Then, I’d just use that knowledge to make the steamed cakes.

“Wouldn’t it be even better if we could make it using the steam from the hot springs too?” I added.

“It definitely would,” Parfeil agreed.

People visiting from the capital would be sure to marvel at the mere sight of steam rising up from the ground.

With that, I finished my brilliant plan for the resort. I was sure this would be popular among nobles.

While Parfeil and I had been talking about plans for delicacies, Van and Roche were quickly retreating from the excavation site. They were flying straight at us with dirt still stuck to their faces.

“Everyone, stand back! Get as far away from the ground as you can!”

I got on top of Van’s back, and Lady Opera rode on Roche. Everyone else mounted wyverns and flew straight up into the sky.

What is going on? But just as I thought that, a pillar of water erupted from the hole that Van and Roche had dug.

Or…I had thought it was water. In actuality, hot steam was erupting from the ground instead.

“That’s the hot spring!!!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, that’s right!” Van shouted.

It looked like we had succeeded in digging it up.

“Van, you did it! This is incredible!”

“Oho, right?” Van looked very satisfied as I rubbed his neck. “I licked a bit of the hot spring water as it came out, but it didn’t seem to be poisonous,” Van said.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know.” I had brought the Evaluation Glasses just for that purpose, so there was no need for Van to test the waters.

“These hot springs will be used by the subjects of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair, so I, the Dragon Duke, had to be the one to test it

first," Van declared.

"Don't push yourself, okay?"

"I know."

Van laughed mirthfully while I petted his back as a reward for his hard work. I hadn't thought the excavation would go so smoothly. It wouldn't have been done this quickly if we had relied on labor done in human form. We needed to thank Van and Roche for their great efforts.

The others started returning to the ground after having confirmed that it was safe to land.

I suddenly had another idea. "Hey, Van, since you're all dirty, why don't you bathe in the hot springs?"

"You're right. We can head back to the Noisette mansion once we clean ourselves off here."

Van let me down and invited Roche to join him in the pillar of hot spring water erupting from the ground.

Roche checked the water first. "Lord Dragon Duke, it seems the temperature is just right!"

"Oh, is it? That's great!"

The two big dragons then seemed to enjoy their hot springs baths.

"How enviable. I would love to bathe in those hot springs as well," Lady Opera muttered.

"If we start building the resort facility now, assuming things go well, it might take about a year to be ready," I said.

"I cannot wait that long!" Lady Opera tried to rush toward the hot springs, but Parfeil managed to catch her first. She dragged the struggling royal lady toward her guards. Madeleine followed right after them.

I took samples of the water into bottles to check their quality. I looked forward to finding out what properties this water had. Letting the steam escape would be a waste, so I sealed the bottles with caps I had prepared. The caps had magic circles on them that would stop the steam from escaping. The fissures on the ground had also been sealed with a magic circle to prevent the steam and hot water from erupting excessively.

"All right, that should do it," Van said. "Mille-Feuille, let's return to the Noisette mansion."

"Yes, let's."

Since Van was going to head back in his dragon form, he let me ride on his back. Once we arrived at the mansion, I wanted to borrow an atelier space so I could analyze the samples I'd brought back from the hot springs.

Upon reaching the mansion, Madeleine offered to help with my work, even though we had just arrived. A number of my white squirrels that had stayed behind started clinging to my back upon my return.

Along with Parfeil, we had the housemaids guide us to the atelier. Ateliers were usually located underground so as not to expose the medicines being brewed there to sunlight. I thought we were going to be led into one such room, but what awaited us was a space akin to a stillroom where many varieties of jams and confitures were being made.

"You are free to use anything within this room," said the maid who had guided us there.

"Thank you."

I decided to ask the maid if there was an underground atelier. An old, prestigious house of magic such as House Noisette was sure to have one.

"Does this mansion not have a magic atelier?"

The moment I asked that, the maid dropped the ring of keys she was holding and it clattered to the ground. Her face went pale, and I could see that her shoulders were trembling.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"No, it's... Um, Lady Fenetra ordered us not to enter the atelier, so..."

"Fenetra did? Why?"

"I-I don't know. B-But a maid who broke that rule went missing the day after she entered the atelier. She still hasn't been found."

Fenetra had apparently flown into a rage and yelled at that maid. The maid we were talking to must have been terrified after witnessing such a scene and finding out one of her coworkers had vanished.

"What happened there?"

"Nothing, according to the maid," she said.

"I see. When was this?" I asked.

"About a month ago."

"That's quite recent."

How disturbing. I should tell Van about this, I thought.

"Thank you for telling me," I said.

I also handed her some money—both as thanks for the information and to keep her quiet. She seemed to have understood as she nodded solemnly.

Once the maid left, I let out a sigh. "There's just one problem after another."

Madeleine, having heard everything, advised me to inform Van as soon as I could. I thought the same, so we went to talk to him first.

I filled a bucket with water and threw in the water mirror communication scroll that Van had given to us earlier. Within moments, the water's surface rippled and Van's figure appeared.

Just as crystals could be used for communication, water mirror communication used water to contact the person you wanted to reach. Since Van usually had black tea in his office, we would be able to communicate with him this way.

"Van?" I called.

"Hm? Mille-Feuille, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me."

I heard the sound of water through the water mirror, and his voice echoed through it. Van's bare upper half was reflected on the surface. Perhaps he was soaking in a bath. Madeleine averted her eyes and turned around. Parfeil, as my bodyguard, didn't even flinch.

"I have something to tell you. Is this a good time?" I asked.

"Oh, sure, go ahead. What is it?"

"Well..."

I told Van about Fenetra's unusual actions. Van brushed aside his hair and listened intently to my report.

"The fact that she punished a maid disproportionately, and that said maid went missing, are both highly concerning," Van opined.

"Van, be careful around Fenetra."

"I will."

If Diamant were to become the next big tourist destination for the duchy, there was no way to avoid deepening our ties with House Noisette. But before we moved further, we had to clear all our doubts and suspicions regarding them.

"Okay, I will ask my knights to investigate her."

“Thank you, Van.”

“It’s no big deal.”

It would be terrible if Van got dizzy from staying too long in the bath, so we cut our conversation short.

“And that’s that. Madeleine, you can turn around now.”

“A-All right.”

Madeleine looked flushed and embarrassed. She must not have expected Van to be half naked. I felt sorry for dragging her into our conversation.

“Sorry about that,” I said.

“It’s okay. I’ll forget about what I saw just now.”

I also drove the image of Van’s half naked body from my mind and got to work.

Analyzing the water from the hot springs was quite simple. I only needed to use my Evaluation Glasses that I had received from my mother as a child. Looking through the glasses would give me a great deal of information about the object being analyzed.

I put the glasses on and started looking at the water samples.

“This sample is bicarbonate water... Apparently, it can smooth calloused skin and make it firmer.”

“My, that sounds wonderful!” Madeleine exclaimed.

I recalled Van saying that the water was smooth and slippery to the touch. The spring water would be easily absorbed by the skin and smoothen it.

“As for its special properties, it can help ease fatigue, nerve pain, skin diseases, cuts, stiff shoulders, and joint pain.”

Madeleine and Parfeil applauded after I had finished listing the water’s properties. There was no mistaking it—the spring’s water was high-quality.

“Also, apparently it has some purification effects.”

“Millefie, by ‘purification,’ do you mean the ability to dispel brainwashing and hypnotic magic?” Madeleine asked.

“Yes, that’s what it says.”

I recalled having learned about that at the magic academy. Perhaps the water had been blessed by spirits. A hot spring with purification effects was quite a rare find indeed.

“Oh, how about we make some lotion using the hot spring’s waters?” I suggested.

“Millefie, that’s a great idea!”

Lotion would make for a great item to buy after a hot springs trip. You could use it yourself or give it to a friend as a souvenir.

"But just using the hot spring water to make the lotion might be ineffective."

"Why is that?"

"Just being in the hot springs already makes your skin smooth, right? People might say that since they've already bathed in the spring water, they won't need the lotion," I explained.

"Oh, that's a good point."

We would need something other than the beautifying hot spring water to make the lotion a more attractive purchase.

"We could make the container out of perlite... But we're not allowed to take perlite, so we can't do that."

"But making an attractive vessel might be a good idea in itself," Madeleine said.

However, just making its container attractive still wasn't enough. We needed it to be something unique to Diamant.

I was trying to think some more, arms crossed, when a white squirrel that had been clinging to my back jumped right in front of me. It squeaked as it raised its hand, seemingly saying that it had an idea.

"Oh? So you're saying that there's a kind of flower that's unique to Diamant that grows in the middle of the forest? And it has a skin-brightening effect?"

"Squeak!" said the squirrel.

"That's it!!!"

Apparently, the flower was called a "snow jewel." They were rare flowers that bloomed in the snow and could only be found growing in Diamant. A lotion made from hot spring water and mixed with the brightening substance within the snow jewel flowers would be an item completely unique to Diamant.

"It'll be dangerous for us to head into the forest, so I'll ask Van to do it for us."

I contacted Van through the water mirror once more. Somehow, he was *still* in the bath.

"Mille-Feuille, what's wrong?" he asked. "Did something happen?"

"No, I just had a request for you. Also, why are you still in the bath?"

It had already been an hour since I had last contacted Van. I couldn't believe that he was still soaking.

"My skin tends to get puffy right after I transform into a dragon. I'm trying to get rid of that by soaking in the bath."

"I see." I then told Van about the snow jewels. Van seemed to take great interest in them as he nodded intently while listening to me talk.

"All right. Let's look for this flower tomorrow."

"Thank you."

With that, our work for today was finished. Madeleine said her thanks, and we ended today's gathering.

That night, Van visited me on the balcony in his dragon form. Right now, he was about medium-sized. I opened the glass door and asked him what was going on.

"Mille-Feuille, I asked Marquis de Noisette about the snow jewels, and apparently they're very difficult to find in the daytime since they blend in with the snow. We should look for them at night since they have a faint glow. We can go now."

"Okay. I'll put on my coat."

The coat I'd had custom-made from Diamant had just arrived earlier today. It was made using fur from beasts caught in this region, which meant it was completely resistant to the cold. I put on a gown over my sleeping garment and pulled the coat on over that.

"Parfeil, I'm heading out."

"Stay safe, milady," Parfeil said, though she looked dissatisfied, possibly because she wasn't coming with us. She glanced at the white squirrels squeezing themselves into my pockets and sleeves and muttered to herself, "If only I were *that* small too…"

I waved goodbye to her and climbed onto Van's back. He flapped his gigantic wings and we flew off into the night.

The deep blue night sky was dotted with stars twinkling like diamonds scattered all over. *What a gorgeous evening sky*, I thought. It was a thousand times more beautiful than it looked from the ground.

"Mille-Feuille, are you cold?"

"I'm fine. Van, look at the stars in the sky. It's almost like I could grab one."

“You’re right,” Van said. He apparently had never paid attention to the sky until now. That sounded like such a waste, considering he could fly like this. “I had been living without paying attention to the beautiful things all around me. Mille-Feuille, thanks to you, I’ve finally freed some space in my heart to do so.”

“That’s good to hear,” I said.

I sincerely hoped that nothing else would trouble Van anymore and that he would live a life that was happy and peaceful every day. I hoped that even more strongly than I would otherwise, considering what had happened in my past life.

“Van, I hope you live for a long, long time.”

“As do I. I dream of being surrounded every day by my great-grandchildren and my great-great-grandchildren.”

After flying for a while, we finally reached the forest. I had thought that it would be covered in complete darkness now, but small lights dotted the forest landscape like the stars in the sky. They weren’t just in a small portion of the forest either—the entire forest was glowing. It was as if I were seeing the starry night sky itself on the ground. The wonderful scene took my breath away.

“Van, are all of those snow jewels?”

“Looks like it.”

“It’s gorgeous. It’s like I slipped into a dream,” I muttered.

“You’re right.”

Van, who had been talking this entire time, went quiet and took in the overwhelming beauty of the forest.

“Mille-Feuille, I’m going to land,” Van said.

“Okay.”

Van was careful not to make me uncomfortable as we descended. We got closer and closer to the flowers below.

Our landing was soft, like a feather falling to the ground. Once I confirmed that our surroundings were safe, I alighted.

A snow jewel was blooming right next to me. I got excited seeing the flower glowing brightly before me.

“Van, look! The flowers really *are* glowing!”

“This is amazing.”

“It really is…”



I thought that the flower's light would disappear once I touched it, but it didn't. It continued to glow when I poked it, held it by its stalk, and even picked it.

"What a strange flower," I muttered.

"They must have quite unique properties," Van said. He picked a flower with his gigantic claws. I thought that he would bring it close to his face to examine it, but he gave it to me instead, tucking it behind my ear.

"Oh, did you want to make it an accessory for my hair?"

"I did. It suits you really well."

"Th-Thanks."

I was quite flustered by his gesture. To hide my embarrassment, I switched the topic back to the flowers.

"I wonder how long these will glow."

"I think they will keep glowing as long as they're under their light source—the moon."

And if picked, they will keep glowing until their mana runs out.

"I heard that snow jewels can absorb and store a large amount of mana from the moon, and they reflect the light of the moon at night."

"So it's a magical flower."

Snow jewels also bloomed year-round, not just during the winter. If that was the case, there should be no problem picking them to create the lotion.

A breeze blew by, bringing the scent of the flowers right to our nostrils. The scent was reminiscent of that of a rose, so even its fragrance was well suited for use in a lotion.

Van had already gotten permission to use the snow jewels as he pleased, so I picked some flowers to use in a sample batch of lotion. Van used his sharp claws to gently gather flowers as well. My white squirrels also pitched in.

"That should be enough," I said.

"Let's head back to the mansion."

And with that, I obtained some snow jewels sooner than I had expected.

The next day, I went back to the stillroom to make the lotion. Parfeil and Madeleine were once again there as my assistants, both wearing their aprons.

First, we had to isolate the active ingredient from the snow

jewels and make an extract out of it. The tools we needed were all available in the room, so I gathered them up to use.

I placed the flowers into a kettle-shaped glass container and heated it up. A tube was connected to the spout of the container. The liquid in the container evaporated and traveled through the tube into a small glass bottle. Though snow jewels seemed like normal flowers, they had a very high moisture content, so even a small number of them could produce a large amount of extract.

“Millefie, these snow jewels smell really nice,” Madeleine remarked.

“Don’t they?”

As we continued the extraction process, a fragrant scent began filling the stillroom. Heating up the flowers intensified the aroma further. Since Parfeil was a beastkin, her sense of smell was stronger than most and she had to cover her nose with a cloth. I told her that she could leave at any time, but she insisted that she was fine.

“If you don’t feel well at any time, just say so, okay?” I stressed.

“I can keep going. I stopped breathing through my nose, so I’ll be fine,” Parfeil replied.

I poured some hot spring water and a moisturizing agent into a bowl. Adding drops of the snow jewel extract came next. Then I used a spoon to mix the ingredients together, and after that, the lotion was finished.

“It’s done!”

My hands had been feeling quite dry as of late, perhaps due to the colder climate in Diamant compared to the capital. I immediately tested the lotion on my skin by putting some of it on my hands and spreading it over my skin.

“It’s not sticky at all, and it absorbed quickly.”

“Millefie, you’re right! This is amazing. My hands feel so smooth now!” Madeleine exclaimed.

Parfeil seemed to like the finished product too, saying that the smell was just right.

“Madeleine, what should we name the lotion?”

“Well, the lotion combines the skin-replenishing properties of the hot spring water and the snow jewel flowers, so how about ‘Jeweled Snow Hot Spring Lotion’?”

“That sounds great! Madeleine, you’re a great help!” I said.

“I’m glad you liked the name, Millefie.”

We took the finished product to Lady Opera for her to test. The moment she spread the lotion on her skin, her eyes went wide in surprise.

“What is this?! This lotion seeps into my skin so easily! And my skin looks so smooth and shiny after applying it! This gives you skin as white as snow and as brilliant as a jewel! How wonderful!”

Line after line of praise came out of Lady Opera’s mouth. A wave of relief washed over me as I saw the lotion was well received.

That afternoon, we began making the steamed cakes. Lady Opera traded places with Madeleine to help me prepare them. Once we headed to the kitchen, we were greeted by the kitchen cooks I was well acquainted with.

“Kitchen cook, I wish to be taught how to make these sweetened steamed cakes!” Lady Opera puffed out her chest as she spoke to one of the cooks.

Behind her, I bowed profusely to the cooks. I knew they must’ve been baffled at this attendant’s haughty attitude. However, if they *were* confused, they didn’t show it as they kindly obliged Lady Opera’s request.

The cook who was to teach us how to make the steamed cakes was a middle-aged woman who was the mansion’s head cook. During holidays, she would teach children how to cook, so she seemed to be quite used to mentoring.

“Okay, let’s begin. The ingredients are right here,” she said as she motioned to a number of items—wheat flour, baking powder, sugar, milk, canola oil, salt, and berry jam.

The recipe began by heating water in a steamer. The device was a specially made one with two compartments. The water would be heated in the lower compartment, and there was an upper compartment with small holes in it where you’d place the dough. Because the dough would be steamed, it would become soft and fluffy instead of solid and dense.

“First, we’ll mix the flour, baking powder, sugar, milk, oil, and salt together in a bowl. Don’t overmix it, though, because then the dough won’t be as fluffy. It would make the texture rough. Be sure to leave some bubbles in it.”

Lady Opera mixed the dough intently. Parfeil and I quietly gave

her moral support from behind.

“Now, the dough is finished,” the cook said. “Next, we’ll place some of it in this cup.”

They poured a third of the dough into the cup, added some berry jam to the center, and then filled the cup with more dough.

“If you pour in too much, it will overflow as the steam cooks it and it expands. Make sure to pour just enough into it.”

A piece of cloth was placed over the cup before letting it steam. Doing that ensured that steam droplets wouldn’t drop over the cake.

“If too much water drips down onto the cake, it’ll get soggy. The cloth will shield the cake from the droplets,” the cook explained to us. I wrote down what she was saying in my notes.

Steaming the cake took about ten minutes. Lady Opera took off the cover and was greeted by a plume of steam. She was shocked at how much steam there was. Once the plume settled, we peered into the cup. A fluffy, white steamed cake sat inside.

“Ah, it is fluffed up wonderfully! Almost like the white volcano of Diamant,” Lady Opera remarked.

“It turned out even better than I expected,” I said.

“That looks delicious!” Parfeil exclaimed.

We each had a piece of the cake while standing. It seemed like Lady Opera’s experiences eating buffet-style were helping her adapt quickly to eating like this.

I blew on my piece of cake to cool it down and then took a bite.

“Mmm!”

The cake was unbelievably soft, fluffy, and slightly sweet. Its taste contrasted with the sweet and sour berry jam inside it, which helped accentuate the jam’s flavor further.

Lady Opera’s eyes glittered as she ate a bite of the cake. “This is such a delicious pastry! This is truly a delicacy befitting Diamant!”

She seemed to approve of the cake. I was sure that other nobles would love this new delicacy too.

“What should we name this delicacy?” the cook asked.

I looked at Parfeil, but she only shook her head, seemingly having no ideas.

“Aura, what do you think?” I asked.

“Since we made it in the image of the white mountain, how about ‘mont blanc’?” Lady Opera suggested.

“Mont blanc! What a stylish name! That’s perfect!”

“Right?”

We’d managed to come up with a delicacy and its name. Now, we just had to find someone to be in charge of making it. I turned to the head cook to ask if she knew anyone who’d be interested, and she actually nominated herself.

“To tell you the truth, I will be resigning from my post as head cook by next month,” she told us. Apparently, she had come to that decision because her youngest child would be coming of age soon. “If I can be of assistance, then I would like to help out with your work.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I know I can trust you with this.”

The head cook also said that she’d ask her friends and acquaintances if anyone else wanted to help too. All my worries were being resolved one by one, and things were going very well. It seemed that the locals wanted to help make Diamant a livelier place to be.

The cooks were also planning to come up with a drink to serve alongside the other delicacies. There were several herbs that were native to the Diamant region, and locals made herbal teas from them that they drank every day.

“The teas will be difficult to drink as they are, so we’ll try to come up with some variations on them,” the head cook said.

“Yes, please do.”

Now, all the matters relating to food and drink were resolved…

However, Lady Opera muttered, “If only there were some kind of food people could bring back to the capital as a souvenir…”

Lady Opera was right. The Jeweled Snow Hot Spring Lotion wasn’t enough as a souvenir on its own. But before I could start thinking too much about that problem, the head cook suggested that we take a break. I tasted the local herbal tea as we did.

“This tea is good for your body, but a lot of people don’t like the taste. Those people will bite into snowflower sugar while drinking it,” the cook said.

On the saucer, underneath the cup, sat a sugar crystal in the shape of a flower in bloom.

“Huh? This is sugar?” I said, surprised.

“Yes. It seems that sugar crystals created with magic turn into this form when they’re exposed to cold weather,” explained the

head cook. A researcher who had been investigating the phenomenon had apparently once concluded that it was a result of the Great Spirit of Snow's protection.

"It's beautiful. Almost like a snow jewel," I assessed.

"Millefie, this is it! We should make this the souvenir!"

I was surprised at Lady Opera's suggestion. But she was right—the shape of these crystals was quite rare. If someone brought these out at a tea party, it'd be the talk of the town.

"In that case, if you serve these snowflower sugars alongside local herbal teas, they'd make for great advertising," the cook suggested.

I immediately agreed.

Still, the herbal teas were incredibly bitter. Even chewing on the snowflower sugar barely helped with the taste. We had to hope that the head cook would come through with some other tea varieties.

"Oh, I just thought of this, but what if we added some toasted caramel? I'll make some right now." Right then, the head cook whipped some up. She put the caramel right into the tea.

I was excited to try it and took a sip from my cup.

"Ah, it's delicious!" I cried out.

The pleasant taste of the caramel neutralized the herbal tea's bitterness. It wasn't overly sweet, so biting into the snowflower sugar made the taste just right.

"Let's go with this," I said.

"All right," replied the head cook.

I was relieved that this topic had been resolved.

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I was writing down notes on our progress when someone knocked on the door. Parfeil answered it and turned to me with an awkward expression on her face.

"Parfeil, who is it?"

"Um... It's Lady Fenetra," she said. "She seems to want to talk to you."

It would be uncouth to turn her away when she had come all the way here. I had no choice in the matter, so I asked Parfeil to let her in.

After a quick greeting, Fenetra approached me. I motioned for her to sit on the couch, and she gracefully sat down. Van should have asked Marquis de Noisette for her to refrain from interacting with us, but it looked like she'd gone ahead and met me by herself. I couldn't help but be scared to talk to her face-to-face after hearing about her terrible actions from one of her maids.

Parfeil, seemingly having sensed my trepidation, sat right beside me. She was able to do this without issue right now as we were both attendants of equal standing.

I broke the ice. "So, what brings you here?"

"I have a request for you," Fenetra said.

What could the lady of House Noisette possibly ask of me, a woman disguised as a mere attendant? I braced myself for what it could be.

"I would like for you to recommend me as a concubine to the Dragon Duke."

"Excuse me?!"

"Are you not Lord Vacherin's favorite concubine?" she asked.

I was at a loss for words. *Just how could she possibly see me as the Dragon Duke's favorite concubine?*

"To tell you the truth, when I was much younger, I had been selected as a candidate to be engaged to the Lord Dragon Duke," she began. "However, in my youth, I had no confidence in myself, so I refused. To this day, I truly regret my decision. There had been talks of holding another selection for the Dragon Duke's fiancée, but while I dawdled, thinking about whether I was fit to be his better half, news that Lord Vacherin had gotten married reached Diamant..."

Listening to Fenetra's side made it feel like I had come in and stolen Van when he already had a fiancée selected for him. It was a strange feeling, to say the least.

"I think I would be a good fit as his concubine, so I came here to ask you to recommend me to him," Fenetra concluded.

I could only sigh in response. *What a ridiculous request.*

"First, may I say something?"

"Please."

"I am *not* the Dragon Duke's concubine," I said.

"But when Lord Vacherin heard that you went missing during the blizzard, he rushed out of the mansion to look for you. Even so, do you still insist that you are not his lover?"

“That’s right.”

Fenetra looked confused. “Then what *are* you to him?” she pressed in a soft voice.

“I am merely his personal maid. That’s all,” I answered.

Fenetra covered her mouth with her hand and gazed at me, seemingly in disbelief.

Well, I’m actually his wife, but I definitely shouldn’t reveal that to her right now.

I had thought that our conversation would end there, but Fenetra didn’t back down. “Then, Miss Millefie, could you please recommend me as a concubine for the Dragon Duke?”

“The Dragon Duke has only just gotten married. Where in the world would you find anyone who would recommend a concubine to a newlywed man?”

“It’s just that I have not heard a single word about their marriage being favorable…” she said.

In other words, she’s asking if our marriage was one of political convenience. In that case, I’d love to ask her just what she thinks Van had to gain by marrying the daughter of House Forêt Noire.

The Dragon Duchy of Éclair had nothing to gain by marrying a random noble’s daughter. In fact, that was the entire reason Van’s councillors had been against our marriage.

“Regardless, I am not in the position to recommend you as a concubine,” I told her. “Please give up on this idea.”

“But…!”

Apparently, Fenetra had been ordered by her father Marquis de Noisette to stay away from the Dragon Duke, so she had banked all her hopes on approaching me. She started sobbing profusely, seemingly out of shock from being refused. I motioned to Fenetra’s attendant behind her to take her back to her room. The attendant supported Fenetra as they left.

When I heard the door close, I let out a big sigh. “What a ridiculous turn of events,” I complained.

Parfeil nodded in agreement. “My, my, nominating herself as a concubine for the newlywed Dragon Duke? She’s quite a gutsy woman!”

“Parfeil, there truly are all sorts of people out there,” I mused.

“I agree, milady.”

Parfeil and I were completely dumbfounded at what had just

transpired.

I thought that Van would pay me a visit that evening, but he didn't show up. It wasn't as if we had promised to meet up with each other, but I couldn't help but feel lonely.

"Milady, please get some rest," Parfeil suggested. "If the Lord Dragon Duke shows up at our doorstep, I will wake you up."

"Okay. I don't think Van will come, though, so you should get some rest too."

"Yes, milady."

I lay down on the bed and the white squirrels huddled around me. Parfeil lay down next to me. I drifted off to sleep surrounded by such soft, fluffy creatures.

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Parfeil woke me up the next morning. I kept yawning, perhaps because I hadn't gotten enough sleep.

"Parfeil, I would like some strong tea today," I requested.

"Yes, milady."

While waiting for the tea, I put on the powder blue dress that Parfeil had laid out for me. The white squirrels clung to my back as they cleverly fastened all of the dress's buttons.

Parfeil returned with a tray in hand as I covered up a yawn. On the tray was a cup of steaming hot tea.

"I brought some herbal tea the head cook made," Parfeil said.

"Seems like the perfect thing to wake me up." The herbal tea that Parfeil brought me was more intense than her usual brew—the ideal thing to stave away my drowsiness.

I had decided with Lady Opera and Madeleine that we would take things easy today. We had been working ourselves to the bone the past few days to prepare the hot springs resort. Lady Opera had asked me whether Van and I had done anything you'd typically do on a honeymoon yet, and I hadn't been able to answer her. So, today, we were on break.

I wanted to spend some time with Van, but he had gone out with Marquis de Noisette to visit the villages. He had already left by the time I woke up, so I couldn't meet up with him.

And so, I spent breakfast with Lady Opera, Madeleine, and Parfeil.

“I was not aware that my brother would be going out on a trip today. I should have talked to him beforehand,” Lady Opera said.

“Since the trip was already on his schedule, there’s not really much we can do,” I replied.

“Millefie, I hope he comes back quickly,” Madeleine said to me.

“I hope so too.”

I wasn’t going to go so far as to ask him to take me along on his outings. I would have been satisfied with just sharing a cup of tea with him. As I expressed such sentiments, Lady Opera looked at me with tears in her eyes.

“Millefie, you are a saint,” she said. “If I were your husband, I would never let go of you for the entire day.”

I think being stuck to someone for an entire day presents a problem of its own, I thought. *I’m glad I’m married to Van.*

After breakfast, we all went our separate ways. Parfeil and I were about to discuss what we should do when we were interrupted by loud knocks on the door. Parfeil rushed to open it up.

It was one of Van’s knights.

“M-Milady, it’s horrible! The Lord Dragon Duke has been stabbed in the stomach with a knife!” the knight yelled.

“Wh-What?!” I doubted my ears for a moment, but there was no mistake in the knight’s report. I felt goose bumps pop up all over my skin, and cold fear settled into the pit of my stomach. “Where is the Lord Dragon Duke now?”

“The others are bringing him back to the mansion. He is currently unconscious,” the knight reported.

“Okay.”

The knight’s face was pale with shock, and I reassured him that things were going to be fine. I had no idea if things *were* going to be fine, but it was all I could say to comfort him. I didn’t want him to blame himself for not being able to protect Van.

It seemed that Van had been able to transform and heal his wound. While he’d managed to seal the wound shut, he had collapsed upon reverting to his human form. Though the wound wasn’t life-threatening, it was possible that some kind of poison had been applied to the blade. The knights were trying to determine what kind of substance it was. The culprit had apparently committed suicide on the spot.

“Parfeil, we have to get to Van,” I told her.

“Yes, milady!”

The two of us headed to Van’s room. A number of village doctors and spellcasters were crowded in front of the room. There wasn’t much that I could do, because I, as a mere attendant, had no right to stay close to the Dragon Duke.

Lady Opera and Madeleine also arrived at the scene shortly after me.

“Millefie, what is the situation with the Lord Dragon Duke?!” Lady Opera asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I see…”

I thought Lady Opera would rush straight to Van’s side at that, but she stayed put. If she had been her old self, she would have let her emotions get the better of her. Still, I could tell that she was very anxious.

I gave her a big hug to comfort her. “Aura, he’s going to be okay. He’ll be okay.”

“I-I know. I know…” After a while, Lady Opera seemed to have calmed down enough to talk. “Millefie, I am truly grateful to you.”

“I didn’t do anything special.”

“That is not true. I am grateful just for you being at my side. It is reassuring to know that I would not be alone if anything happened to the Dragon Duke.”

Madeleine also held Lady Opera’s trembling hand. The three of us huddled together, praying for Van’s recovery.

Three hours later, we were finally permitted to see Van. Unexpectedly, he was sleeping peacefully with a calm expression on his face. Lady Opera seemed relieved upon seeing him.

One of the knights noticed me and wordlessly bowed deep to me. Apparently, he wanted to report the details of what had transpired to us. We all went to a different room.

He had a grave expression on his face as he started to recall the strange events in the village. “Um… It’s a bit difficult to put into words, but we were greeted with an unprecedented level of enthusiasm in the village.”

According to him, over a hundred villagers had approached Van and surrounded him. The knights had tried their best to keep the

villagers away from Van, but as a result, Van himself had been left poorly guarded.

“I felt that the villagers were clearly acting strange.”

Apparently, the villagers’ eyes had seemed unfocused, and they’d all looked ready to cause a riot at any moment. It had been completely different from the enthusiasm and excitement that one would normally feel upon seeing the Dragon Duke in person.

“We also started feeling lightheaded as we were exposed to their excitement… The next thing we knew, someone had stabbed the Dragon Duke in the stomach with a sharp knife.”

While the knights had managed to suppress the culprit, they’d had a drug in their mouth and committed suicide. None of the knights had recognized the culprit, and they hadn’t been able to figure out where they had come from either.

Now that the perpetrator was dead, the truth had been lost forever.

After finishing his report, the knight wiped a copious amount of sweat from his brow. His face was completely pale, perhaps because Lady Opera had been glaring at him from start to finish. I ordered the knight to stand down, and he bowed deeply before exiting the room.

“Millefie, what do you think of the knight’s report?” Lady Opera asked me.

“I don’t know. But I think it’s clear that the person who stabbed Van wasn’t working alone.”

“I agree.” Lady Opera then began speculating based on what she’d heard. “First, I cannot help but think that the villagers were being manipulated by someone.”

“That might be the case,” I agreed.

On my sixteenth birthday, the Dragon Duke had shown himself in public for the first time in a century. Back then, while all of the dragonkin had been elated and excited to see him, none of them went as far as trying to force themselves through the crowd to get close to him. Everyone who knew the Dragon Duke respected him, and those who didn’t looked upon him with fear and awe. None would dare get close to such a person. Because of all that, it was highly possible that someone was manipulating those villagers with magic.

“But why would they want to kill Van and not me?”

Until now, I had been the intended victim of all the previous assassination attempts. Suddenly, the target had shifted to Van.

There were too many things we didn't know.

Right now, the only other person I knew who was acting strange was Fenetra.

"Do you think that Fenetra was the one who ordered the culprit to kill Van?" I then asked.

"Was she not in love with him? I cannot imagine her plotting to kill my brother."

Fenetra's love for Van was unrequited. While she had tried to become his concubine, she had been rejected, and—

"She lamented that she would never be by Van's side, so she tried to kill him...?"

I shuddered at the possibility. Just last night, she had come straight to me to try to nominate herself as Van's concubine. I told Lady Opera about that.

"I cannot believe that she *still* thinks that we are my brother's concubines," she replied.

Is Fenetra truly the culprit? I asked Lady Opera for her opinion, but she could only confess that she didn't know.

"If it were me, I would plot the murder of the Dragon Duchess consort and the attendant 'Millefie,' as she had refused my request to become a concubine."

"You're right."

The lives of dragonkin, especially those of the Dragon Duke's house, were long. It was very possible that the Dragon Duke would find a new lover after his wife was gone. So why would Fenetra try to murder Van if he was the target of her affection? It was a complete mystery.

A few moments later, we heard that Van had woken up, so we rushed straight to his room. The squirrels seemed to be concerned for him as well, since they had leaped onto my back and shoulders. As we ran, the knights pointed us straight to his room and opened the doors for us.

"Van!!!" I shouted. As I approached him, he raised his hand toward me and I held it in mine. "Your hand is cold," I said.

"I made it cold so you can warm it up."

"There's no way you can control your body temperature like that."

Van seemed to be healthy enough to joke around, so I felt relieved. He looked around at all of our distraught expressions and apologized for worrying us all. Roche, who was standing by right next to Van, bowed deeply to him in response.

“Brother, what exactly happened to you?”

“I don’t know myself,” he told Lady Opera. “At first, I thought that someone in the crowd just elbowed my stomach really hard.”

The crowd had apparently grown so dense that he couldn’t tell the villagers and his knights apart. He had also lost sight of Roche, who had just been in his line of vision moments earlier.

“I could only describe it as a wave of passion and enthusiasm,” Van said. According to him, he’d felt a dull pain in his abdomen, and the next thing he knew, he had been stabbed with a knife. “The incident is still a complete mystery to me. It felt like the crowd’s feverish enthusiasm was getting to me too.”

I asked if it was some kind of magic that someone had cast, and Van affirmed my suspicions, saying that there was no mistaking it.

“It’s a bit different from the type of illusion magic that fakes an emotion. I can’t be sure, but it might be some kind of dark magic—forbidden magic that forcibly manipulates a person’s emotions,” Van surmised.

Lady Opera had once talked to me about forbidden magic. Many of those spells were dangerous, and among them, there were some that not even the royal family was immune to.

“Even I don’t have in-depth knowledge about dark magic,” Van confessed.

“That’s fine.”

The reason dark magic was forbidden was that it was dangerous and unethical. Many dark magic spells required the use of a person’s flesh. Other dark magic users would also recommend consuming monster meat, which was normally not eaten by regular people. Monster flesh was often deeply contaminated by mana, and consuming it could induce a rejection reaction in the person eating it. The mana contained in the monster’s flesh was several times more plentiful than what was normally present in a person’s body, and people were unable to contain that much. However, dark magic users would eat monster flesh without flinching. The damage they’d normally suffer from eating it would instead be transferred to the person being offered as a sacrifice

for their spell, so the user would be unharmed.

Dark magic users could do things like extend one's lifespan in exchange for another's life, fuse different monsters into completely new creatures, or burn down entire villages to complete a single spell. In any case, many dark magic users performed unspeakable and abominable acts.

Still, there were legitimate users of dark magic. Instead of working with the flesh of others, they would use their own to cast their spells. Because of the cruel acts done by other dark magic practitioners over the years, these legitimate users were often the targets of discrimination. I couldn't help but sympathize with their plight.

"The one who tried to assassinate me is unmistakably a practitioner of dark magic," Van deduced.

"Do you have any idea who might be behind it?" I asked.

"No...is what I wanted to say, but I think I do."

"Who is it?"

Van's finger glowed. He swiped it through the air and started writing. The words "Fenetra de Noisette" floated in the air for a moment and then vanished.

"Speaking of which, she showed up in my room last night," Van said.

"Did she come to you directly to ask if she can be your concubine?"

"No, it was something else."

What he said Fenetra had asked for was difficult to believe.

"She came to my room to ask if I could sleep with her," Van revealed. She had told Van that she would be satisfied to have him even just once. "Of course, I refused her advances. I felt disturbed and disgusted, so I told her to never show herself before me ever again. That might have been why she tried to kill me."

Her brazen actions left me speechless.

"So, her affection for my brother turned into murderous intent just because he had rejected her? What a horrible woman," Lady Opera opined.

"Perhaps since her feelings for him were so strong, once they became negative, they became a powerful impetus for her actions," I speculated.

Van crossed his arms as if mulling things over.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“I just feel that there’s something off about Fenetra,” Van replied.

“Like what?”

“I can’t help but think that she’s a completely different person now from how she was as a child.”

Parfeil seemed to have something to say about this too. “Um, about that… I felt that there was something wrong about Lady Fenetra, right from the first time we met her.”

“What do you mean, Parfeil?” I asked.

“Her dress didn’t fit her body right,” she said.

A lady of the House Noisette would have had all her dresses custom-made and tailored. But according to Parfeil, she’d found it strange that her sleeves and seams had been too short. Her shoulder lines had been off as well. Parfeil had been my attendant for years, and it took her sharp eyes to notice such a small thing.

“Of course, I can’t discount the possibility of it being just my imagination…” she added.

There was also the possibility of House Noisette attempting to keep up appearances as a rich and wealthy family while actually being in dire straits. Perhaps they were trying to offer up their daughter as a concubine to curry favor with the Dragon Duke.

Van offered his opinion on the matter. “I *did* think that Marquis de Noisette was acting odd from time to time.”

According to Van, it was like the man was out of it, always staring into space. But he had always been a kind, gentle, and introverted man, so Van thought that he was just like that.

“Call in the marquis. I need to hear his side,” Van commanded.

A knight who had been standing by bowed to him and carried out his order. A few moments later, Marquis de Noisette entered the room. He appeared to be relieved upon seeing Van, and there didn’t seem to be anything unusual about him either.

“Lord Dragon Duke, I am heartened to see that you are well,” the marquis said, greeting him.

“Yes, thank you for your service. I have something to ask you,” Van said.

“Of course, milord. What could it be?”

“Has there been anything unusual happening around Diamant lately?”

“No, milord, I cannot think of anything,” the marquis said.

I didn’t sense anything odd about the marquis. It didn’t seem like he was being controlled or manipulated.

Van continued his interrogation. “What about the wealth of House Noisette?”

“Our wealth?” the marquis echoed.

“Yes. If there is anything you need help with financially, I am willing to lend you aid.”

“I am quite thankful for the offer, milord, but we are currently not in dire straits.”

House Noisette had been profiting from the sales of warm fur and silk made from indoor-raised silkworms. While the Diamant region was known as a barren land, it still had many unique specialties.

“Speaking of which, I saw a lot of interesting structures around the villages. Is that where you are producing silk?” I asked. I had been meaning to ask about those structures before, but because of the incident with one of the Burrowless, it had completely slipped my mind.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Marquis de Noisette didn’t seem to be lying. I couldn’t picture him trying to give his daughter away as a concubine because of poverty or to curry favor.

“Finally, Marquis, I would like to ask about your daughter, Fenetra.”

“My daughter?” The marquis’s brows drooped as if he was feeling guilty about something.

Is he aware of his daughter’s crimes?

Van went straight to the point and spoke frankly. “I suspect that your daughter is involved with this assassination incident. What do you think, Marquis?”

“M-My daughter? There is no way! She cannot *possibly* be involved!” the marquis cried out. He explained that his daughter had adored and respected Van ever since she was a child. He insisted that she would never try to kill the Dragon Duke.

“I feel that the Lady Fenetra I knew as a child and Lady Fenetra today are completely different people. Do you have any thoughts on that, Marquis?” Van asked, pressing him further.

“My daughter changed? M-My daughter? M-M-M-My d-d-d—”

The marquis suddenly started acting very strangely. His head bent back and his eyes rolled back into his head, exposing their whites. He started floundering about the room, and the knights had to support him so he wouldn't fall over.

But in the next moment, he regained lucidity and flashed us a big smile.

"My daughter is the same as always. While she was quiet and introverted as a child, she has become more active and lively through interacting with the villagers," the marquis said.

It wasn't normal—he was answering like nothing had happened despite being restrained by the knights. There was no doubt that someone was manipulating a part of Marquis de Noisette's mind.

"Knights, arrest Marquis de Noisette!" Van ordered.

"Yes, milord!" The knights dragged the marquis out of the room.

Even as he was being dragged out, the man kept blabbering praise for Fenetra.

"You may not take my word for it as her father, but she is a very kind daughter. Lord Dragon Duke, I am sure that you will love her!"

Madeleine must have been terrified—she was trembling. I put my arms around her to calm her down.

A few messenger knights entered the room, trading places with the knights who had escorted Marquis de Noisette out. They had come from the capital on wyvernback to deliver a report.

"Lord Dragon Duke, the substance on the knife has been identified," a knight began. An alchemist in the capital who specialized in poisons had examined the blade used in the stabbing.

Van's expression became more and more grim as he pored over the report given by the knights.

"Brother, what was the substance applied to the weapon?" Lady Opera asked.

"It was roro mushroom extract," Van announced.

"What?!" I exclaimed. I became dizzy and my body felt wobbly. Parfeil immediately supported me before I could fall over. "No way... That can't be! Van, are you okay?!"

"Yes, there's no need to worry," he said.

Roro mushrooms were a tasty treat for normal humans, but for dragonkin, they were deadly poison. They were fatal to dragonkin, and even just touching them would be enough to cause symptoms

of poisoning to appear. In the era before Charlotte had been born, there had been an incident where dragonkin who had been invited to the Kingdom of Sacristan had died one after the other. For a while, their cause of death had remained unknown, but it had been thought that they were murdered as the kingdom's citizens had been unharmed. However, it had been found out that the sautéed roro mushrooms served at the kingdom's banquet had been the cause.

After that incident, it became forbidden to harvest roro mushrooms or to bring them into the Dragon Duchy of Éclair. In the hundred years since Charlotte's death, it'd been thought that these mushrooms had gone extinct. Since they could no longer be found in the wild, they were only being cultivated by a handful of farmers in the Kingdom of Sacristain and its neighboring countries. And as the sale and purchase of these mushrooms were also forbidden, it was thought that those farmers had long since shut down their businesses.

"My body differs from that of the average dragonkin, so I won't die just by touching or eating roro mushrooms," Van said. "Still, it was enough to knock me out."

It was fortunate that that'd been the extent of the damage to Van's body.

Still, it terrifies me to think what could have happened if his body weren't special.

"Mille-Feuille, it looks like it was the right call to disguise you as one of my attendants," Van said.

If I had come here as the Dragon Duchess consort, I would've had to accompany Van on his trips. Though we still had no idea what the culprit's motives were, they might have made an attempt on my life. Or, if I had witnessed them trying to kill Van, I might have tried to shield him from harm. In that case, *I* might have been the one to die from the roro mushroom's poison.

One of the big mysteries here was the use of roro mushroom poison to attack Van. If their goal was to assassinate him, it would've been enough to just stab him in the stomach. Were they aware of Van's unnatural vitality and wanted to make sure that he died?

"The culprit wouldn't have been able to obtain those mushrooms overnight. I can only surmise that this attack had

been planned for a long time," I speculated aloud.

"You're right. People even go as far as to say that roro mushrooms are extinct."

And even then, why would Fenetra, a dragonkin woman, use something that's so poisonous to us?

"Is Fenetra *not* the culprit…?" Madeleine muttered.

Indeed, I considered that it could be someone else too, but… "There's no one else who seems suspicious," I argued.

"Yes, but I cannot imagine her impulsively using roro mushroom poison to commit this crime."

It would have taken her a long amount of time to obtain the mushrooms and prepare an assassin to deliver the poison to Van. This certainly had been in the making for quite a while.

Should we just ask her directly? I can't imagine she'd answer any of our questions outright, though…

"Mille-Feuille, you mentioned that Fenetra was hiding something in the underground atelier and that she blew up at a maid who peeked in there, didn't you?" Van asked me.

"Oh, right! There might be some kind of proof down there."

We all decided that we should head to the underground atelier. Van and I were surrounded by our royal knights, just in case something terrible happened. I thought they were being overprotective, but I let it slide, considering an attempt had just been made on Van's life.

As we reached the door to the basement, we were greeted by a gruesome scene—a bloody magic circle had been drawn on it.

"What is *that*?" Van gestured at the ghastly sight.

I shuddered. "How disturbing."

The butler accompanying us tilted his head in confusion. He mumbled that there had been no such circle drawn on the door this morning.

"My apologies. I will clean it up this instant—"

"Get away from that!" Van bellowed.

The butler was about to wipe the magic circle clean, but the moment his rag touched it, it began to emit a strange glow.

Van quickly grabbed the butler by the nape. "Get down!!!" he yelled—just as the magic circle exploded.

I ducked, and Parfeil covered me with her own body.

Blam! A thundering noise rang out. The explosion blew the

basement's door clean off, and the nearby walls and floor shattered from the force of the blast. I braced myself for impact, but it never came. When I opened my eyes, I saw that Van had put up a magic barrier to shield everyone.

I had almost let my guard down in relief, but it wasn't time yet. "Stay on guard!" Van shouted. "There's something strange going on!"

At the same time, red letters began appearing on the wall. Another magic circle appeared in the basement's doorway.

"What's going on?!" I cried.

Lady Opera's voice trembled as she read the spell's red letters. She warned us not to touch anything. "Offer... Sacrifice... Attack...?"

It would seem that this atelier had been the culprit's base of operations. It was likely that they had put all these spells in place to deter anyone from entering.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of people running toward us. Before I knew it, we were surrounded.

"What?!"

The mansion's attendants and people from the villages were all around us. They had scrolls attached to their faces and were brandishing weapons at us. They began attacking us indiscriminately.

"Everyone! They are being controlled by dark magic! You must not harm them!!!" Lady Opera shouted at the knights protecting us.

There were about thirty assailants, and all of them were residents and villagers from Diamant. The knights appeared hesitant to attack these people as they were clearly not fighting of their own volition.

Van, meanwhile, showed no hesitation on his face. He clearly had a plan for what to do next. He began shouting orders at everyone.

"Roche, I will leave this place to you."

"Yessir!"

"Also, be sure to protect Opera. Bunny, I will leave Madeleine in your care."

"Van, her name is Parfeil," I corrected him.

"I'm aware," Van said. "Mille-Feuille, you're coming with me. We'll be interrogating Fenetra."

“Huh? Me? Won’t I just hold you back?”

“No, not at all!!!” Van declared loudly. Since he’d said it with such conviction, I felt that I should just go with him. However, people who were mind-controlled blocked the way out left and right. Right as I was about to ask Van what we’d do, a magic circle appeared on his back. The next moment, dragon wings sprouted from the same spot.

I had no idea that he could transform just one part of his body, I thought as I gazed at Van flapping his wings.

“You never told me that you could do that,” I said.

“Well, now you know. Mille-Feuille, I’m scooping you up.”

“I’m ready.”

Van lifted me into the air and took off. The hallway’s ceiling was quite high, so we didn’t need to worry about the villagers’ weapons reaching us as we flew past them.

“I’m glad none of them came with bows.”

“Even if they had, I’d block the arrows with my magic. I won’t let any of them reach you.”

I tightened my hold on Van to show my appreciation.

The second floor of the Noisette mansion was where the living quarters were. There, attendants who could use magic were lying in wait for us. While they were not as well trained as Van’s forces, they could still launch fireballs and water arrows at Van as we flew through. Van was able to block all the projectiles, but there were too many—getting anywhere took too much effort. The two of us were getting stalled here.

“Dragonkin, kneel before me!!!” Van bellowed out.

The air around us vibrated from Van’s roar. The scrolls that had been plastered to the attendants’ faces came off and fell onto the floor. I had no idea if their brainwashing had worn off too, but the attendants collapsed right where they had been standing. They had all fallen asleep and were breathing softly. It was best that they had done so since the mansion was in such a state of disarray.

Van swiftly flew past the sleeping attendants. “Those who use magic know the true value of words. That’s why my command reached them,” he explained.

“I see.”

While attacking at range with spells was certainly powerful, it

also had certain weaknesses. For example, the people armed with weapons had been unaffected by Van's voice, but those who wielded magic easily fell under Van's control.

We arrived at Fenetra's private quarters at last, and Van kicked down the door.

"She's not here," he said.

There was no sign of Fenetra inside. I peered into her bedroom and saw a number of dresses lined up like she had been about to put one on. Among those garments, an elegant dress that I had previously seen her wearing stood out. She must have really liked that one as I recalled her wearing it two or three times during our stay.

"Van, can you track the mana from this dress?"

"I can, but a few of Fenetra's attendants probably touched it too, so I might not be able to... Hm?"

"What's wrong?"

"There seems to be a spell cast on this dress. It's strange," Van said. According to him, the spell had been weaved into every tiny seam in order to make it difficult to notice. It was cast so meticulously that even Van had to pay especially close attention to detect it. Once he finished analyzing the spell, he shuddered.

"There's mana on this dress from someone who isn't a dragonkin," Van said. But at the same time, his brow furrowed, and he covered his mouth as if he were about to throw up. "Wh-What is this mana?! It's been concealed with magic, but it smells horrible!"

The mana apparently smelled like a rotting corpse. Mana obtained from monster or human flesh emitted such a smell.

"This is mana from an outsider, not a dragonkin," Van concluded. While he was unable to distinguish Fenetra's mana from that of her attendants, he was at least able to tell if it belonged to a dragonkin or not. The rotting scent of mana from someone who wasn't a dragonkin emanated from the dress.

"Speaking of which, I heard that they also found non-dragonkin mana when someone tried to blow me up," I recalled.

"It might have the same source as this one, then," Van suggested.

Could these crimes have been part of a single plot? Van hadn't been directly involved with the investigation into the explosion

incident, so he wasn't able to say if the mana was from the same person.

"Maybe this dress was imported from outside the Dragon Duchy?" I suggested. If the dress had been imported, it must have passed through many hands before it got here. The mana could have adhered to this dress during that process.

"I could only detect one source of mana that came from someone who wasn't a dragonkin. If this had come from outside the duchy, it would have multiple different sources of non-dragonkin mana."

"Hmm, now that you mention it..."

That means that someone who isn't a dragonkin has infiltrated this mansion.

"In that case, does this mean that Fenetra isn't the culprit?" I asked.

"I can't deny that possibility."

The source could be Fenetra herself, but it could also be one of her maids or servants. There were just too many possibilities to consider.

Just who is orchestrating all these incidents, and for what purpose?

"Would you be able to track down this outsider's mana?"

"I'll try." Van then transformed into a medium-sized dragon and started sniffing around on the floor.

"Any luck?"

"I can smell it, but it reeks so badly that I feel sick."

"Hang in there."

Van turned to me with a grim look in his eyes. "Mille-Feuille, once we solve all these incidents, I want to get a good whiff of you instead."

"I *thought* you were going to say something important."

"I'm begging you! I don't think I can make it unless you promise me!"

"Fine, I will. Now *please* find whatever's making that smell!" I begged.

"You got it."

Van went back to the floor and started tracking the scent once more. Once we got out into the hallway, the attendants attacked us again. This time, the magic users were gone, and the ones left were wielding weapons instead.

“Out of my way!” Van roared as he knocked the attendants away with a swipe of his tail.

However, they swiftly got back on their feet and started coming at him once more. This time, his voice couldn’t reach them.

I suddenly remembered that the magic users had regained control of themselves once the scrolls on their faces had been removed.

In that case…

I yelled out an order to my squirrels. “All of you! Remove the scrolls from their faces!”

“Squeak!!!” One after the other, the squirrels leaped onto the attendants and craftily peeled off the scrolls on their faces. Once the scrolls had been removed, the attendants stopped moving. Much like the magic users from earlier, they crumpled to the floor and began to sleep peacefully.

Thanks to the white squirrels, Van was able to resume his tracking. The scent trail continued onto the ground floor and finally led us back to the underground atelier. The sinister magic circle that had appeared earlier was still on its now-doorless entryway.

We met up with Roche and his knights again.

“Lord Dragon Duke!”

“Roche, are you all right?” Van asked.

“Yes, milord!”

Lady Opera, Madeleine, and Parfeil all appeared to be unharmed. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The attendants and villagers had all collapsed and were sleeping on the floor. Lady Opera had also apparently realized that they’d stop moving once the scrolls on their faces had been removed.

“Opera, you did a great job.”

“Of course I did. Anyway, brother, we are in trouble! I have finished analyzing the spell that showed up on the wall.”

Lady Opera had figured out the meaning behind the ominous words on the wall: offer, sacrifice, attack. What she then revealed to us was utter madness.

“This large-scale spell is going to sacrifice everyone in this mansion and create a Corrupt Dragon!”

“What?!”

Corrupt Dragons were remnants of dragons who had fallen into darkness. They were the most wicked of all dragons and were said to be pawns of the dark lord. Duchesse had previously summoned a Corrupt Dragon, but that one didn't even compare to the one that this spell was going to bring. The culprit was going to use Van—the Dragon Duke himself—as a conduit to convert the life of everyone in the mansion into mana and then transform him into the most powerful Corrupt Dragon to ever exist.

"I will not let such a wicked plot come to fruition!!!" Van roared out. He lifted his tail and then slammed it down onto the floor repeatedly, smacking the magic circle floating in the entranceway each time. After repeated blows, the circle began to crack like glass, then faded away. While it seemed like a brutish way of solving the problem, Lady Opera explained that he was actually neutralizing the spell with one of his own.

Still, the text on the wall didn't disappear. The source of the spell seemed to be somewhere else.

"Everyone, follow me! That includes everyone who isn't fighting!"

Van had judged that while the spell to create a Corrupt Dragon was still active, the safest location would be by his side. We all huddled around him as we descended underground.

We were shocked at what was at the bottom of the staircase—there sat a wide-open space, about as large as the palace's grand hall. I couldn't fathom why such a large underground hall had been created.

"Don't let your guard down just because you can't see anyone," Van warned.

Van was trying to raise our morale, but I could see that even he was trembling slightly. Since this was the enemy's base of operations, the rotten scent must have been strongest down here.

I noticed a part of the wall wavering, like a mirage.

What could that be?

I pointed it out to Van, and he took a knife from one of the knights and threw it at the wall. The sound of metal being repelled rang out, and a woman appeared there. She was bound to the wall with chains and handcuffs.

"Who *is* that?"

It was the first time I'd seen this woman. She was slumped over

and appeared to be very malnourished. In any case, we needed to save her.

We waited for Van to give us orders, but it looked like he had just realized something.

“Th-That’s Lady Fenetra!”

“Huh?”

The woman was so thin that her skin was practically hanging off her face. How could she be Fenetra? Why did Van think that it was her?

“I remember the way she looked as a child. There’s no mistaking it—she’s the *real* Lady Fenetra!” Van declared.

If she was the real Fenetra, then the woman we had been interacting with until now had been an impostor. The knights went to remove the real Fenetra’s shackles and rescue her. Apparently, she had been concealed down here with magic.

“Van, what is going on?” I asked.

“Mille-Feuille, stay back. Something is coming.”

“What?”

A malevolent magic circle then appeared in the middle of the great hall. In the center of it, the silhouette of a woman suddenly materialized. Her form soon became clear—she was the woman we had come to know as “Fenetra.”

Van’s tail pricked as he bared his hostility at the woman. “Who are you to steal Lady Fenetra’s identity?”

In contrast to Van’s anger, the woman smiled and answered his question calmly. “My name is Streusel de Sacristain, princess of the Kingdom of Sacristain!”

Her introduction made me shudder. She was part of the same royal family as Charlotte.

“You imprisoned Lady Fenetra and stole her identity while controlling and brainwashing innocent people. What are you after?!” Van demanded.

“How *dare* you act so high and mighty,” the woman hissed.

“What?!”

“The fiend who destroyed my kingdom dares to play innocent? Have some shame!”

Streusel muttered an incantation and swiftly cast a spell. A strong blast of wind magic appeared from a magic circle and was launched at Van. He promptly countered it with a breath of fire.

“How long have you been plotting this foolish scheme?” he asked.

“Eighty-two years. I have waited for so long to enact my revenge,” Streusel said. She had begun plotting her revenge on a winter day—her eighteenth birthday. In other words, she was a hundred years old now.

I was aghast at her revelation. She looked as young as the real Lady Fenetra. There was no doubt that she had been using dark magic to extend her youth.

“You are an abomination for rebelling against time and keeping yourself alive,” Van said, denouncing her.

“And what of you dragonkin, who live for hundreds and hundreds of years? Are you not abominations yourselves?!”

“We dragonkin naturally live for a long time. How can we be abominations when our lifespans are dictated by nature itself?”

“Enough!!!” Streusel shouted. She then cast a different spell, summoning a windstorm this time.

I couldn’t keep myself standing and was almost blasted off my feet, but Parfeil managed to grab onto me. She shielded me from the wind.

“I was told that on the day I was born, the Dragon Duke went into a long, deep sleep and vanished,” she began.

Afterward, as she grew up, her parents—members of the royal family of the Kingdom of Sacristain—had never ceased telling her about their hatred of the Dragon Duke. Her father had been Charlotte’s elder cousin, hailing from a branch of the royal family. Van hadn’t killed the royal family—he had merely exiled them, thinking that they would pose no threat to the dragonkin.

“I can never forgive you, Dragon Duke!” she cried. “You’re the one who stole everything from my proud and honorable parents!”

“Hmph, it would seem that Duchesse’s advice to kill all of the royal family was right all along,” Van sneered. Despite understanding that an incident like this would be a possibility, he had been unable to bring himself to kill innocent members of the royal family.

It had been both a boon and a curse that he could not bring himself to be so cruel and merciless. Spurred by her anger and hatred toward Van, Streusel had sworn revenge and begun dabbling in dark magic.

“Dark magic requires the use of flesh and blood. My first sacrifices were my parents.”

“You sacrificed your *parents*?!” Van blurted out.

“I did,” she admitted. “I had always resented them for complaining and ranting about the dragonkin but never taking action. Since I used their mana for my dark magic, I figured we could all take revenge this way, don’t you agree?”

Madeleine’s face went pale as she listened to Streusel’s story. She looked like she was about to faint, so I told her to sit down and cover her ears.

I didn’t want to hear Streusel’s horrible tale either, but as Charlotte’s reincarnation, I felt that I should know what Streusel had been doing all these years.

“I managed to get my hands on a dragonkin corpse and attempted to take it into myself. However, it turned out that I couldn’t turn the flesh from a corpse into mana…”

Streusel had then plotted to assassinate a dragonkin. Instead of killing her victim, she had taken them with her and consumed them for her dark magic.

“I ran into a problem at that point. The mana of dragonkin was too much for a human to bear.” She had suffered from symptoms similar to the kind of rejection reaction one had from consuming the flesh of monsters. “Still, I managed to overcome it eventually by strengthening my own mana. I started traveling from place to place, consuming flesh whenever I could get my hands on it.”

Eventually, she’d heard that the Dragon Duke was looking for a bride. She had entered the bridal selection and had manipulated events from the shadows. However, she had almost been found out by the duchy’s knights and then gone into hiding in a neighboring country. There, she had managed to deepen her knowledge of dark magic.

“I discovered that I was adept at the type of dark magic that let me manipulate people. It turned out that it was effective against dragonkin, so I used it to get close to the Dragon Duke.”

Streusel had infiltrated parties in high society and gathered information. There, she had learned about a former candidate for Van’s fiancée—Fenetra. She had used her powers and connections to make Van’s councillors her puppets and to attempt to assassinate me, the Dragon Duchess consort. The strange things

about Van's councillors—their unusually rebellious actions and the fact that their personalities had changed completely—had been Streusel's doing all along.

How utterly vexing.

"And I take it that asking to become my concubine was part of your plan all along?" Van continued to press her.

"Of course. I needed to control the Dragon Duke if I wanted the stubborn dragonkin to fall into my hands, after all. It would be difficult without your assistance."

Taking control of someone took a long time. Streusel needed to get close to Van to start that process.

"My desire is to tame the Dragon Duke like the animal you are. I want to take over the Dragon Duchy of Éclair and restore the Kingdom of Sacristain to its rightful place!" Streusel then shook her head. "No, that's not quite right. It's not just *my* desire. It's also the desire of Princess Charlotte, the princess slain by the dragonkin!"

The air trembled upon the mention of her name. Van was furious.

"You know *nothing* about Charlotte!!!" he roared.

"I know *everything* about her. After all, we are both princesses of the Kingdom of Sacristain!" Streusel declared.

"Fool!"

I signaled to Van to calm him down. He nodded, seemingly having received the message.

"Still, I've been constantly tormented by an unexpected element in the way of my plans," Streusel divulged. It seemed that I had been a stumbling block for her ambitions.

"Why didn't you just capture Mille-Feuille like you did with Fenetra and take her place?" Van asked.

"I decided that it was too difficult to abduct her since her security was tighter than I had anticipated."

Streusel had been planning to kill me, take the place of some other woman, and then get close to the Dragon Duke. But while she had been plotting all this, she had gotten word of our expedition to Diamant. Fenetra, who had been Van's ministers' favorite candidate for his wife, had been living in Diamant, so her plan had changed—she'd take Fenetra's place and gain control of Van. Then, she would have free rein over the Dragon Duchy of

Éclair.

Streusel had arrived in Diamant ahead of us. She had abducted the real Fenetra, hidden her underground, and then taken over the mind of Marquis de Noisette. She had succeeded in passing herself off as his daughter and had placed all of the house's attendants under her spell. Since then, she'd been brazenly living as Fenetra.

"I heard that the Dragon Duke would be coming here alone, so I was shocked to see that you had brought your concubines with you."

"Concubines? What are you talking about?" he asked. "They're not my concubines."

"Please, you need not hide anything. I already know."

"You..."

Van declared that he would not be showing her mercy. Streusel's ambitions would end right here, right now.

"I will blast you and your cursed flesh with my breath!" Van roared.

He'll blow up this entire underground chamber if he does that! As if sensing my worries, Roche assured me that Van could launch breaths on a smaller scale.

"Prepare yourself!!!" he cried out.

"No, Dragon Duke, *you* prepare yourself."

"What?!"

What's going on? Parfeil and I braced ourselves as the ground shook with the sound of footsteps. Someone or something was about to enter this underground chamber.

"Guuuooohhh!!!"

More villagers with scrolls attached to their faces entered the great hall, weapons in hand. Their numbers were far greater than those we had encountered upstairs. Over a hundred of them had come, and they started attacking immediately.

"All of you, don't forget that you can stop them by removing the scrolls on their faces! Do *not* kill them!" Van shouted.

Van and his knights were surrounded by masses of villagers and couldn't make a move. Even so, Van managed to cast a barrier around us, preventing anyone from attacking us. Parfeil and my white squirrels exited the barrier and began ripping the scrolls off of the villagers. The attackers collapsed to the floor one after the

other, but they were replaced by other villagers just as quickly. There was no end to them.

While we were preoccupied, Streusel began chanting an incantation. “I offer as sacrifice all the lives in this chamber to summon a Corrupt Dragon…”

A ghastly magic circle appeared on the walls of the underground hall. At this rate, she would complete her spell to summon a Corrupt Dragon.



“What shall we do?” Lady Opera mumbled. “We cannot just abandon these villagers or we will be in hot water!”

“Hot water… That’s it!!!” I exclaimed and thanked Lady Opera for the idea.

She threw me a confused look. “Mille-Feuille, you are not suggesting we abandon these villagers, are you?”

“Of course not! I just mean that hot water will save us!”

I called my white squirrels and asked them to give me a certain device that I had entrusted to them. “Bring it to me.”

“Squeak!” The squirrels handed the dwarf-made magic shovel to me.

Lady Opera was shocked. “Are we going to bash the heads of the villagers with that shovel?!”

“Of course not! I’m going to use it for *this*!” I then started digging into the hall’s stone floor. The shovel slid into the solid stone like it was pudding.

Madeleine seemed to have realized what I was doing. “Wasn’t there a big hot spring source underneath the mansion?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

And the waters under Diamant have the special property of purification—they can dispel magic related to mind control and coercion.

“Lady Mille-Feuille, I’ll do it!”

“Parfeil, please go ahead!”

Parfeil, an expert in digging through the snow, now efficiently dug for the hot spring source. She kept on digging until…

Whoosh!

A geyser of hot spring water burst out of the ground. The purifying waters splashed onto the villagers and snapped them out of their daze.

“Where am I?”

“What am I doing?”

It looked like the mind control had been fully dispelled.

At the same time, Streusel’s dark magic had been completed. Her magic circle emitted a ghastly glow, and the mansion started trembling.

Are we too late?

“Milady!”

Parfeil and the white squirrels clung to me. I closed my eyes

and braced myself for an impact, but the trembling subsided. I tilted my head in confusion.

“Aaaaaargh!!!”

Streusel was now writhing in pain.

What happened?

Lady Opera seemed to have found the answer. “It seems that the purifying waters are poisonous to that woman.”

Van approached Streusel and launched a breath attack at her from up close.

“Gaaaaaah!!!” Streusel let out another pained, twisted scream as the attack pierced her body. Her skin began to wrinkle as her life force started slipping away.

Now at the end of her rope, Streusel took an action that none of us anticipated—she transported herself next to me and started to strangle me with her wrinkled hands.

“I will never, never, *ever* forgive any of you!!! I will live and lord over this land!” Streusel screamed as she tried to take a bite out of me. She was trying to consume my life force.

“I will…not allow you…to do this!” I cried.

Parfeil then yanked Streusel off me. She was launched across the room, and Van slashed her head clean off. Her head rolled across the floor, but even then, she still wasn’t giving up.

Streusel’s head ended up right in front of me. She glared up at me. “Who are you, and why would I need *your* permission for anything?!” she screamed.

“Because I am the rightful Dragon Duchess consort of the Dragon Duchy of Éclair!” I declared. Then, in a whisper so low that only she could hear, I added, “And I also happen to be the reincarnation of Princess Charlotte. And I know that she never once sought revenge for herself.”

“Ahh… Ahhh… How could this be…?” Streusel mumbled as her head and body crumbled away. Not a single trace was left of her afterward.

That was the pitiful end of someone who had been consumed by dark magic. I could only pray that her soul would be guided to its rightful path.

With this, the incidents had been resolved, but the conclusion left all of us with a terrible aftertaste.

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After everything had settled, Marquis de Noisette regained his sanity, but much of his mana had been sapped away. He needed time to recover. The real, captured Fenetra had been fed the bare minimum during her imprisonment and was severely malnourished. To help their recovery, their attendants, who had also recently recuperated from the incident, remodeled the underground hall to utilize the natural hot spring that had sprung up from the ground and made a hot bath there for them.

The spring waters had also been drawn into the rooms that we had been staying in, so we were now able to enjoy them.

Today, Parfeil and I were relaxing in the hot spring bath.

“Ahhh…”

There were no words for this level of comfort. The spring waters under the Noisette mansion turned a beautiful milk white upon contact with the air. As we soaked in the spring waters, our skin became as smooth and shiny as pearls. The faint scent of milk also hung in the air. Everything about this room was relaxing.

“It’s only here that the water turns white and smells this nice. How strange,” I remarked.

“It really is…”

I had previously analyzed the health effects of the spring waters here and found that they helped ease nerve pain, muscle pain, and chills. It was the perfect thing to heal bodies exhausted from recent battles.

“Maybe we should name this private bath something special. ‘The Pearl Bath,’ perhaps?” I suggested.

“Sounds great, milady!”

The different color of the spring waters outside the mansion meant they must have originated from a different source.

“All the happiness in the world can be found right here in these hot springs…” I muttered.

“That’s true…”

I had come to Diamant to find a new tourist destination for our people, but I had encountered so much trouble along the way.

“Getting attacked by that giant bear feels like the distant past now,” I said.

“Milady, that was just a few days ago!”

The incident with Streusel had been just so horrible that the Burrowless attack paled in comparison.

After getting up from the bath, we put some Jeweled Snow Hot Spring Lotion onto our skin.

“Parfeil, this is incredible! This lotion is even more effective after you’ve been soaking in the hot springs! My skin feels even smoother than usual!”

“Wow, that’s an amazing discovery!”

I was sure that the dragonkin would love these hot springs. I could hardly wait for the resort to be constructed.

Over the past few days, Van had been very busy dealing with the aftermath of the recent incidents. When he finally visited our room, I hadn’t seen him in three days. I opened the glass door to the balcony, and there he was in his tiny dragon form.

“Mille-Feuille, it’s me.”

“I can see that.”

“You’re quite calm even though we haven’t seen each other for three days,” he remarked.

“That’s just how I am. You know that.”

“Right, right. It seems that I made up a version of you in my head. Since I’ve been so busy that I couldn’t see you, I’d thought you’d gone soft, sweet, and lovey-dovey during that time.”

Van puffed up his chest, proud of his recent efforts, and I carried him to my bed.

“Oh, right, Mille-Feuille. I’ve yet to soak in a bath,” Van said.

“Really? Okay, I’ll ready one for you.”

“Please do!”

Parfeil and I filled a bucket with hot spring water and carried it to the dimly lit bedroom. We put a towel down on the floor and put the bucket on top of it. Then I placed Van inside the bucket.

“Ahh, now that hits the spot… Wait, this is not what I meant!”

“What? You wanted a bath, didn’t you? What’s wrong with this?” I asked.

“Th-This is the kind of bath that mothers would give to their babies!”

“It’s your fault for coming over in your tiny form.”

“Well, yes.”

There’s no longer anyone here who might object to our meetings,

so why did he bother transforming into a tiny dragon just to get to me?

I asked him about that.

“Well, while I’m in this form, you hug me close to your chest, don’t you? You’re also much kinder and gentler to me while I’m like this,” he replied.

“So that’s why. I never realized you had such an ulterior motive,” I said.

While we continued our conversation, I washed him with soap. I was unsure how much force I should put into lathering up his soft scales, but Van answered my doubts.

“How relaxing…” he mumbled, but… “I came here expecting to bathe with you, Mille-Feuille!” Van then complained.

“I’d prefer that we take our baths separately.”

“But you take your baths with Parfeil!”

“That’s because she’s like a wet nurse to me.”

“Grrr!”

Anything Van said while in his tiny dragon form automatically became adorable.

How troublesome. I started to feel bad for him, and I almost felt that I should indulge his wishes for a bit. *But I shouldn’t be fooled!* I reminded myself. No matter how he looked, he was a mature young man who could take his own baths. I didn’t need to grant each and every one of his requests.

“Such a waste,” Van said after a moment of silence.

“Huh?”

“This honeymoon trip feels like such a waste! It’s our special trip, but all my memories involve getting attacked by villagers, sniffing the rotting scent of a dark magic user, and being a big brother to Opera by playing matchmaker for her and Roche!” Van ranted. He fiddled with his claws and looked up at me with teary eyes. “I just thought that it would be nice to take a nice long bath with you. Don’t you think so too?”

“Well…”

I *did* think that it was a pity that we had come all the way to Diamant and worked so hard without having made any precious memories that one would expect to make during a honeymoon.

“Okay. We can take a bath together,” I conceded.

“Yes! Thank you! I’m so glad I tried asking!”

I feel like I've been duped into saying yes, but I'll let him be for today.

I entered the bath and called Van over. "Van, you can come in now."

"Okay." Van walked over, not as his tiny dragon form, but as his usual self. But upon seeing me, he shrieked. "Wh-What is this white, cloudy water?!"

"Oh, didn't you know? The spring water under the Noisette mansion is pearl white."

"No! This is the first I've heard of this!"

"I thought you saw the spring water spurt out while we were underground," I said.

"I was preoccupied with fighting Streusel! There's no way I could pay attention to something like that!"

Why is he so shocked at the milky water? I wonder. I decided to ask him directly.

"That's because I can't see you— Ah, achoo!!!"

I told him to get into the hot bath before he caught a cold.

"A-Ahhh... It's so warm and comfortable here..." Even though Van had been complaining so much, he seemed to love the hot bath.

"Right?" I said. "The people of Diamant must be so happy to have such a luxury every single day."

"Maybe I should move the capital here. Then, I could enjoy baths like this with you all the time."

"You better not. Besides, I'm not taking a bath with you every single day."

"N-No way!" Van whined, and I giggled at how disappointed he seemed.

Our honeymoon had been such a rocky time, but I was happy that we got to enjoy this hot spring bath at the end.

And with that, our honeymoon came to an end. We returned to the capital bringing with us word of a new, upcoming tourist destination as a souvenir for all dragonkin.

Chapter 4: Welcome to Diamant, the Land of Snow and Hot Springs!

Today's topic of discussion was what kind of resort we were going to build. If we only decided that among ourselves, we wouldn't be able to make a vacation spot that everyone would enjoy. It would be monopolized by one segment of the populace.

The first idea that had been set in stone was that we would make two facilities—one for the nobles and one for the general public. Each facility had a separate team working on it, and each team was proceeding with their plans.

I had picked Opera to head the team in charge of the nobles' facility since she had sensibilities that matched the nobles' tastes. Meanwhile, I chose Madeleine to lead the facility for the general public due to her flexible way of thinking.

It was Lady Opera's first time leading a large group and listening to their opinions. I was worried about her at first, but she told me to leave it to her and confidently puffed out her chest as she said so. It was good that she had such confidence...I think.

On the other hand, Madeleine wasn't exactly an expert on the affairs of the general populace, but she insisted that she wanted to take charge, so I didn't object. At the moment, there wasn't really anything to comment on, so I could only hope that it would go well for her.

My role was to check in with both of the teams, listen to their discussions, and gather their opinions.

Fenetra was the one taking charge of things in Diamant. She had completely recovered from her capture and having been severely weakened by Streusel. Now, she was a key figure in the region's tourism business.

While all these talks were going on, I joined a meeting of Van's council for the first time. I had thought that I'd earned the ire of the councillors, but they weren't as stern as I had previously thought. Perhaps they had only acted that way due to the influence of Streusel's magic. Or perhaps Van's glares during the meeting were keeping them in check.

Today, I was to report on the progress of the duchy's tourism industry. Right now, our most pressing problem was managing our transportation networks. Travel to Diamant by carriage took several days—an unreasonable amount of time. That meant the only real option was to fly there on a wyvern. Someone suggested that people could head there on the backs of dragonkin men, but that was quickly rejected. There were men who didn't have the stamina to fly such a distance and other men who were not used to having people ride on their backs. We couldn't risk the possibility of accidents happening while they were flying to the hot springs.

I suggested the use of wyverns, which I had brought up before as well. While wyverns were normally used for military purposes, we could also utilize them for the tourism industry. They were friendly creatures and actually quite adorable.

The wyvern squadron had previously complained about funding for wyvern feed and that the wyverns weren't getting enough exercise. By making them travel between Diamant and the capital, they could raise funds for feed while giving them exercise at the same time. It would certainly kill two birds with one stone.

Duchesse had originally been the one to organize the wyvern squadron. At that time, the Dragon Duchy of Éclair had been newly formed and the Dragon Duke had been absent. They had been wary of assault from neighboring countries, so he'd wanted a unit that could handle aerial combat. They were to serve as a visible threat to outsiders at a time when the duchy was vulnerable.

However, we dragonkin could transform into dragons. I questioned whether the use of wyverns in the military was truly a necessity.

Count Disque Praline raised his hand to offer his opinion. He had once been the councillor most vehemently opposed to my marriage to Van and had supported Fenetra as a candidate to become Dragon Duchess consort.

"As you noted, maintaining our wyverns is a very expensive task. They are difficult to raise, and other countries also fear them as monsters," he opined.

Indeed, while wyverns were valuable beasts of burden in the Dragon Duchy of Éclair, other nations saw them as terrible monsters. This had been true even in the Kingdom of Sacristain.

Villages had suffered attacks from the wyverns, and they had caused several casualties.

It was the dragonkin who had saved the Kingdom of Sacristain from the wyverns. We had tamed these creatures and prevented them from causing more damage. That was how the once-friendly relationship between the Kingdom of Sacristain and the dragonkin had begun.

“Wyverns are a symbol of pride for our knights. Would it not be an insult to use these wyverns for tourism?” he asked.

The councillors began whispering among each other as Count Disque Praline laid out his argument.

I refused to give up and was ready to put up a fight. I glared at Count Disque Praline, challenging him to say something more convincing.

But then, the count loosened his expression. His eyebrows relaxed, and the tension in the room was lifted. It was as if a cat who had been itching for a fight had turned around and left.

“However, times have changed,” he continued. “It’s no longer the same era when the Dragon Duke was absent, and morale among our knights is high. The exploits of knights who fight in their dragon forms have also reached my ears. Our army is powerful enough, even without our wyvern squadron.” He then cast a vote in support of using wyverns for the duchy’s tourism industry.

A majority decision had been reached with very few dissenters, and it was decided to use wyverns for transport.

While I was lost in thought over that turn of events, Count Disque Praline approached me.

“You have earned my respect as the Dragon Duchess consort,” he said. He extended his hand, and I returned his handshake while still not knowing quite what was going on. “We councillors had been dealing with the problem of what to do with the wyverns for a while now.”

Apparently, the councillors had discussed that topic many times, but none of them could come up with a satisfactory solution.

“To be quite frank, your idea was novel and innovative. It showed a new path for the future of our wyverns. However, it would have been an embarrassment if we had accepted your plan

so easily."

That had been the entire reason he'd made a show of arguing and seeing how I would react.

"We cannot have our precious wyverns be treated irresponsibly. I would not have accepted your plan if you had turned to the Dragon Duke for help," he explained.

While Van had been present during the meeting, in my mind, it had been a battle between me and Count Disque Praline. The thought of asking Van for help hadn't even crossed my mind.

"I felt your conviction in your gaze. It was then that I truly felt that there was no longer a need to argue."

So that's why his expression loosened up back then, I thought. I felt a bit annoyed that he'd had to test me like this, but I finally understood Count Disque Praline's position.

"If the Dragon Duchy of Éclair were to ever go to war with a neighboring country once more, I could even see you riding a wyvern and leading a charge onto the battlefield," the count quipped.

"I don't think I'm that much of a tomboy."

"A tomboy! Ha ha, perhaps."

Count Disque Praline politely bowed to me. He then remarked that the Dragon Duchy would remain peaceful as long as I was around.

Having someone much older than my own father bow to me feels really strange. If only Charlotte's memories had something to tell me about how to handle this situation.

"Well then, I shall take my leave. I look forward to your work on our tourism industry," Count Disque Praline said and then left.

At some point, Van had approached me. "Let's head back to our room," he said. I nodded, and we left the meeting hall.

I sighed in relief while drinking the milk tea that Parfeil had prepared for me.

"I was so worried when Count Disque Praline voiced his opinion," I said.

Van had been thinking of stepping in between me and the count, but apparently my glare had been so terrifying that he'd flinched.

"You were exerting such a terrifying aura back there," Van

remarked.

"I was just trying my best to win the argument."

If Van hadn't read the room and instead had tried to help me out, I would've just earned Count Disque Praline's ire. He hadn't only been testing me—he'd been testing Van as well.

"To think that Count Disque Praline would test you like that… I *knew* I should've fired him when I had the chance."

Until we'd resolved all the recent incidents, Van had been considering firing all of his councillors. However, now that they were free of Streusel's control, they were no longer as rebellious as they had been and were now keeping the status quo.

"They've been quite placid lately, so I was worried when that old asshole said that he would voice his opinion," Van admitted.

"Where did you learn *that* word?" I asked, addressing his vulgar comment.

"The magic academy."

The students there were apparently using that insult to bad-mouth a particularly hardheaded teacher who handled their magical medicines classes. It would seem that besides learning magic, Van was learning how to use colorful language as well.

"I really wonder why Duchesse decided to send you to school instead of having a tutor teach you magic."

"Maybe he thought that being in such a restricted environment would lead me to focus too much on one thing like I used to."

"I see."

"If I didn't go to the magic academy, I would never have met you," he said. "While there were days when I complained about having to attend, I do have to thank Duchesse for forcing me to go."

I almost burst out laughing imagining Van throwing a tantrum about not wanting to go to school. I could almost sympathize with Duchesse's troubles, picturing him with an untroubled expression on his face while dealing with Van.

"In any case, what did the others say about our plans for Diamant?" Van asked.

I started giving Van my report. I wanted to make it as detailed as possible, but there had been too many debates. I decided to tell him only the things that had been set in stone.

Lady Opera had met the Four Great Nobles' wives and other

noblewomen of various ages to gather their opinions. The Dragon Duchy of Éclair previously had no concept of what a “hot spring” was, so the meeting had begun with an explanation of what they were. Many of the noblewomen had narrowed their eyes upon hearing that they were similar to the public baths in the Kingdom of Sacristain as those were apparently vulgar and obscene institutions.

Of course, Van had burned down those facilities with his breath attacks before the Dragon Duchy of Éclair had even been established. After their destruction, they had never been rebuilt, and they were nowhere to be seen in this day and age.

The dirty image of those public baths was too strong in the minds of these noblewomen, though, so many of them had been against the idea of making the hot springs a public attraction.

“During the first meeting, Lady Opera was unable to explain the concept of hot springs very well, and it all ended with a big argument,” I recalled.

“Sounds like a disaster.”

Lady Opera had then come to me to ask for advice on how to make them understand the appeal. That had surprised me as I hadn’t thought she was the type to ever ask someone for help.

“I’m sure it’s because Opera trusts you,” Van said. “She’s accepted you as a part of her family, so she trusts you with her vulnerabilities.”

“Well, that’s quite an honor, then.”

Explaining the concept of a hot spring to someone who had never heard of them was certainly a difficult task, so letting them experience it firsthand would make it easier. I’d suggested this to Lady Opera, and she’d immediately approved of it. “That’s it!” she’d exclaimed.

Thus, she had immediately taken action and taken the noblewomen to Diamant to tour the hot springs. She had brought them to the underground hot springs in the Noisette mansion—the Pearl Bath. A large marbled pool had been constructed in the basement for the residents to enjoy.

While Lady Opera had been used to exposing her body to the attendants during her baths, many of the other noblewomen had never even shown their bodies to anyone other than their husbands. Naturally, many of them had also been resistant to

showing their naked bodies to others while in the baths. Those who had been reluctant to enter would later do so at their own pace, but others had experienced the hot spring baths with Lady Opera for the first time.

"Apparently, all of them were so astonished at their first time in the hot springs," I said.

"I can imagine," Van replied.

After their baths, the women had used the Jeweled Snow Hot Spring Lotion. Their reviews had been very favorable. The hot springs had also turned out to be quite popular, even among the women who had initially been reluctant to get in. All of them had returned to the capital feeling refreshed and rejuvenated.

"It sounds like the discussions all went well after that trip. Lady Opera said that they're now in the middle of talks about the facility interiors," I told Van.

Lady Opera now knew that there were women who'd be reluctant to show their skin to strangers, so she'd approved a suggestion to construct private bath stalls. If she had been the sole person in charge of the construction plans, she would've pushed for giant hot spring pools all over instead.

"She wouldn't have gotten different perspectives on how people enjoyed baths if she didn't go there with those noblewomen," Van remarked.

"Right. None of the women would've brought up not wanting to enter baths with strangers in a meeting room either."

Lady Opera had managed to learn something valuable by failing to convince the noblewomen the first time around.

"I'm sure they'll be able to come up with the ideal hot spring resort that the nobles envisioned," I concluded.

"I look forward to that."

On the other hand, Madeleine's planning of the resort for the general public had also run into a few roadblocks. She'd called women of various ages and different walks of life to come to her meetings, like the wives of merchants and traders from all over the duchy, teachers and seniors from the magic academy, and staff members from various stores and shops.

During her meetings, she had informed the women of the tentative costs of a hot springs tour.

"Madeleine computed the costs of traveling to Diamant

including transportation, inn fees, and meal prices, but the women complained that it was too expensive," I said.

The estimate that Madeleine had come up with for a single trip was almost what the general public made in an average month. That day's proceedings had ended on a sour note as everyone had refused to pay such an exorbitant amount.

"After that, Madeleine tried to figure out why the costs were so high."

The sum she had come up with took into account the wyverns' passenger capacity, the number of rooms in the local inns, food and maintenance costs for the resort, and employee salaries. All of those were important, and she couldn't afford to deduct from any of those.

Until now, tourism had been a luxury only affordable to wealthy families and nobles. But even so, Madeleine had been determined to spread the wonder of hot springs to the public. She had scrapped her plans and started over. She had then consulted her fiancé—my brother—and he had advised her to find out more about the lives of the duchy's populace first.

Madeleine had immediately gone out to the city with my brother to survey the public. There, she'd found out just how much the lives of us nobles differed from those of the general populace.

"First of all, most people don't live in single-family mansions like most nobles do. Instead, they live in communal residences that can house several families," I explained.

Before then, Madeleine had only perceived the slender five-story buildings lined up on the city streets as mere parts of the capital's scenery. But now that she had taken a good look at them, she realized that many people lived out their daily lives in those structures.

She had also encountered large two-floor carriages on the city streets, each one packed full of people. The carriages that Madeleine was used to could only fit four to six people at a time, so she had never considered that they could be used to transport masses of people at once.

"From her observations, Madeleine concluded that her basis for a 'resort for the general public' had been wrong from its very foundation." She had been assuming that the transport wyverns would only carry six people at a time, and the inns for the hot

springs would consist of about thirteen separate structures each holding an individual group of visitors. Those assumptions had driven up the costs of her estimations.

Madeleine had then revised her estimates by imagining two-story transports that could carry upward of twenty people at a time and assuming that the inns would be tall structures that could house many guests at once. By doing that, she'd managed to slash the costs to about one-third of her original estimate.

When she had brought up her new estimates in the meetings, the participants conceded that the prices were reasonable enough to spend once every six months. They had finally agreed on an ideal amount.

"Madeleine managed to get her plan accepted," I concluded.

"I see. She really worked hard to get this far."

"She really did."

During her time at the magic academy, Madeleine had been timid enough for Van to run into her without noticing, but now, she had grown into a strong woman. She had surprised me by volunteering to manage discussions for the public-facing hot springs resort. I was glad now that I hadn't said no to her, thinking that she wouldn't be able to handle things on her own.

"Do you think our tourism industry will be a success?" I asked Van.

"It will. You don't need to worry about anything," he replied confidently.

Hearing him say it with such certainty made my worries go away. I had faith that the hot springs would be accepted and become beloved by the Dragon Duchy of Éclair's people.

I then recalled an experience from the time when Van and I had returned to the Dragon Duchy of Éclair from Diamant. We were greeted by the knights who had acted as our body doubles—Sir Chouquette Salée, Sir Saint-Honoré, and Sir Potiron. This time, they were not cross-dressing but in their regular armor.

"Lord Dragon Duke, Lady Dragon Duchess consort, welcome back."

"We are relieved to see all of you well."

"We are glad to see you back."

I had been so used to seeing them in their feminine outfits that

it felt odd to see them in full armor. Apparently, they had managed to go the entire time without being found out.

"I'm sorry I put you through a mission that none of you were used to," I said.

The three knights looked at each other and gave us big smiles.

"Not at all. We spent quite a peaceful time here in the capital."

"I feel enriched by the experience."

"It was a valuable opportunity for all of us."

They all said that they would happily act as our body doubles if the need ever arose again. It would seem that I had obtained three powerful allies.

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A year later, the first hot springs resort opened in Diamant.

Before its opening day, we had several influential people from across the duchy visit the facilities so they could spread the word about the resort. They seemed to understand what we were going for as those who had visited the hot springs previously were praising the experience. We didn't need to lift a finger for them to start acting as our advertisers. Trips to the hot springs became a hot topic not only among the nobles but also with the general public.

Making reservations for the hot springs resort was different for nobles than it was for the public. Nobles could reserve trips through crystal transmissions, while the rest of the population could do it at special facilities throughout the city. We prepared thirty crystal transmission platforms and three reservation facilities.

We waited with bated breath for reservations to start coming in. Once people could begin making them, the crystals made sounds to announce the arrival of a transmission. In just moments, all thirty of the crystals were busy receiving requests.

We also received word from the city that there were long lines snaking around all three reservation facilities. Before long, all the available reservation slots had been completely filled. Lady Opera and Madeleine shed joyful tears at the news.

It seemed that Diamant's tourism efforts were headed toward success.

After that, the hot springs resort was available for use, and Diamant became livelier than ever before. Employment opportunities for residents increased, and there were even people from other regions who moved there to find work. Villagers also opened new restaurants serving local bear meat. Making use of the legends surrounding the Burrowless that prowled the region, they advertised their dishes saying that they granted immense strength and vitality.

Well, bear meat is *healthy, so they're not wrong there…*

A knight squadron had also been sent to the region, which helped reduce the risk of Burrowless and White Bear attacks.

The new tourist attraction had received an amazing reception, which led to Van's councillors thanking me. It seemed that our tourism problem was on its way to being resolved.

Count Disque Praline had also announced that he wanted to come up with ideas for other tourist destinations. He was right—the hot springs and the lake region just weren't enough.

Van—who, for some reason, was in his tiny dragon form—had just told me about all this.

"I wanted to entrust discussions of those tourist destinations to you, but for now, I put it on hold to ask for your opinion on something," he said.

"Hm? Why?"

Van's brow furrowed and he scowled at me. I had no idea what I had done to earn that expression.

"I'm sorry, but I really have no idea why," I told him.

Van trembled and pointed his tiny claw at me. "You've been ignoring me ever since you started your tourism work! I haven't forgotten that you've been leaving notes in my bedroom after finishing your work saying that you're going to sleep in your own room! I've been crying myself to sleep every night you do that!"

"I've been working late into the night, so I thought I might disturb your sleep! I wasn't trying to make you feel bad."

"I don't care if you get back late. I want to sleep with you beside me every night…" Van sulked.

"Okay. I'm sorry for neglecting you." I picked up Van and rubbed his cheek. I thought he wouldn't like it, but he didn't seem to mind. "Thanks to all my work on the hot springs, I've found so many

excellent and skilled people. I want to leave the administration of the industry to them," I announced to Van, and he looked shocked at my declaration. "I want to stay by your side more."

"Mille-Feuille, are you really okay with that?"

"I am. It was fulfilling to be preoccupied with my work in the tourism industry, but it's starting to get exhausting," I explained. "Lady Opera, Madeleine, and even Parfeil all think so too."

In other words, I wanted to get some rest for a while.

"If that's what you want, then I have no reason to object. That's my policy," Van said.

"Oh, really?"

"Of course. That's why I told you about the discussions and asked for your opinion on them."

Then, Van revealed that he had shown up in his tiny dragon form to earn my sympathy in case I was considering taking on the talks for new tourist destinations.

How could I neglect such an adorable man and get too absorbed in my work? I'm such a horrible wife.

"To be honest, I'd been so close to asking you to pick between me or your work," Van confessed.

"So why didn't you?"

"I probably wouldn't be able to recover if you chose your work over me. And I thought that watching over you enjoying your work wasn't half bad. So, I decided that I would support you and your efforts."

"Van, thank you. I'm glad." I embraced Van's soft, tiny body. I felt more thankful than ever before that I had married him.

"Oh right, that reminds me! Don't you think it's a great time to go to Diamant and relax in the hot springs?" I suggested.

"That sounds like a great idea!" Van exclaimed.

"Okay, we should go on a hot springs trip with everyone."

"Yes, we should!"

Before that, I needed to check if there were any available openings at Diamant's inns. I was worried that we wouldn't be able to get a slot since I had heard from Fenetra that all the rooms had been reserved for the next year.

"Maybe I should just use my power as the Dragon Duke...or not."

"You're *not* allowed to do that, obviously," I scolded Van, and he

looked quite disappointed. However, it made me sad to see him like that, knowing that he'd been spending every night looking as he did now. "I know, why don't we check with Fenetra? I'm sure that House Noisette would be happy to let us stay in their mansion for a while."

Van's eyes sparkled at the idea and he started wagging his tail. "That sounds great! I can't wait for our trip!"

"Me neither."

And with that, we decided to take a trip to Diamant for the first time in a long while.

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Our trip to Diamant took place a half year after we had initially planned it. It had become a big event that all of us were looking forward to, so it was a struggle to find a date when everyone could go. But now that the day had finally come, we were all excited about our first trip in quite some time.

Parfeil had been getting ready for it since early that morning.

"Milady, you're taking this dandelion-colored dress, right?"

"Yes, thank you, Parfeil."

Van had picked out this dress for me—one with a cute color and an abundance of frills and ribbons. Even though I thought that such a girly, frilly outfit wouldn't suit me, Van had insisted that I would look good in it, so here I was, trying it on.

"Parfeil, how do I look?"

"It suits you shockingly well, milady!"

"Really?" I asked. "That's great, then."

I combed my hair and put on a hat with a big ribbon on it. I looked at myself in the mirror. Perhaps it was because Parfeil had said it suited me, but I didn't feel bad about my outfit at all. My white squirrels applauded me, seemingly approving my dress. When I showed myself to Van, he bent over and covered his mouth. I thought he was going to be sick, but when I went over to check on him, he only mumbled, "My wife is so cute. I might die..."

Van had his hair tied up in a ponytail. He was wearing a jacket and a pair of trousers—a combination that made him look like a dapper young man.

"I don't think anyone would see us as the Dragon Duke and

Dragon Duchess consort when we're dressed like this," I commented.

"You're right. It makes us look young."

"That just makes you sound like an old man."

We left for our trip in high spirits.

We were finally setting out on our first excursion in a long while, so we were all over the moon. Even though all of us were adults, we were all as excited as kids on a trip.

Lady Opera and Roche were actually looking forward to this trip the most. They had just recently gotten engaged, so they were both quite elated. On the other hand, the newlyweds—Madeleine and my brother Glacé—were quite relaxed. They didn't look like a newlywed pair, perhaps because they'd been engaged for a long time. Instead, they seemed more like an old couple that had been married for several years. Apparently, they wanted to take it easy on their honeymoon.

As for me and Van, our previous trip to Diamant hadn't felt like a honeymoon at all and we wanted to make up for that with this trip. Unlike that time, we were heading to Diamant in a wyvern carriage instead of on dragonback. Riding in a carriage with tamed wyverns was a much more comfortable experience compared to riding on dragonback. I had traveled like this once before, and I was surprised at how little it rattled and shook during the ride this time.

A wyvern carriage station had been built right on the capital's outskirts. There, carriages came and went, and there was a line of people waiting for their rides. There were stalls, food carts, and souvenir stands to keep those waiting in line occupied. The scene was almost like a miniature town in itself. Bringing in the various stores and stalls had been Madeleine's idea, and she'd come up with that after hearing feedback that waiting in line was a bore.

Parfeil seemed to have noticed something and let out a small shriek. "Eek!"

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"Milady, look at that! There's a line for a stall that's selling wyvern meat on a stick!"

"That's a wild delicacy they're selling here."

"It looks like they're not selling actual wyvern meat. It's just

giant lizard meat on a stick."

"Does it taste good?"

"I-I don't know..."

Other than that, there were stalls selling various foods like bread in the shape of a wyvern's tail, candies that looked like a wyvern taking flight, and cotton candies in the shapes of clouds that could be seen during the flight. Besides food, there were also novelty items like wyvern stuffed toys, wyvern-themed hats, and wyvern glasses. The funds generated from the sales of these items went directly toward raising and keeping the wyverns.

The wyverns' situations had changed greatly after they'd been trained to fly customers for travel. They were being given as much meat as they wanted as rewards for safe and comfortable flights. As a result, their faces and natures had become noticeably kinder and gentler.

We had only looked away from Lady Opera for a moment, but before we knew it, she was holding a stuffed wyvern doll close to her chest. She was also wearing a wyvern hat and glasses.

Van grumbled at the sight. "Roche, you spoil her too much!"

"Let them enjoy their day," I said.

"Mille-Feuille, you're also spoiling her too much!" he complained again, and he started marching toward Lady Opera.

Lady Opera, in turn, approached Van and pointed at the line for the wyvern candy stall. She put her hands together and appeared to be begging Van for something. The next moment, Van was getting in line at the stall.

"Aren't *you* the one who's spoiling her the most, Van?" I whispered, and Parfeil nodded in agreement beside me.

It was finally departure time, and our wyvern carriage was being prepared. We were going to ride in an eight-person carriage that was exclusive to nobles. The carriage body was black and lined with gold plating, making it a hit with the nobles. The seats inside were lined with elegant velvet, and our feet rested on a long, fluffy carpet.

Once all of us were seated, Roche signaled to the driver to depart. The wyvern flapped its wings and slowly ascended into the air. The carriage body was equipped with magicstones that let it float, easing the burden on the wyverns.

It was my brother's first time riding a wyvern carriage, and the

experience seemed to be full of surprises for him. However, part of his nervousness seemed to stem from the fact that he was riding with Van and Lady Opera. Madeleine seemed to realize this, and she gently held my brother's clenched fist in her hand. That finally seemed to ease the tense expression on my brother's face.

Meanwhile, Lady Opera's eyes were sparkling as she gazed at the scenery outside the window. "Roche, look! You can see my palace from up here!" she exclaimed.

"You're right," Roche replied.

"It looks like a small bean from up here."

"It looks quite cute from the sky."

Roche had his arm draped over Lady Opera's shoulders as she stared out the window. I thought the two of them suited each other quite well, but Van seemed to think otherwise. He was shooting daggers at Roche's arm around Lady Opera, but the happy couple was oblivious to the stares they were receiving. The situation seemed to make Madeleine and my brother feel awkward. Roche must have had nerves of steel to pull that off while Lady Opera's brother was here.

Eventually, the capital disappeared from our sight. And when Van saw Lady Opera's brilliant smile, he seemed to stop caring about Roche being too close to her and instead gave them warm, welcoming glances.

"Seems like they're already enjoying this trip plenty, even though we haven't gotten there yet," Van remarked.

"Indeed," I said. "I was surprised at how much the station had developed while I wasn't paying attention."

"Same here."

From reading the reports, I had been aware of the scale of the station and the lively businesses and stalls that it had, but I was still overwhelmed upon seeing it with my own eyes. Apparently, there were even people buying things from the food stalls there even though they had no plans to ride the wyverns. The station was turning into a small-scale tourist destination of its own.

Lady Opera stifled a yawn, seemingly having gotten bored of staring out the window. I had thought that it was time for her nap, but she instead ordered Roche to spread open a folding table that was inside the carriage.

"I bought a lot of food from the station. Everyone, let us eat!"

she announced.

Roche gingerly brought out the food that had been stuffed in a basket. This basket was a magic one that prevented the food's scent from leaking out while also maintaining its freshness.

Lady Opera had apparently bought a wide assortment of things—wyvern sticks, wyvern-shaped sweets, wyvern buns, wyvern noodles, grilled wyvern... I hadn't realized that she had bought this much.

"So, you were buying all that for us to eat in here?" Van asked.

"Of course, brother. Did you think that I was going to eat all of it by myself?"

Van nodded, and Lady Opera pouted in response.

"There is no way I can eat all of this on my own!" she said as she handed Parfeil a wyvern-shaped candy. "Little Bunny, this is for you."

"F-For me?"

"Indeed. I saw you looking longingly at it."

"I am surprised and honored that you noticed. Thank you, milady." Parfeil looked elated, and Lady Opera appeared to be satisfied with herself.

"All of you, have some," Lady Opera said.

Each of us took turns getting some of the foods she'd gotten from the wyvern station's stalls.

Moments later, Lady Opera fell asleep on Roche's lap, exhausted from all the excitement.

"Roche's lap looks uncomfortable with all the muscles he has," Van grumbled.

"But look, she seems so happy sleeping there," I pointed out.

Lady Opera's peaceful, sleeping face comforted me as we rode in the carriage and waited to arrive at our destination. It had fallen quiet inside, not out of awkwardness, but out of a sense of peace as time gently passed us by.

Finally, we arrived at Diamant. It had been quite a while since we'd been here, but it was still covered in deep snow. I had experienced this sight once before, but it still caught me by surprise. One thing that was different this time, however, was how lively it was compared to before.

There were two wyvern stations in Diamant—one for nobles

and one for commoners. Each station was situated somewhere where it was easy to head to its associated hot springs resort.

Unlike the capital, there were no food stalls at the stations here in Diamant—they were simply places for wyvern carriages to land and take off. The ones here were simple—if they were as lively as the ones in the capital, they'd take away the focus from the hot spring resort.

There were a number of hot spring inns in the town, all centered around the Noisette mansion. Steam from the hot springs rose up and hung over the snowy village, creating a phantasmal spectacle before us.

Fenetra had come all the way to the station to pick us up. She turned and greeted us. "Lord Dragon Duke, Madame Dragon Duchess, Lady Opera. I welcome you to Diamant. We have been waiting for your arrival."

"Thank you for your service. You have done well," Van said.

"I am humbled by your words."

"I am glad to see that you are well."

"I owe it to all of you, milord," she said. "As you can see, I am quite healthy."

The real Fenetra was just as Van had described her to me. While she had been weakened and starved by Streusel before, she was now the very picture of health as she did her job. Since our last encounter, she had begun a relationship with one of Van's knights and they had recently gotten engaged. Since the knight in question was going to marry into House Noisette, Van had been lamenting the loss of one of his most skilled men. Still, if he was to acknowledge the accomplishments of House Noisette, it would not be a bad idea to grant them one of his most loyal vassals.

Noble politics sure can be complicated...

We were going to travel to the hot springs resort by sled. It would be pulled by an "elk"—a phantasmal beast sporting impressive antlers, akin to a deer.

"Everyone, this is an elk," Fenetra explained.

"It's huge!" I exclaimed. The elk had pristine white fur and massive antlers. Its round eyes gazed at us gently. Elk had become more common in Diamant after this land had been blessed by the Great Spirit of Snow. A long time had passed since then, and the people of Diamant had developed a symbiotic relationship with

the elk in this region. The hot springs resort had recently employed these beasts for travel, and it was my first time seeing one in the flesh.

"Parfeil, I wonder if this was the creature you spotted during our previous trip here? The one that looked like a deer."

"Oh, I think you're right, milady! It *did* look something like this," Parfeil said.

Diamant was home to about three hundred of these elk. They were gentle creatures that could withstand the heavy snow and were quite easy to tame. These elk were several times larger than horses, and their massive size was an impressive sight to behold.

The elk whinnied and produced white breath from its nostrils.

"So this is what an elk looks like," I remarked. "They're huge."

"Indeed. This is actually one of the smaller ones," Fenetra said. A single one of these creatures was strong enough to pull three adults and their baggage. These beasts of burden were indispensable in this snow-covered region.

"If only we could have shown these majestic beasts to all of you during your first trip to Diamant," Fenetra lamented. Back then, Marquis de Noisette had been under Streusel's control while Fenetra had been trapped underground. There just hadn't been an opportunity for them to introduce these elk to us.

"Well then, Lord Dragon Duke, Madame Dragon Duchess, and Miss Parfeil, please take this sled. This one is for..."

Fenetra divided us into three groups. Roche and Lady Opera were in the second group, and Madeleine and my brother were in the third. And with that, the sleds were ready to take off.

"This is the first time I'm riding a vehicle where I'm all exposed to the elements like this!" I said, somewhat terrified of the prospect.

Van gave me a confused glance. "But you've ridden on my back before. If you weren't scared back then, you should be just fine on this sled."

"Oh, you're right." I had completely forgotten that I'd ridden on Van's back. It was possibly because a dragon didn't immediately register as a "vehicle" to me.

"Okay, we'll be taking off," Fenetra announced, giving me a smile of reassurance.

The sled had no driver. Elks were clever creatures, so they knew

where to go even without a driver directing them. There was a bell hanging high at the station, and the elks only needed to hear it ring to know to take us to the hot spring resort. Fenetra pulled on a string, and the sound of the bell echoed throughout the station. Upon hearing the sound, the elks kicked the ground repeatedly and started moving. They were slow at first, but they quickly picked up speed.

I shrieked as the freezing cold wind blew in my face. When Van had let me ride on his back, he'd put up a barrier to shield me from the incoming gusts of wind so I wouldn't have to deal with them.

"I-It's freezing!"

"Mille-Feuille, close your mouth! You'll bite your t— Mmph?!"

Despite his warning, Van seemed to have bitten his own tongue. He looked sad. Without saying anything else, he drew me closer to him and embraced my shoulders to keep me warm. I huddled close to him in response.

The sled leaned to the side whenever we had to turn a corner. We were going so fast that I thought we might get thrown off if we didn't pay attention. I could hear screams from Roche and Lady Opera right behind us, but it looked like only Roche was terrified of the ride; Lady Opera sounded like she was enjoying herself instead.

I'll check on Madeleine and my brother later.

We arrived at the hot springs resort in no time. Sled handlers were waiting at our stop, giving us a hand as we disembarked. We had only been riding for less than five minutes, but my knees wouldn't stop shaking. The sled traveled much faster than I was expecting.

"Mille-Feuille, are you okay?" Van checked up on me.

"I am… I was scared, but I enjoyed the ride. What about you?" I asked. "Didn't you bite your tongue out there?"

"I'm all right. I bit it pretty hard, but it's not bleeding or anything."

I was relieved that Van seemed to be just fine.

Fenetra arrived at the hot springs in her personal sled soon after. "Is everyone here? How was the ride?" she called out.

Lady Opera seemed to have been a huge fan of the sleds, while Roche was incompatible with them. He looked like he was about to lose his lunch at any moment.

“I am glad that you enjoyed our sleds,” Fenetra said. Apparently, they were their own attraction at the hot springs, and there were visitors who would use them to go on more distant trips. “Every day, we have fifty to a hundred visitors who want to use them.”

The elks traveled at speeds that were essentially a fast walk for an elk when heading to the hot springs resort, but they went at top speed when heading out on distant trips.

“We envisioned these sleds to be a method of travel for commoners, but it seems that even nobles enjoy traveling on them too,” Fenetra explained. She, the Marquis de Noisette, and the townspeople had all contributed ideas for this attraction. The elks, just like the wyverns, seemed to be earning their keep as well.

“Lately, elk racing is becoming a popular pastime too,” Fenetra continued. As in horse racing, the elks would run along tracks and compete to see who was the fastest runner. Surely nobles who were fans of horse racing would go wild for such an event as well. “The proceeds from these races go toward the maintenance of the hot springs’ environment, like replanting trees that had been cut down for construction.”

I felt reassured that the hot springs seemed like they were being managed pretty well.

Fenetra then led us to the resort proper. “First, I would like to introduce to all of you the stall that sells our famed local delicacy, the ‘mont blanc.’ Let me tell you, the taste of freshly steamed mont blancs in the cold weather is *heavenly*,” she said excitedly.

The sweet scent drifting from the steamers at the storefront hung in the air. The person manning the store was the previous head cook at the Noisette mansion, whom we had met on our previous trip to Diamant.

“It’s nice to see you again. How are you doing?” I greeted her.

“M-Milady! Y-Yes, as you can see, I am doing quite well,” she replied awkwardly in contrast to the way she had interacted with us previously. Of course, I couldn’t blame her. Back then, she had been the head cook and I a mere attendant, but now she was staff at a stall while I was the Dragon Duchess consort. I told her that there was no need to act so formally, but she looked very nervous. It didn’t help that Van was right behind me as well.

The former head cook opened the steamer and we were

greeted by a cloud of vapor. Before long, the fluffy, steamed mont blancs inside became visible. My brother treated all of us to one of these pastries. There were seats in front of the stall so we could eat them immediately. They also served us complimentary hot tea, and it was a great match for the gentle, fluffy taste of the mont blanc.

The former head cook approached us. “The modified herbal tea that we discussed previously is being served at a stall in the central plaza. Please have some if you have the time,” she said.

“Thank you for telling us. I’m looking forward to trying it,” I replied. The former head cook seemed to be enjoying her new job too, so I felt happy for her.

We would all be going our separate ways from here. Each of our three groups was staying at a different inn.

“Roche, you’re not sleeping with Opera today, all right? You two are still merely engaged, so I won’t be allowing it!” Van warned.

“Y-Yes, milord!” Roche stammered in reply.

Our inn arrangements were as follows: Van and I at one, Madeleine and my brother at another, Lady Opera and Parfeil sharing one, and Roche and a few knights at the last one.

Roche looked dejected at that split, but Lady Opera cheerfully called out to him.

“Roche! We are heading out!”

“Okay!” he exclaimed, but upon hearing that they were going on a long trip on an elk, he looked disappointed once more. They were going to check the rooms first before heading out.

And with that, we all headed for our respective destinations.

Our inns were all separate buildings, with one group staying in a single lodge. Only Van and I would be staying in our lodge. While there were knights stationed outside our building, they wouldn’t be entering it. We were now free to spend our time as we pleased.

The lodge’s interior was more luxurious than the one we’d had at the Forêt Noire estate. The lodge was a bungalow with a living room, a study, a tea room, and a bedroom—several rooms where one could just laze around. There were no servants here to wait on us, but we could order tea and snacks through crystal transmissions. There were also hot and cold drinks stored in magicstone containers to preserve their temperature.

“Mille-Feuille, we’re finally on our own.”

“You’re right.” I thought I’d be a bit more vulnerable today. I went and embraced Van, but as I did, he froze. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“U-Um, nothing… I just didn’t think that you would embrace me like this,” he admitted. “Right now, I’m frozen with shock, confusion, and elation all at the same time.”

“I didn’t expect you to have such a complicated reaction. Well, I’ll be sweeter to you from now on so you don’t get shocked.”

“R-Really?!”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“W-Well, you’re right,” he stammered.

Van took out a piece of paper from his pocket and started writing. He wrote so fervently that I couldn’t help but peek at his work. The contents were shocking.

“‘A contract for Mille-Feuille to be sweet to Van once a day’?!”

“That’s right,” he said. “I want to have it in writing or you might forget about it.”

“Once a day is too much,” I protested.

Van’s eyes widened in disbelief. “W-Well, what about once a month?”

“I’m not sure about that frequency…”

“D-Do you mean you only want it once every six months?!”

I shook my head, and Van slumped down in despair.

“Well, I was thinking that I could be sweet to you once a week,” I said. Van seemed to doubt his ears and asked me to repeat that. “I *said*, I could be sweet to you once a week.”

“Mille-Feuille!!! You’re the best!!!” Van shook my hand with tears in his eyes, and I laughed at all of his over-the-top reactions.

Our fun trip to Diamant came and went in the blink of an eye. Our ride back to the capital was also in a wyvern carriage. All of us had enjoyed the hot springs to the fullest, and we had bags full of souvenirs to bring back to the capital. The Jeweled Snow Hot Spring Lotion had been sold out, much to Lady Opera’s annoyance, so Fenetra would be sending some her way at a later date.

“The hot springs were fun, but I think I would like some places to visit in other regions as well,” I said, blurting out my thoughts while everyone was talking about the trip. Lady Opera and

Madeleine seemed to agree wholeheartedly with my comment.

Van, meanwhile, seemed to sulk in response. “I knew it! You *did* want to take on more tourism work! And when you do, you’re going to get so absorbed in your work that you’ll ignore me every night!” he complained.

“I didn’t say *I* was going to be in charge of it!” I retorted.

“Really?”

“Really.” I didn’t want to be the Dragon Duke’s maid ever again, even if it was only disguising myself on a trip to another region. “That’s why this time, I’m going to have someone else take charge.”

“Well then, I have an idea in mind,” Lady Opera declared.

“What is it?”

“What about wyvern racing? We have horse racing in the capital and elk racing in Diamant. We could add wyvern racing to our list of attractions!” she announced proudly.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to make gambling even more popular,” Van complained.

“Well then, brother, do *you* have any good ideas in mind?”

“Me? Hmm… What about a museum to celebrate Mille-Feuille?”

“Who’s going to go to *that*?” I asked.

“I’d go there every single day.”

“Make that in your private garden or something, *not* with our public funds,” I retorted, and Lady Opera nodded in agreement.

We spent time talking about such silly things until we arrived back in the capital.

***

Sometime after coming back from our trip, I started feeling that something about my body was off.

What’s wrong with me? I thought. While Parfeil was fussing over me, I dragged myself out of bed.

Today, my mother was visiting. Upon seeing me, she remarked that I had put on some weight.

“I just came back from a trip, so I might have eaten too many tasty things over there. But now, it’s like I have no appetite at all,” I told her.

“Mille-Feuille, are you pregnant?”

My mother's words sent a jolt through me. When I thought about it, I realized I'd been unable to stomach strong scents lately. I'd also been unable to eat sour foods, and I felt sleepy all the time. The signs had been everywhere.

"Call a doctor! If you feel sick, then you should have yourself checked out!" my mother urged.

"Y-Yes, I will!"

And so, I had an urgent appointment with a doctor to have myself examined. The result? The doctor found that I was carrying a child.

"I feel like an idiot," I grumbled. "I thought I was just tired from my trip and from eating too much."

"Don't worry about it. It's your first time, after all."

I hadn't been a mother in my previous life. I couldn't imagine myself being one. When I had been told that I was pregnant, I understood how Van had felt when I'd hugged him during our trip —frozen with shock, confusion, and elation all at the same time. But now, my heart was filled with nothing but happiness.

My body is no longer just my own. What a mysterious feeling.

From now on, I had to take a step forward as a mother, with all the responsibilities that it entailed.

Just as I was steeling myself for this new phase in my life, my mother said something that caught me off guard. "I'll be staying by your side until the baby is born, okay?"

"What?! I'll be fine. You don't need to worry about me," I told her.

"Really now? Just where are you finding all that confidence when moments ago you simply thought that you were sick?"

I had no retort for that. Parfeil could only silently comfort me.

That night, I let Van know that I had something important to tell him and that he should make some time tonight. Upon arriving, Van looked pale and nervous. Sweat dripped from his forehead.

He sat in front of me and started talking, his voice trembling. "Mille-Feuille, just so you know, I don't want to divorce you."

"Huh?"

"I don't want to di..." he started to repeat and then stopped. "Never mind. I'm too scared to say that word again."

"Van, what are you talking about?"

“Calling your husband over, saying that you have something to talk about? I can’t think of anything except di… *That*.”

Van looked like he was about to cry. I wondered why he would even think that. Then, I remembered that I hadn’t been seeing Van much lately because I’d felt ill. We had been sleeping in separate rooms, and there must’ve been days when I hadn’t talked to him at all. I hadn’t told him that I was feeling sick so as not to worry him, but that turned out to have backfired.

“Van, I’m so sorry. It’s not bad news,” I began. “Actually, it’s really, really good news.”

“So, it’s not di—*that*?”

“It’s not.”

Upon hearing that, Van promptly stood up and gently sat right next to me.

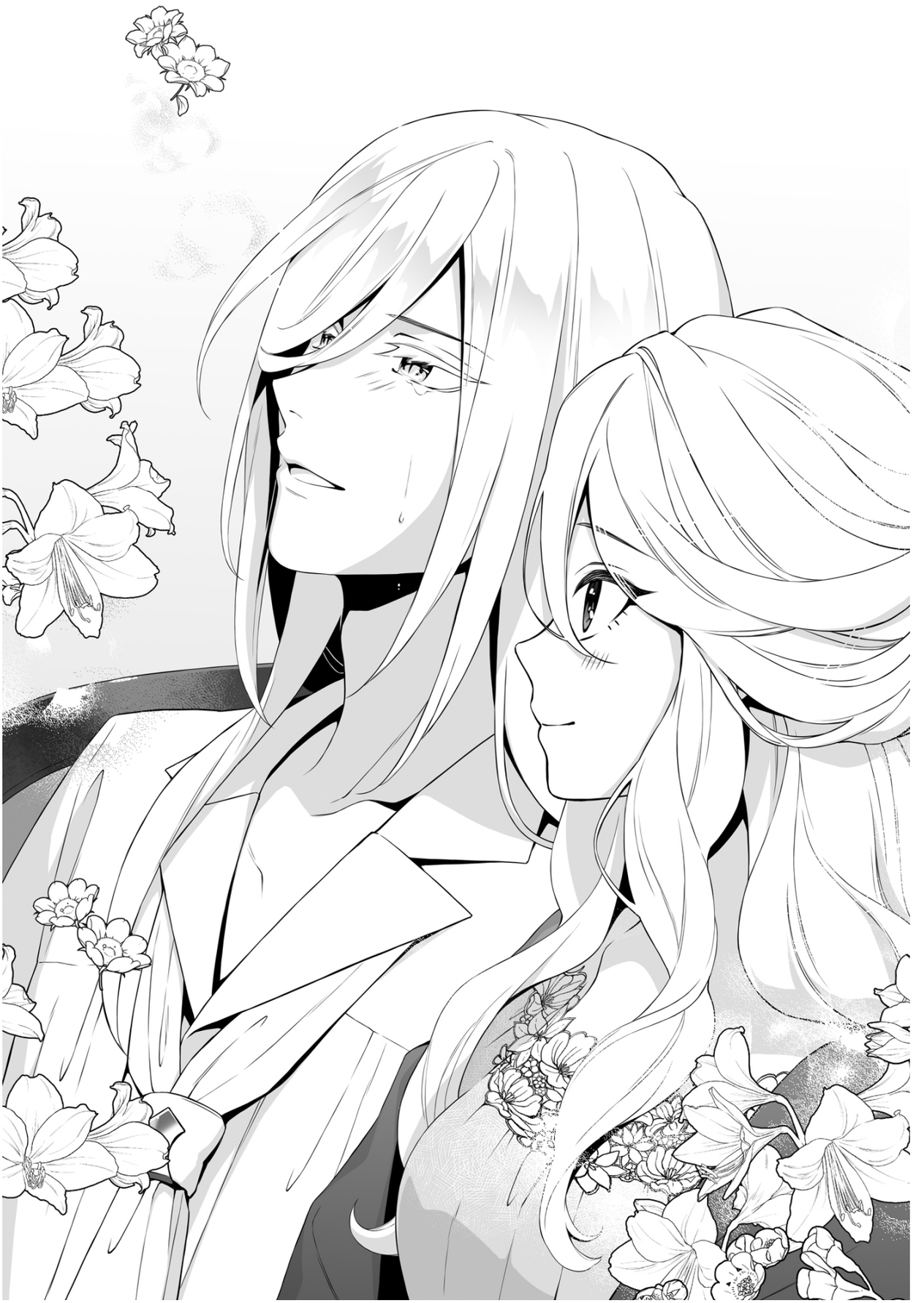
“I’ve been feeling sick the past few days, and I’ve been sleeping in a lot more. I’m sure I worried you a lot. I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” he told me. “I was just assuming the worst. I’m also sorry for not noticing that you were feeling under the weather.”

I hadn’t been showing my face to him at all, so it was only natural that he wouldn’t have noticed. I told him that neither of us were at fault.

“Anyway, about the news…” I started. Van stared at me hard enough that he might have bored a hole through me as he waited for me to continue. “I’m pregnant with our child.”

The moment I broke the news, Van looked up at the ceiling and tears started streaming down his face. He said nothing. As his wife, I knew that those were tears of joy. I’d thought that he would jump up and down in joy, but I hadn’t expected him to celebrate so quietly.



“Mille-Feuille… I’m so happy right now.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Please take care of yourself and take it easy,” he told me.

“I will.”

Van embraced me gently. “Thank you,” he whispered into my ear. I reciprocated.

Months later, our first child was born—a healthy dragonkin boy, as handsome as his father. Lady Opera gave him the name “Chocolat.” Like his father, he was an energetic little kid.

Parfeil, who was acting as his nanny, had her hands full all the time. “Dear me! I thought I’d be able to draw on my experience raising you, milady, but raising a boy is so different from raising a girl!”

“It is, isn’t it?”

Madeleine also joined in helping to raise Chocolat. Everyone was pitching in. Meanwhile, Van announced that he “wasn’t going to leave everything to the nanny!” and took our son to his office some days to spend time with him.

Of course, as a result, he wasn’t able to get any work done and would return from his office completely exhausted.

Giving birth to and raising a child took so much work. This realization made me feel so grateful to my parents and Parfeil, who had raised me since I was a little child.

And with that, I lived happily with my husband and son, surrounded by my friends and family. I prayed that every day ahead of us would be peaceful and prosperous.

Ultimately, my second life was filled with happiness.



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I Don't Want to Be the Dragon Duke's Maid! Serving My Ex-Fiancé from My Past Life: Volume 2
by Mashimesa Emoto

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