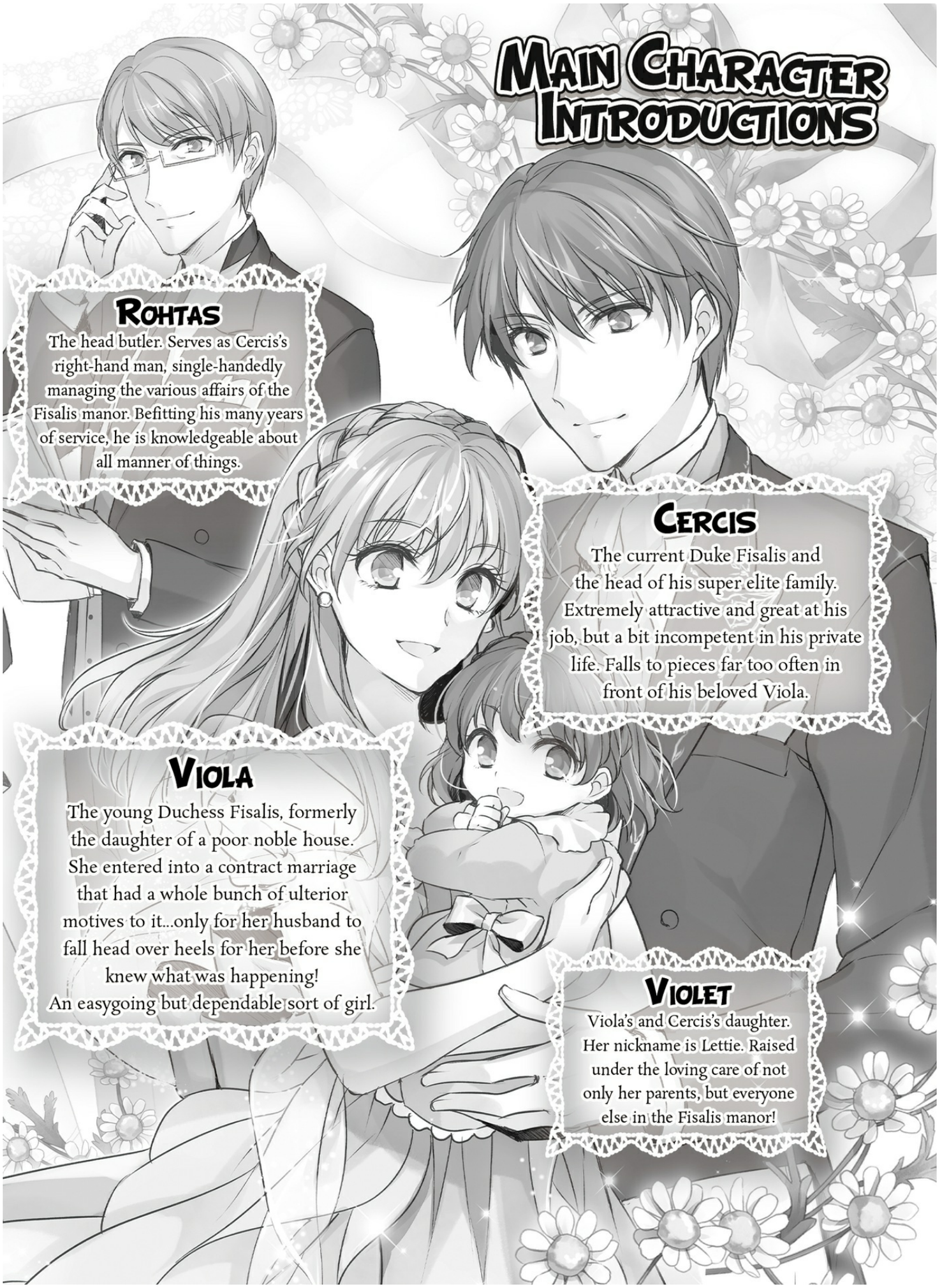

Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?!
~The Contract Couple's Happily Ever After~
7
Author: Tsuredurebana
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Main Character Introductions



Rohtas

The head butler. Serves as Cercis's right-hand man, single-handedly managing the various affairs of the Fisalis manor. Befitting his many years of service, he is knowledgeable about all manner of things.

Cercis

The current Duke Fisalis and the head of his super elite family. Extremely attractive and great at his job, but a bit incompetent in his private life. Falls to pieces far too often in front of his beloved Viola.

Viola

The young Duchess Fisalis, formerly the daughter of a poor noble house. She entered into a contract marriage that had a whole bunch of ulterior motives to it...only for her husband to fall head over heels for her before she knew what was happening!
An easygoing but dependable sort of girl.

Violet

Viola's and Cercis's daughter. Her nickname is Lettie. Raised under the loving care of not only her parents, but everyone else in the Fisalis manor!

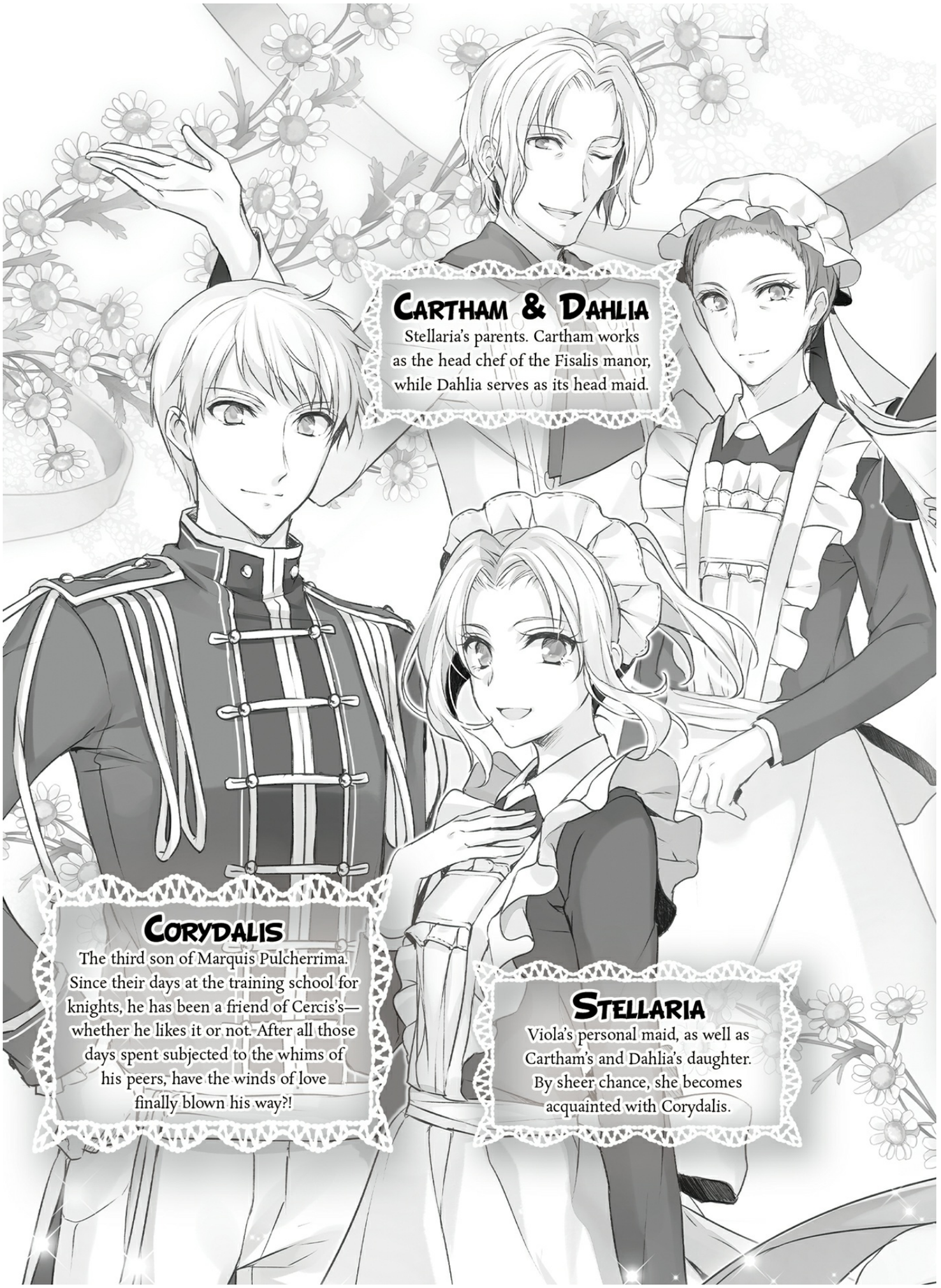

Cartham & Dahlia
Stellaria's parents. Cartham works as the head chef of the Fisalis manor, while Dahlia serves as its head maid.
Corydalis
The third son of Marquis Pulcherrima. Since their days at the training school for knights, he has been a friend of Cercis's—whether he likes it or not. After all those days spent subjected to the whims of his peers, have the winds of love finally blown his way?!
Stellaria
Viola's personal maid, as well as Cartham's and Dahlia's daughter. By sheer chance, she becomes acquainted with Corydalis.

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Main Story: A Romance on the Periphery

The sanctuary bell, known to many as the Bell of Good Tidings, was tolling. Not a single cloud could be seen in the sky that day, giving the impression that even God had given his blessing.

This was the royal capital, Rohze, of the Flür Kingdom. In mere moments, a wedding was to be held in the sanctuary of a state church that sat on a small hill overlooking the capital. This sanctuary was the holiest place in the entire palace.

“Can’t believe the commander’s really getting married!”

“Guess so.”

“Gotta say, part of me kept waiting for the big ‘gotcha’ moment.”

“Seriously? This would be way too much effort for a prank.”

My men and I—Corydalis Cashmeriana Pulcherrima, the lieutenant commander of the Special Ops Division—were standing guard just outside said sanctuary. Here we were, at the wedding of Duke Fisalis, one of the most prominent nobles of the Flür Kingdom, and the daughter of the Euphorbia family, an earldom famously on the decline. And all the while, I kept wondering to myself, *Should we really just stand by and let this happen?*

Flür was a peaceful and prosperous country, generally speaking, but this was the royal palace we were talking about. Not to mention, it wouldn’t be hyperbole to say that every VIP from across the nation was gathered here today, including His Majesty the King himself. There was no such thing as being too cautious.

Hence the reason the chivalric order had been called in to keep security nice and tight.

As the most elite squad among the kingdom’s knights—and the direct subordinates of the duke himself, to boot—we had been tasked with guarding the area just outside the sanctuary. That said, I’d actually been invited to attend

the ceremony itself; I'd just turned it down because I had a job to do.

Why was *I* invited, you might be wondering?

I'd say the biggest reason would be that I've been friends (well, maybe partners-in-crime is more accurate) with the duke since our days at the knights' training academy. Oh, and you'd never know it, but I've technically got the fancy title of the Third Son of Marquis Pulcherrima. That might have a little something to do with it too.

But forget about all that.

The point is, today I was experiencing the festivities from the outside looking in. I have to admit, part of me felt this was a way more comfortable spot to be anyway.

Oh, yeah. Right before the ceremony began, I caught a glimpse of the lucky bride getting dragged to the sanctuary by her maid... But wait. Hold on just a second. Was that seriously the earl's daughter?

The Euphorbia daughter *I* knew was a much more plain, practically nondescript girl. I couldn't claim to remember her all that well, given how rarely she showed her face in high society, but I seemed to recall her being a dyed-in-the-wool wallflower who wore dresses so dull in design and color that it was hard to believe a girl her age had picked them out. She wasn't bad-looking or anything, but she was just so lacking in presence that it was hard to remember her in any real detail. Almost like she was some kind of phantom.

Today, however, she was the picture of a sweet, ephemeral beauty.

Makeup really works wonders! Wait, why am I *so impressed?*

Meanwhile, the other half of the pair was one mega handsome, mega elite catch of a guy, except for this one fundamental problem: his personality. Don't get me wrong, he was great at his job—good-looking too.

But getting married when you've got a girlfriend you totally intend to keep around? I don't know about that one, buddy. We may be friends, but that's enough to put me *off.*

*

“I’m getting married.”

It was over a year or so ago when Duke Fisalis—the commander of the Special Ops Division—had suddenly announced as much to me.

Hell yeah! He’s finally breaking up with his mistress!

Though it wasn’t my place to comment on his choice of women, it was hard to watch him shirk all his duties around the house to fawn over his lover, so I was relieved to hear the news.

Maybe he’ll get his act together outside work now. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to say those capable servants of his are the only thing keeping that manor afloat.

“Congratulations! Then it sounds like you’ve got some affairs to get in order.”

“And why would I need to do that?”

“Huh? Don’t tell me you’re formally marrying your lover!”

“I wouldn’t be in this mess if things were that simple.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. What’s the deal, then?”

“My current girlfriend comes as part of the contract.”

“I’m sorry, WHAT?!”

I can’t believe he dropped something that nasty on me like it should’ve been obvious! A marriage where he and his mistress come as a package deal? Seriously? Guess that means he has zero plans to break up with the girlfriend any time soon. I already feel bad for that poor wife (fiancée?) of his.

As an aside, our subordinates in the Bombshell Trio had been ready to crack open the champagne when they’d first heard about the engagement, but as soon as they learned he had no intention of breaking it off with his mistress, they really let the commander have it.

*

Reminiscing about the commander’s abrupt wedding announcement made me think back to the wife-to-be of his I’d just seen.

So the commander’s just going to give a cute girl like her the cold shoulder,

huh? (Or so I thought.) *I'd never do something like that! I'm a one-woman man!*

I was determined to use that boss of mine as an example of how *not* to behave.



1. The Man Known as Corydalis

My name is Corydalis Cashmeriana Pulcherrima, the third son of the Pulcherrima family. My middle name doesn't get used too often, so feel free to forget it immediately.

Thanks to the two very distinguished brothers who came before me—a reliable eldest son and an intellectual in the middle—I had a pretty relaxed upbringing. Unless things went catastrophically wrong, there was no chance I'd ever end up inheriting the marquisate.

I was better at studying than your average kid, but I'd always preferred doing physical exercise and swinging a sword around. When I told my dad I wanted to be a knight when I grew up, he gave me the go-ahead immediately.

"Have at it, son. I think you're well suited to the job."

"There are a variety of roles within the chivalric order," my oldest brother explained. "Some squads call for brains over brawn."

"I imagine you'd fare well with either, Cory. A more cerebral position will give you a leg up on climbing the ranks, however," my middle brother said, his glasses glinting in the light.

My siblings sure know their stuff.

With getting into the knights' training academy as my new goal, I devoted myself to studying and practicing my swordsmanship until I reached the age of admission.

*

When I was fifteen, I was admitted to the academy.

I would be living in a dormitory for the two years from my enrollment to my graduation. Being the son of a marquis didn't win me any special treatment there. That said, the dorms *were* divided into two buildings, colloquially known as the Noble Wing and the Commoner Wing.

Whether you lived in the Noble Wing or the Commoner Wing, everyone started out in what we called the Grunt Chamber (in other words, a collection of those on the bottom rung). After that, you would get assigned to a room with marginally nicer amenities and decor depending on your grades. Nobody ever got their own private room, though.

The Grunt Chamber had several sets of bunks, and the only space that was *really* yours was your bed. Personal belongings had to be kept to a minimum.

I'd never lived like this before, so I was just as excited as I was nervous. Though the dorm room was charged with all the nerves and apprehension of the first day of school, I was thinking positive thoughts as I went to work arranging my space.

Right as I'd finished setting up my living area just how I wanted it, the whole room suddenly went dead quiet. I poked my head out from my bunk to see what was up, only to be greeted by a pair of long, slender legs. *Who's that?*

I lifted my gaze up and up, eventually landing on one hell of a handsome face.

Whoa! That's Cercis of the Fisalis family!

I'd seen him around at plenty of parties before, so I recognized him immediately. *No clue if he knows who* I *am, though.*

"Do you have the top bunk?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"I'm Corydalis. Nice to meet ya."

"I know who you are."

"Well, well."

Looks like the answer is yes.

That terse conversation was my introduction to Cercis. I could tell that the rest of our peers were listening in on it carefully. They all knew who Cercis was already—which came as no surprise—but now that they were seeing him up close and in person, his beauty and grandeur were so overwhelming that all they could do was stare.

Thinking back, the two of us have been inseparable ever since that fateful moment.

We successfully made it out of the Grunt Chamber after our first exam, and with each subsequent test, we moved on to a higher-ranked room. But somehow we *always* ended up in the same one.

On top of that, we were perpetual rivals in both our studies and physical training. Don't get me wrong—I don't mean in a fraught sort of way. It was more like a neck and neck race where we'd keep swapping the lead back and forth.

"Damn! Looks like you came out on top in training, Cercis."

"And? *You're* number one on our written exams. Can't call myself top dog until I've claimed both spots."

"Ooh, big talk!"

And so on. Together we held a total monopoly over first and second place. Nothing beats having a little competition!

As competent as he was in his studies and training, being the pampered rich boy that he was, Cercis was totally useless when it came to chores.

The younger students in the dorm had to take turns preparing meals as part of our hands-on training. The first time we had meal duty, Cercis told me had zero experience with housework, so I put him in charge of the easiest task of all: making the soup. Literally all he had to do was take everything the rest of us had chopped and put it into the pot.

"Go ahead and toss in those ingredients over there."

"Got it."

It seemed like he understood what to do, so I left him to it while the rest of us went to work on the entrée and side dishes.

Fortunately, I got just a *taaad* bit concerned and glanced over to see how he was doing. And wouldn't you know it? For reasons that escaped me, the dope was about to dump a bunch of fruit into the soup.

"Whoa there! What the heck are you doing?!"

“Cercis, no! You can’t put *that* in!”

“Don’t jump the gun! That’s for the dessert!”

If you toss in the sweet fruit (pretty ripe too) we set out for the dessert, we’re gonna have one nasty soup on our hands!

When the other members of our team scrambled to stop him, he responded with a blank look on his face, “Huh? But you told me to toss in the ingredients over there.”

God, I am so done with this guy!

“I meant the ingredients FOR THE SOUP!”

“These were sitting right next to those. I *did* think it was strange for fruit to go in a soup, I’ll admit.”

“Okay, that’s it, Cercis! We’re putting you on dish duty!”

From then on, Cercis was appointed Chief of Silverware.

He got plenty of attention just from his looks, but his grades netted him even more. The world of knights is a meritocracy, where people’s abilities matter more than their lineage. So as you might expect, we often came across peers or older students who didn’t think too fondly of us, and we were called out back on more than one occasion.

Sometimes it was tough-guy seniors (who had worked their way up from the rank of commoner, naturally), and sometimes it was classmates pretty confident in their skills (who had worked their way up, etc., etc.). We were regularly outnumbered, with Cercis and I having to take on a handful of guys each.

’Course, we always managed to send them packing.

For the record, every single one of those guys we beat ended up becoming our “vassals.” They were all decently capable themselves, so that was sure to come in handy down the line.

And that’s the story of how Cercis and I became buddies.

*

Once we had successfully graduated from the training academy, we joined the chivalric order at long last. There, we were given our temporary assignments.

“Whaaaat? I’m stuck with you *again*?!”

“That’s *my* line!”

On the bulletin board where the assignments had been posted, both my and Cercis’s names were written under “The Special Operations Division.”

Special Ops, huh? That’s an elite squad you can’t get into unless you’ve got both the smarts and the skills for it. This’d be the “brains” my brother mentioned.

Considering the two of us had been in an eternal competition for the top grades of our school year, these results weren’t *too* surprising.

*

Now that we’d graduated, we were free men once more. I, however, opted to stay in the knights’ dormitory instead of returning home. I was an adult now, so I figured I was better off fending for myself.

Cercis didn’t have that option, so he went back to his ducal manor. Considering how self-sufficient he was (meaning, not at all), that was probably the right move. A wise decision.

After that, we started getting invited to social functions. I always went in with an attitude of, *Cool, guess I’ll eat good food and kill some time*, but it was different for Cercis. All the young noble ladies wouldn’t leave the damn guy alone!

“It’s good to see you, Sir Cercis!”

“Would you care to dance with me tonight?”

“Goodness, no! Come dance with *me*!”

You get the idea. There would always be a huge crowd of girls around him. The guy was a total chick magnet.

Cercis knew how to deal with this by then, so he’d always put on his best

mask of a smile and say, “No need to fight, ladies. I’ll come ask you for a dance next, so stay faithful and wait your turn.”

“C-Certainly, milord!”

He then flashed them a dashing grin. *Man, you can practically see the stars light up whenever a pretty boy smiles, huh? I learned something new.*

I was decently popular with the ladies myself, but I wasn’t really looking for a girlfriend. Since I’d decided that getting my feet under me and getting used to my job was my top priority, I’d ignored all the girls who came on to me.

“Is that same woman still making advances towards you?” Cercis asked me when I saw him a few days after the aforementioned incident. I only heaved a weary sigh in response.

A young noblewoman had accosted me at the evening party the other night. She had sent me several letters since then, but I’d thrown them all out.

“Not interested. Girls like that are only after my title.”

“Fair enough.”

“And what about you, huh? You’re pretty popular with the ladies yourself.”

“It’s like you said: they’re all just lusting after my looks and status. It’s nothing but a nuisance, frankly. None of them care about who I am as a person.”

He raised a good point. His good looks alone would be enough to make him a top-class lady-killer; add a fortune, a prestigious noble title, and an elite knighthood on top of that, and there was no way he *wouldn’t* be a total knockout.

I knew Cercis was sick and tired of that reality too.

“That sure doesn’t seem to stop you from fooling around.”

“It’s fine. I always make sure they’re no-strings-attached arrangements.”

“*That’s* your biggest concern?!”

How come that’s *the part where you get all resolute in your principles?*

I watched as Cercis went through casual (maybe even impersonal) relationship after relationship. It looked to me like he was practically cycling

through women, but he must have been making a clean break every time, since I never heard about it coming back to bite him. It was almost impressive, in a sense.

There was a time when I honestly thought, *This guy's never going to find a girl he truly loves.*

And yet. Not a year later...

He actually found The One! And she's a traveling dancing girl, to boot!

Finding out about Cercis's new girlfriend nearly sent me into shock. From the sound of it, he was genuinely head over heels for her, and he'd go straight from work to see her almost every day. He spent so much time at her place that he rarely went back to his own mansion.

He still took his job seriously, but everything else? Not so much.

"She doesn't care about my title or my credentials. She sees me for who I am."

As spellbound as you sound, I'm not convinced.

To be fair, that *was* the sort of thing Cercis had always talked about wanting. I hoped to find a girl like that myself someday.

Still, I figured I'd share a certain idiom with that lovesick little knight of ours.

"Yeah, yeah. Love is blind."

*

Much like Cercis always said, I didn't care for girls who were drawn to my title. The reality was that way too many women only approached me because of superficial attributes like "a marquis's son," "rich," "elite," or "hot." There was only one way that was ever going to end: they'd build up their own version of me around those traits, and then once they actually got to know me, they'd be disappointed. It wouldn't be long before they'd start complaining about how "I thought you were better than this" and lose interest.

If a girl didn't love me for who I was, I wasn't about to get serious about the relationship either.

Aww, man! I've had enough of these pushy girls who treat me like a piece of meat. All I want is a laid-back romance with a nice, gentle girl.

2. Corydalis's Fateful Encounter

Seven whole years had passed in the blink of an eye since I'd been assigned to the Special Ops Division. During that time, Cercis and I had worked our way up through the ranks to the positions of commander and lieutenant commander, respectively.

The first thing I had to do after getting back from a long business trip was to write up an insane amount of reports. Or more precisely, I had to compile all the reports we'd already sent from our destination and present a conclusion.

I'd already gone over said conclusion with the commander, so the only thing left to do was put it down on paper. Still, considering I'd take exercise over deskwork any day, even that was pure torture for me.

The commander had already up and ditched me.

"I've been away from the manor for too long," he'd mentioned offhandedly, only to disappear the moment his work was done.

Damn, that guy knows how to make a quick exit. Newsflash, Cercis: we've ALL been away from home for a while!

I hadn't the slightest clue whether it was his wife or his mistress he was hurrying home to, but I'd gone ahead and said, "You've got a cute wife waiting for you at home and all! Man, I'm jealous!"

"What are you going on about? Calendula is the one waiting for me."

"My mistake."

Well, there you have it—it's his mistress. That poor, poor little wife of his. What's it like to be living with both your wife and your mistress, anyway? Do you get a new catfight every day? Yikes, I'm shuddering at the very thought.

Now that he'd already taken his leave with that proud declaration about keeping his mistress waiting, griping wasn't going to get me anywhere, so I opted to just do my job. (I hate my life.)

You'll pay for this. Tomorrow there's gonna be a fresh pile of paperwork waiting on your desk.

But anyway, I'd have to save my revenge for later.

I hadn't slept for something like two or three days before arriving back at the royal capital, only to have this stupid report waiting at the finish line. You'd think someone had it out for me or something. I was about as tired as you'd expect, so all I wanted was to finish up and head home to sleep.

I wrote up the report as fast as I possibly could.

"This is bad. I'm hitting my limit."

At that moment, I was walking through the halls of the royal palace, on my way to submit my report to one of the higher-ups.

We'd gotten back from our trip yesterday evening. I'd then met with the commander to formulate our conclusions about the mission, so it wasn't until late into the night that I'd gotten started on the actual draft.

Morning had rolled around. Though I'd gotten a short nap in, that was more or less just me dozing off at my desk, so it would be hard to claim that my body was fully rested.

I was mostly managing to walk in a straight line, but with the way I was fighting to keep myself awake, I kept stumbling over my own feet. My drowsiness and fatigue had reached their peak.

"Once this is done, I'm hitting the bath! Once this is done, I'm hitting the bed! Once this is done—whoa!"

"Eep!"

As I was walking down the corridor in my bleary-eyed daze, I rounded a corner and smacked right into someone coming from the other direction.

The girl I had bumped into was a lady-in-waiting from the royal palace. I managed to catch her in my arms as she stumbled, which kept her from getting hurt—but this came at the cost of sending all the important documents in my hands flying everywhere. *Oh well. She's okay, and that's what really matters here.*

“I’m sorry! Are you all right?” I helped her back to her feet, ignoring the scattered documents for the moment.

“Yes, I’m just fine—thanks to you, I should say. Really, I’m the one who should be apologizing; I wasn’t watching where I was going. Forgive me,” she responded, dipping her head in a bow.

“No, it wasn’t your fault at all. Please don’t apologize!”

That one was one hundred percent on me. I’d been walking around in a daze. *I* was the one who hadn’t been watching where I was going.

“Oh, but I must. Just look at what happened to all those important documents of yours.”

“Yeah...well, I’ll pick ’em back up in a moment here, so don’t worry about it.” I shrugged it off with a laugh, hoping she wouldn’t realize that these were some pretty vital papers I’d just dropped. Ergo, I did my best to pretend like it was all just trivial paperwork.

Of course, as soon as she turned to leave with a quick bow, I started gathering up the papers without missing a beat.

But then...a slender, dainty hand entered my view.

She had picked up a paper that had landed a good distance away and come to hand it over to me.

Every gesture of hers was so graceful that I couldn’t help but gawk. As I crouched there spacing out, she gave a curious tilt of her head. Seeing as I had yet to move a muscle, she went ahead and slipped the paper into my hands herself.

“Are you sure everything’s all right? I’ll go ahead and gather the papers that landed over there,” she said, kneeling next to me and extending a hand to pick up more of the scattered documents.

Crap! That’s a really important one!

When I saw her reaching for the paper on which I’d recorded our conclusion, I snapped out of my reverie and started panicking.

“No, please! I’ll handle these myself!”

“Oh, dear me—I have terrible eyesight, so I haven’t the faintest idea what this says.”

She must have figured out what was up when I began freaking out all of a sudden; with a sweet smile on her face, she shut her eyes and started gathering up whatever papers her hands landed on.

Talk about considerate!

Seeing her close her eyes with such a gentle look on her features made my heart skip a beat.

Wait, this is all well and good, but...

I brought myself back to reality just as I was getting carried away. No matter how nice she appeared, there was always the chance that she was really a spy. Besides, she seemed almost a little *too* tactful.

Anyone with enough smarts would be able to deduce from both my uniform and my behavior that these were some key documents. Once I was out of hot water, I was gonna have to give myself a stern talking-to for getting so visibly flustered.

I suspected her extra hard, just to balance out how charmed I’d been just seconds ago.

She kept her eyes shut, and I stared long and hard at her. The fact that she couldn’t see meant she wasn’t at her most efficient, but she helped me however she could as quickly as possible.

Then, she said, “Is that all of them? I’m afraid the pages are all out of order now, but this is as much as I can do.”

She tapped the stack of papers against the floor to straighten it out, then handed it over to me.

Nothing suspicious so far. It’s too early to jump to any conclusions, though.

“Thanks. You really helped me out here. I can take care of the rest myself.”

I smiled back at her, grateful.

Aw, great. Now I have to go back to the office and sort these out. If I hand

these over to my superior all jumbled up, he's going to be pissed. I can't believe I have to do this all over again... Dammit! Next time I'd better get myself together before I go to turn it in! Guess I'll just splash some cold water on my face and try again.

I turned on my heel, planning to head back to the office.

"I beg your pardon, but you seem awfully tired," came the maid's demure voice from behind me.

Oh, what's this? Is she thinking, "Now that I've got a chance, I might as well leave an impression"?

Though I wasn't anywhere near the commander's level, I was pretty popular with the ladies too—as tacky as it is to say that about myself.

Girls working in the royal palace would try to strike up conversations with me on the regular. I didn't have time to worry about a relationship these days, however, so I'd always let them down right away. If anything, wasting time flirting was just going to get in the way of my work.

If you can tell I'm tired, don't make me stick around even longer!

And here I'd been a little charmed for a second there. It didn't take long for my opinion of her to drop.

My drowsiness, exhaustion, and the stress of having to redo all my hard work came together to put me in a snappish mood. "I'm fine."

"Really? You're quite pale."

"I'm just sleep-deprived. I've been pulling all-nighters for a few days in a row now."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it's nothing serious...but here, have this."

"Hm?"

I heard her rummaging around for something, so I reluctantly turned back around, only to witness her taking a small wrapped candy out of a pocket of her maid uniform.



“This is a caramel my father made for me. He always says that a sweet treat is the best remedy when you’re feeling worn down. It’s quite tasty, as long as you don’t mind sweets.”

“Ah... Nah, I like ’em just fine.”

Everyone knows you’re not supposed to take candy from strangers, though.

What if it was poisoned or something? I *was* the third son of a marquis, believe it or not, so I’d been taught to watch out for tricks like this ever since I was little. I’d gotten the same lesson drilled into me after joining the chivalric order too.

When she noticed I was hesitant to accept it, the maid said, “Oh, my apologies.”

With that, she plucked the caramel out of my hand and popped it into her own mouth.

“There aren’t any questionable ingredients in it, I promise,” she reassured me, smiling with an indulgent sigh.

Now that she’d gone to the effort of taste-testing it for me, I had no choice but to accept it.

“Don’t mind if I do, then.”

She produced another piece of candy from her pocket, which I then took off her hands.

After that, we went off in different directions for real this time, with me returning to the office.

I studied the caramel intently, but as far as I could tell, it didn’t look any different from the one she had eaten. It didn’t smell weird either. Quite the contrary—it had a sweet, pleasant aroma.

More importantly, I just don’t think she’s the type to do something like that... Well, I say that now, but I guess I did *suspect her of being a spy not too long ago.*

I knew the commander and the rest of my subordinates would scold me for

my carelessness if they found out, but I was too tired to use my better judgment. I figured I might as well eat the caramel, consequences be damned.

Let me rephrase that: I was *dying* to eat it.

I peeled off the wrapper, then popped it into my mouth just like she had earlier. A sugary fragrance and a mellow sweetness flooded my mouth.

“It’s delish!” It was so good that I mumbled my internal monologue out loud.

The taste of it sent all of my fatigue out the window, dispelling any lingering doubts about her along with it.

*

“‘Dispelling any lingering doubts’? Oh, come off it! What you *really* mean is ‘I fell head over heels’!”

“She’s right!”

“No need for the posturing, Lieutenant Commander!”

“Can it already, Chamomile! Angelica! Alkanna!”

“Tee hee!” they all squealed in unison.

3. Corydalis's Crush

Ever since bumping into her in the corridor, I couldn't get that girl out of my mind. Soon, I found myself gazing at her whenever I could.

At first, this was because part of me had some lingering doubts about her being a spy, and I wanted to keep an eye out for whether the contents of the documents had been leaked to anyone outside our department—but that turned out to be a needless worry. She was just an ordinary lady-in-waiting from the royal palace.

What I learned after looking into her was that she was named Stellaria, and that she served as a personal attendant to the first princess, Artemisia. She had quite the reputation too.

Stellaria excelled at her job. Heck, she was so good at telling it like it is that she could actually get that selfish princess to listen to her. And it wasn't just the eldest one either—I heard that Stellaria looked after the other two princesses and the crown prince too. She enjoyed the confidence of the queen as well, and rumor had it that she was on track to claim the position of chief lady-in-waiting.

Every rumor I heard was about how talented or capable she was—all pretty intimidating stuff. She hadn't seemed so straitlaced the day I'd met her, though. If anything, she'd given off a sweet, gentle vibe. Was that just because she'd kept a smile on her face the whole time?

Everyone claimed that she was "a top-notch lady-in-waiting (in a no-nonsense kind of way)," but my impression from meeting her was "a cute, mellow girl (by my definition)." *Which is the real Stellaria? Now I really want to find out.*

As that curiosity grew, I took to watching her more and more often.

*

"Your Highness, it's time for your lesson! Don't even think about running off!"

"Ha! Catch me if you—*ack*!"

“Cheeky, aren’t we? Now then, it’s back to your chambers we go.”

“Fiiine...”

Playing tag with the naughty little prince today, eh? I mean, if you could even call it tag, considering she caught him the moment he started talking smack! You could put up a little bit more of a fight, Your Highness!

Upon watching that game of tag end in the span of a second, I burst out laughing. “Pfft—aha ha!”

“What is it? You’re giving me the creeps,” said the commander beside me, casting me a dubious glance.

“Oh, nothing.”

“Uh-huh. Say...it’s not the *prince* you were smiling at, was it?”

“Of course not.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

The prince may have a cute face, but there’s nothing cute about his behavior. Well, so long as I don’t join the Royal Guard any time soon, at least I’ll *never have to worry about babysitting the brat. Being forced to deal with him on a daily basis can’t be much fun for her.*

Still, I was surprised to see how quick on the draw she was. She’d scruffed the nimble little prince, tucked him under her arm, and carried him off to his room, all in the blink of an eye.

Not even His Fussiness is allowed a word in edgewise! She’s going to make a great mother someday... Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa*! What am I even thinking?! A great mother? Don’t get ahead of yourself, Corydalis!*

When he saw me shaking my head furiously to rid myself of those stray thoughts, the commander gave me a *really* weird look. “Are you all right, Corydalis?”

“I’m fine. I’m feeling overworked by my slave-driver of a boss, but that’s nothing new.”

“Interesting. I’ll be sure to tell the commander of the chivalric order you

called him that.”

“Hey, don’t you dare!”

He’s not the commander I’m talking about, and you know it!

*

The more I observed her, the more I noticed the disparity in her behavior. During moments like her recent prince-nabbing, she was downright authoritarian. But when she was, say, taking a break with her co-workers in the cafeteria, she’d always smile happily, with a gentle look on her features.

She was very good at switching between work mode and personal mode.

Now that I was actually keeping an eye out, I started spotting her in more and more places. Sometimes I’d see her in the corridors of the royal palace, and sometimes in the garden. Being the accomplished lady-in-waiting she was, it seemed she was always busy with something.

What’s more, I got her to remember me well enough to acknowledge me whenever we made eye contact.

“Whew! That’s it for today’s training session. Now that we’re on break, who wants to hit the cafeteria?” I suggested to my men one day.

“Me!”

“Me too!”

“Me third!”

“Good. Then wash off all that sweat and go get yourselves changed.”

“Yes, sir!” came the chorus of replies.

We cleaned ourselves off in the shared bath in the knights’ quarters, changed our clothes, and headed for the royal palace cafeteria.

“Hmm, now what should I get?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to stuff myself silly.”

“Sounds good to me.”

My men considered what to order while casting glances my way.

“You guys can pay your own way.”

“Cheapskate!” the knights whined in perfect harmony.

C’mon, you guys are too obvious.

As soon as I’d made it to the cafeteria with my subordinates in tow, I happened to spot *her* enjoying a cup of tea. Maybe she and her co-workers were off the clock too. Seeing as my men were making enough of a racket to draw plenty of attention, she shot a glance my way.

Crap! Now that we’ve made eye contact, I can’t just ignore her!

I gave her a nod of acknowledgment, and she nodded back—with a lovely smile on her face, of course.

Knowing how dignified she acts while on duty just gives that dreamy smile of hers some extra oomph! I can’t get enough of it.

While I was struggling to keep a stupid grin off my face, her co-workers looked over at me. *Oh no. Did they catch me smiling for a second there and decide I’m some kind of weirdo? I wouldn’t want them telling her, like, “There’s something wrong with that guy—stay away from him,” or something, so I guess I’d better offer them a genial (generic brand) greeting too. Though, uh, I’m pretty sure I’ve never met a single one of these maids besides Stellaria.*

Since it was an odd time of day, there were plenty of open seats.

“Aww, man, what am I gonna do? My wallet’s in dire straits, and payday’s still a few days off.”

“Everyone else here is in the same boat.”

“Maybe I’ll just ask for water...”

My men peered at the menu with crestfallen looks on their faces.

“Oh, fine already! I’ll—aha!”

Just as I was about to say that lunch would be my treat, I spotted the commander just outside the cafeteria! *Lucky me, here comes my walking walle* — Ahem*, that is, he really ought to be socializing with his subordinates more, so I should go ask him to join us!*

“Commander! Come have a cup of tea with us!” I offered, a huge smile plastered across my face.

“You just want to use me as your own personal wallet, don’t you?” he shot back before sitting down next to me with an exasperated sigh.

The arrival of the mega handsome, mega elite Duke Fisalis prompted a stir among the seated patrons of the cafeteria. The women in particular went red in the cheeks as they ogled him, spellbound.

At least she *isn’t like that*, I thought to myself, but that belief didn’t last long.

She didn’t have hearts in her eyes or anything, but Stellaria was definitely gazing at the commander with a gentle smile on her face.

Oh, come on! Not you too, Stellaria!

All the warm fuzzies I’d just been feeling evaporated in an instant. I cast a sidelong glance at my boss-slash-partner-in-crime beside me. *Ugh! The way he’s sitting with his legs oh-so-gracefully crossed is downright picturesque!*

*

“Um, Sir Corydalis!”

“Yes?”

“I... I’m in love with you!”

“Uh-huh...”

The girl standing before me was some lady-in-waiting I’d never met before. She had called me out into the garden during my lunch break, and lo, here was the reason for the summons.

As far as looks went, I’d put her on the cute side, if you asked me. The way she was blushing and trembling from embarrassment was pretty endearing too...but considering she was a total stranger to me, I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do with this confession of love.

Besides, I’ve already got a girl I like. Not that she seems to return the interest, of course.

Thinking back on my last encounter with Stellaria was enough to make me

tear up, so I did my best to forget about that for the moment.

More important right now was getting rid of this girl.

“Sorry, but I’m not interested in a relationship. I don’t know you all that well, and I’m too busy with work to think about anything else.”

Like, seriously, I’m swamped*.*

Now that the covert reconnaissance mission to our southern neighbor of Aurantia was officially underway, I had tons of prep work to do.

That country is a real pain in my ass. It doesn’t help that my perfectionist of a boss is always making one brutal demand after another either... Ugh.

Back to the point: I used work as an excuse and let her down gently. It wasn’t even a lie, really.

I was getting more and more of these love confessions as of late. Frankly, it was a headache to deal with.

Working in my department made relationships something of a hassle. Seeing as we were entrusted with a lot of top-secret missions, I couldn’t divulge the particulars of my work even to my family or closest friends. This wouldn’t be a problem if I found a partner who was okay with all of that, but there aren’t a ton of girls like that out there.

Any woman liable to start demanding, “Which is more important to you: me or your job?!” was a hard pass from me.

In most cases, if I put on my most convincing look of distress (to be fair, this *was* distressing) and apologized, the girl would say, “I-I get it!” and back off. That always made things a lot easier on me, since I wasn’t interested in being a jerk about it. Unfortunately, the girl of the day was more stubborn than usual.

“In that case, can I come see you on your days off?”

“I’d rather spend those days getting some actual rest.”

“How about on your way home from work?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever left the office on time.”

“During your breaks, then!”

“My subordinates will butt in to tease us.”

Just take the hint already!

She was digging her heels in so hard it was exhausting. *C’mon, wouldn’t you be disappointed if I only agreed to this under duress? Jeez, my gut is telling me that she’s exactly the type of girl to bust out my least favorite line.*

“We can start as friends!”

“Sure, I wouldn’t mind something platonic.”

“I said we could *start* as friends.”

“And I’m saying we can *be* friends.”

Leveling up from friendship isn’t gonna happen here. No offense.

“Fine.” She finally backed off.

Of course, “friends” in this case basically amounted to “acquaintances,” and I doubted I was going to run into her too often.

Feeling worn out from that whole exchange, I wandered down the corridors of the royal palace. My attempts to talk her down had taken up almost all of my precious lunch break.

Guess I’ll just grab a sandwich for takeout and eat while I work.

I decided to stop by the cafeteria before heading back to the office. Just as I picked up my pace, feeling the hunger pangs start to hit, I heard a voice call out to me from behind.

“Pardon me, but are you feeling tired?”

Not another girl!

After my most recent encounter, the last thing I wanted was to talk to yet another woman. *Besides, if you can tell I’m tired, don’t start a—hm?*

Feeling an odd sense of déjà vu, I cast a lazy glance over my shoulder only to find Stellaria standing there.

Ahhh, I’m such a jerk! That definitely came off as super nasty! I couldn’t have looked more annoyed! What was I thinking?!

“Err. That is, uh...”

I was in total panic mode, berating myself for my behavior and suppressing the urge to tear my hair out.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I couldn’t help but notice you looked exhausted from behind, but I suppose that was rude of me to ask. I’ll be on my way, then.”

Though her smile was strained, she offered me a graceful bow before turning to go.

Wait! That one was my bad!

“No, you were totally right! I’m *drop dead tired*, that’s all!” I stressed with all my might. I probably sounded a little *too* intense for someone who was supposedly tired, but who cares?!

Her eyes went wide for a moment at my sudden burst of energy, but a giggle soon spilled from her lips.

“Dear me... Hee hee. In that case, feel free to have this.”

Just like last time, she produced a wrapped candy from the pocket of her maid uniform, then pressed it into my hand.

It was the same type of sweet too: a caramel.

“A treat is the best remedy when you’re feeling worn down, right?” I said, staring down at the candy.

“Precisely,” she responded with a soft smile.

Yeah, that’s the smile I like to see.

That smile made for better medicine than caramel or anything else.

“Thanks for the one you gave me the other day, by the way. It was delicious.”

“Oh, I’m glad you liked it.”

“Its mellow sweetness melted away all my fatigue, just like you said it would.”

Just seeing your smile gives me the strength to go on... is what I’d like *to say here, but that’s never going to happen! I bet a certain boss of mine could say that without batting an eye, but not me! Wait, now that I think about it,*

wouldn't a guy dropping a line like that out of nowhere be a total turn-off? Yeah, it definitely would. Thank god I didn't go for it. It would've been pretty out of character, anyway.

"My, that's good to hear. Please do enjoy the second helping. Well then, if you'll excuse me."

While I was busy working through my internal conflict, she gave a quick bow and turned to leave—for real this time.

That was quick. Well, I don't know what more I was expecting, if she's a Cercis fangirl. Wait, don't tell me... Is she just being nice to me so she can get at the commander?!

Shocked by the thought that had just crossed my mind, I glanced down at the caramel sitting in my palm.

It's the same delicious candy as last time. And the caramel isn't the problem here!

I unwrapped it and popped it into my mouth.

I can't believe how good it is. There's something almost nostalgic about the taste.

As I savored the candy, I slowly recovered from all the exhaustion and psychological damage I'd suffered that day.

4. The Rumors About Corydalis

The latest stream of love confessions abruptly ground to a halt.

That meant I didn't have to worry about wasting my precious break time or struggling not to hurt some poor girl's feelings when I turned her down, so it was a huge weight off my mind. It felt like some peace had finally been restored to my life.

As for the object of my affections?

The two of us had yet to grow any closer, but we were on good enough terms to have a short conversation every now and then.

Wait just a second—that doesn't even really qualify as a friendship! I'm just a plain old acquaintance! Bummer...

Exemplary hard worker that I was, no amount of disillusionment could keep me from doing my job. Both arms full of documents, I was just on my way to deliver them to the commander.

"Hard at work, sir? The commander's not in his office, if that's who you're looking for."

Since both of my hands were occupied, I'd "knocked" on the door by slamming my whole body against it. A subordinate who just so happened to witness my struggle in passing had offered me that helpful tip.

"Huh? Why not?"

"He stepped out. Said he was going to the Royal Medicinal Garden."

"The Medicinal Garden? What business has he got over there?"

"From the sound of it, his wife has been stuck in bed with a stomachache since morning. He said he was going to pick up some herbs for her."

"His *wife*?"

"Yeah. His wife."

I can hardly believe it! I was so sure I'd misheard him saying "girlfriend" that I had to ask him to repeat himself! The commander's actually thinking about his wife for once? Are we talking about the same guy who said all that horrible stuff about him and his mistress being a package deal? Well, if he's finally taking an interest in his actual spouse, I'm not about to knock that.

"Huh..."

None of that helped me with the task at hand, however.

I slammed myself against the door to the commander's office yet again, this time flinging it open. Once inside, I unceremoniously dropped the heap of papers on top of his desk.

Have fun with these once you're done picking herbs!

Having left the documents for the commander to find, I went back to my own desk. In the short time I'd been away from my seat, all sorts of new work had piled up already: another research project, new scheduling requests, applications for travel expenses, you name it.

"It never ends!"

"Aww, isn't that a good thing? It's a sign that we're all hard at work! Speaking of which, here you go."

"Not you too, Chamomile!"

"Thanks in advance!"

Chamomile dropped the latest business trip report on my desk, then turned and left my office with a swish of her blonde hair.

"Jeez."

For now, I figured I'd go down the list and knock out anything I could get done on my own.

*

After an epic battle against the towering stack of papers, a handful of my subordinates showed up to invite me to lunch. I could hardly believe it was already noon. I'd been focusing so hard on my work that I'd completely lost

track of time.

“Sure, let’s go.”

I got to my feet, doing a few light stretches to loosen up my stiff muscles.

For lunch, we always went to the cafeteria, where we could eat to our hearts’ content.

As my men and I walked down the corridors of the royal palace, I spotted a maid walking toward us from the opposite direction. Unfortunately, it wasn’t Stellaria.

Come to think of it, I haven’t seen much of her lately.

Seeing this random lady-in-waiting made me think of Stellaria—since they wore the same uniform and all—so I ended up staring at her long enough for our eyes to meet.

We’d made eye contact now, sure, but considering we didn’t know each other at all, there was no real reason to bother with a greeting. Just as I was about to breeze past, acting like I hadn’t noticed her, a huge smile crept across her face.

Huh? What? What’s so funny?! Did I do something wrong?! Seeing a total stranger grin at you like that is downright alarming!

I looked over my whole body to check if anything was amiss, but everything seemed normal enough.

What was that all about? I haven’t got the slightest clue... Guess I’ll just put it out of my mind for now.

With that newfound resolution, I averted my gaze and walked off as if nothing had happened.

Similar incidents would occur several times after that.

*

“Ugh...”

I’m lost.

Lounging in the break room of the knights’ quarters, I heaved a dramatic sigh.

“What’s wrong, Lieutenant Commander? That was quite the sigh.”

“Looks like ennui to me!”

Two of my subordinates struck up a conversation with me.

“Nah, I’m not that tired.”

“What happened, then?”

“Did your girlfriend dump you?”

“No! I don’t have one in the first place, you dope—I’m still on the hunt! Er, ahem. I can’t make heads or tails of what’s going on, that’s all.”

“Uh-huh,” they both mumbled, equally lost.

“A lot of girls seem to be locking eyes with me as of late...”

It would happen whenever I passed them in the halls. Or when I went to hand in my paperwork. Or when I was on break... You get the picture. Just when I thought I was finally free of those pesky confessions, now I had a new, unspoken kind of pressure to deal with!

Oblivious to my weariness, one of the men naively commented, “C’mon, isn’t that a good thing?! I’m super jealous!”

I’m sure the images floating through his head were of beautiful ladies with stars in their eyes, but he couldn’t have been further from the truth.

“No, the issue is...uh, how do I put it? The intensity of it? There’s this almost predatory glint in their eyes, and it’s giving me the creeps. I’m afraid I’m going to get hunted down and eaten alive one of these days.”

Imagine, like, some random girl staring you down reaaally hard, only to flash you a giant grin! It’s pretty terrifying!

Gripped by an unspeakable terror, I turned white as a sheet.

The same subordinate who had been looking so envious just seconds ago seemed to abruptly remember something. “Now that I think about it, one of the ladies-in-waiting asked me about your type the other day!” he said, clapping his hands together in a eureka moment.

“What?”

Why was some random maid going to my subordinates to ask about my tastes?

As I sat there with a blank look on my face, the guy went on excitedly. “I didn’t have any idea, so I just told her, ‘If you gaze at him with enough passion, I bet he’ll eventually smile back and give in to your charms!’”

“Say WHAAAT?!”

What kind of advice is that*?! It’s got nothing to do with my type! Do I really seem that shallow?! Great, I guess I’m just some womanizer now!*

“Oh, now I’m seeing the picture! Lieutenant Commander, you’ve been rejecting girls left and right lately, haven’t you? To think she’d put in all that effort to become your perfect woman—I have to commend her dedication!”

Nooo, I think I’ve dug my own grave... Uh, NOT! And there’s nothing commendable about it!

“Don’t go around making stuff up about me! ‘If you manage to lock eyes with him, I bet you can seduce him’? Seriously? Just how easy do you think I am? I can’t believe you made me out to be such a sleaze!” I’d blown my top so hard that I sprung right up out of my chair.

“Eek! The lieutenant commander’s lost it!”

“Sorryyyy!”

The knights made a show of running away in a panic.

“Hold it right there, you scoundrels!” I shouted, chasing after them.

With how noisy our antics were, it wasn’t long before the commander himself poked his head into the break room. “What’s all the fuss about?” he asked, raising those gorgeous eyebrows of his in question.

Oops, is he actually mad? This is *the break room, but maybe we were being too loud.*

“These guys made me out to be some kind of playboy!” I pointed at my subordinates in accusation, then explained the whole “eye contact” debacle to the commander.

“I had nothing to do with it! I just got caught in the crossfire!”

“I couldn’t help myself! It’s not fair that the lieutenant commander gets all the girls!”

“So it was just a fit of jealousy!”

Look, the culprit behind the rumors is owning up to his crimes with a smug smile! Meanwhile, his friend is flapping his hands furiously and pleading his innocence.

The commander shot us an unimpressed look before suddenly breaking into a grin.

Huh? Why is he smiling?

It only lasted a second, so the other two might not have noticed it. I cocked my head to one side, suspicious, but the commander was quick to slip back into work mode.

“I see. Sounds rough. So anyway, about all these papers you left on my desk...”

He went ahead and showed me the documents in his hand. It wasn’t hard to tell he had zero sympathy for my plight.

“Way to act like it’s not your problem!”

“It *isn’t* my problem.”

What an honest guy, admitting that without missing a beat. Jeez.

“Fine. I’m not explaining the materials to you.”

“Well, that’s a shame. Stop by my office later, then.”

“Did you even hear what I just said?!”

Completely forgetting our workplace hierarchy for a second there, I slipped into my usual laid-back banter with Cercis. Our subordinates knew about our history, however, so they didn’t seem to mind it.

Unfazed, the commander ignored my shouts of protest, shot me one last grin, and left the break room.

Uh...why does he keep smiling at me like that?

*

Not long after that conversation, the ladies-in-waiting and female staff laid off their constant eye assaults.

As glad as I was for all that to be over, now they were *averting* their gazes from me. To be fair, I guess there were a handful who would glance at me with pity in their eyes too.

Also, I'd stopped getting stares from *girls*, but that didn't mean I wasn't getting any at all.

"Things are just getting worse," I groaned, clutching my head in the break room.

You guessed it. Ever since the conversation, well...

"Huh? What 'things'? Is it the same problem as last time?" one of the knights from the previous incident asked, having overheard my grumblings.

"Damn right it is. Was it you again? Did you do this?!" I glared daggers at the previous culprit.

After staring at me blankly for a moment, he insisted, "I haven't done or said anything else since then, I swear!" He rushed to deny my accusations, flapping his hands and shaking his head back-and-forth.

Then who did*?*

"How did it get worse? What happened?" the other knight asked when I went right back to holding my head in my hands.

Great, I'm glad you asked!

"Something so dreadful, it makes me long for the days when girls would constantly catch my eye and smile at me."

"Yeah?" the two knights prompted me in stereo.

"Now the *guys* are looking at me!"

"Uhhh..."

Both subordinates looked scandalized. No surprise there. If I were in their shoes, I would've reacted the same way.

"You try having some super buff dude gaze at you all misty-eyed! It's like something straight out of a horror story—not that I'd want a pretty boy doing it either! What is this, some new form of torture?! Am I being hazed?!"

"Oh, wow..."

I slammed my fists against the desk with all my might.

The other two guys must have pictured it for themselves, seeing as they'd each broken out into a cold sweat.

"It's terrifying! For all I complained about the intensity of the women's stares, that didn't even compare! No, don't let this get the best of you, Corydalis! I'll beat back anybody who comes for me, no questions asked!"

"Whoa...that's badass, Lieutenant Commander!"

My hands still clenched into fists, I found my resolve. No matter what happened next, I would be sure to defend myself!

Judging by the way they were shivering in fear, I guess the two knights really were imagining it.

"Oh, there you are, Corydalis."

The commander once again poked his head into the room. *What's up? Was he looking for me again?*

"Do you need something?" I responded, shifting back into work mode and putting a lid on my raging emotions.

"Not exactly. I just wanted to check on how you've been doing since then."

"Huh? Since what?"

"Oh, you know, since you told me about the rumors of your debauchery and all those women leering at you because of them. Has your good name been cleared yet?" he asked, grinning.

Cleared? Why would it be? The guy responsible said he hasn't done anything about it since, and I certainly haven't either.

Yet somehow, the situation had only gotten worse, and it kept getting more and more dire with each passing day. What a coincidence that the commander would inquire about it with such perfect timing—and with a grin on his face, to boot. I was getting a bad feeling about this.

"Cleared? Why?" I ventured to ask.

"I set the rumor straight. Each time someone brought it up to me, I told them it only applies to men."

Hey, Commander! Is that something to confess with that dashing grin you never *use while on the clock?! Look, all the girls around us are squealing over your sparkling smile!*

...Wait, no, that's not the issue! I can't believe this! The commander *was the one powering the rumor mill this time around!*

"Listen here, you little...!"

"Hm? Was I wrong? You're always dallying with other men, so I just assumed..."

"That's not why!"

"And it would've explained why you're so fed up with women making passes at you."

"*That's not why*!"

The commander put on his most convincing look of surprise, but it was obviously an act. *I'm onto you. You may be playing dumb now, but you knew exactly what you were doing!*

"So it's *your* fault why the guys have been acting so weird around me lately..."

"Oh? Has someone already started putting the moves on you? That was fast."

"Don't sound so impressed! C'mon, why don't you meet me out back so we can let our swords do the talking?!"

"What's wrong, Corydalis? You're so hot-blooded today."

"Shut up!"

I dragged the commander to the training grounds, and boy, we sure *did* let

our swords do the talking.

*

Normally we were pretty evenly matched, but my fighting spirit was on a whole other level that day. It was enough to make the commander complain that I'd been "overtaken by a demon."

How's it feel to reap what you sow, Cercis?

After that, the commander went to work setting the rumors straight.

Honestly, though, not even one *person called him out on his lie?! You guys are killing me here!*

"Considering you turned down almost every girl in the palace, can you blame anyone for getting the wrong idea?"

"I mean, you *do* spend all your time with us..."

My two subordinates shot me looks of sympathy, and I really wished they'd cut it out.

*

Soon enough, women and men alike ceased to spread any weird rumors about me.

I came across Stellaria in the hallway for the first time in a while. When our eyes just happened to meet, I gave her a smile and a nod.

As for her? She returned the nod, but refused to make eye contact.

She couldn't look me in the eye! Oh god, this hurts... She's the one girl I wouldn't mind coming on to me as strong as she can! Ugh... I guess she really is a Cercis fangirl... No point in getting my hopes up.

Talk about depressing.

5. Stellaria’s Take on Corydalis

Hello. My name is Stellaria.

Ever since I graduated from Rohze’s vocational school for household servants, I’ve been working here at the royal palace.

Even commoners can work in Flür’s royal palace if they have the right connections, which ought to explain how someone of my social standing could come to be employed there. For the record, my patron was Duke Fisalis, one of the finest men in all of the Flür Kingdom.

Of course, there’s a good explanation for why he vouched for me: my father is the Fisalis family’s head chef, while my mother has served as their head maid for many years now. In other words, I was born and raised in the duke’s manor.

Given my determination to follow in the footsteps of my wonderful parents, I had always assumed that I would one day work as a servant for the Fisalis family myself. However, as soon as I graduated from my vocational school, I received a request to come work as a lady-in-waiting at the royal palace.

Even though I’d been so certain I was destined to work at the Fisalis manor, Rohtas had simply told me, “Think of it as a training period—merely preparation for when you join us here, if you will.”

I wasn’t entirely sure I understood, but I assumed he knew what he was talking about. Thus, I agreed to take the job.

According to what I heard later on, my ultra-talented mother had been asked to come work at the royal palace back when she was initially hunting for a job, only for the Fisalis family to snatch her up first. As a trade-off, the palace was given dibs on her daughter.

Don’t tell anyone, but this was my mother’s side of the story: “I chose to work at the duke’s manor for a reason: the servants are more skilled and the work is more rewarding.”

And that’s the history of how I came to work at the royal palace.

*

Though I had never spoken to him directly, I had heard of Sir Corydalis prior to our hallway encounter. He was one of the young master's subordinates, after all.

I kept tabs on all of the young master's—pardon me, *Commander Fisalis's* colleagues here. If anything were to happen to him in the workplace, you see, it would be remiss of me not to report back to my father Cartham, the head chef of the Fisalis manor; my mother Dahlia, the head maid; or Rohtas, the head butler.

Mind you, that wasn't the *only* reason I knew of him. Among the young master's subordinates, Sir Corydalis was particularly exceptional—and not only was he good at his job, but his appearance was on point as well. It wasn't uncommon to hear my co-workers or the other female staff squealing about how "dreamy" or "hot" he was. Why, I'd even say he enjoyed equal popularity with the young master himself.

Someone like the duke—what with his stunningly handsome features, incredibly prestigious title, and elite knighthood—felt completely out of any commoner's league. An unattainable crush, you might say. Most girls never did more than gaze at him from afar, too intimidated to casually approach him.

By contrast, though Sir Corydalis may have been born into the family of a prestigious marquis, he was only a third son. He lived a commoner's lifestyle, choosing to stay in the knights' dormitories rather than go home to his family's manor. As a heartthrob who nonetheless remained approachable, it was quite possible that he was seen as the more likeable of the pair.

For the record, *I* largely saw him as "a good friend of the young master's."

The young master's department always seemed to have its hands full with something, which meant Sir Corydalis rarely managed to catch a break himself. Still, I was sure it wasn't just work that was taking a toll on him. Being friends with the young master must have been quite tiring in its own right.

Indeed...I say that as someone who was well aware of all the goings-on at the Fisalis manor at the time.

Nevertheless, I wouldn't say I had taken any particularly special notice of him.

*

My main responsibility was to look after the first princess, Artemisia. I alternated between placating and menacing the selfish diva, encouraging her to study and strive to become a proper lady.

"Come along, Your Highness, it's time for today's dance lesson. You mustn't keep your instructor waiting."

"Ugh, no thanks. I already know how to dance!" she whined. "I'd rather spend the time thinking up a design for a new dress!"

You already know how to dance? Don't make me laugh.

"Really, now? Bold words from a girl who still steps on her partners' toes," I objected with the sweetest of smiles.

The princess went stiff. "Urk..."

"If I recall, wasn't it the son of Viscount Dianthus whose feet you crushed at that one party? You claimed ten other victims there as well. And let's not forget the occasion where you were so off beat that your dance partners had to cover for your mistakes. I believe there were fifteen victims that time around. Not to mention—"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I'm going already!"

The moment I started listing off her numerous blunders, the princess made a mad dash for the practice room. *See, you* can *do it if you put your mind to it!*

Now that I'd managed to shoo the princess off to her lesson, I could finally get around to tidying up her chambers. Or so I thought, for one fleeting moment of relief, until...

"The chief lady-in-waiting wants to see you, Stellaria. Stop by her office ASAP."

One of my co-workers had arrived with a summons.

The chief lady-in-waiting is notorious for taking forever to get to her point, so I wish this had waited until I was done with my work. Is there any chance she'll be

finished with me before the princess is done with her lesson, I wonder?

"Very well."

Perhaps I'll just use the princess as an excuse to wrap up my work early today.

And then, just as I was walking down the corridor to the chief lady-in-waiting's office and had just rounded a corner...I bumped into someone coming from the opposite direction.

Goodness... Most people keep to the left in the hallways, so it's not every day that you crash into someone head-on.

The force of the impact made me stagger, but the other person caught me in his arms, sparing me a painful tumble. And as I was wondering who this mystery individual could be, I saw that it was none other than Sir Corydalis—and as the price for stopping my fall, the documents he'd been holding were now a scattered mess on the hallway floor.

"I'm sorry! Are you all right?" he blurted out, peering into my face.

Considering this was the first time I'd ever found myself caught in a man's arms, my heart was racing like nobody's business. It certainly didn't help that my face was a mere hair's breadth away from such a handsome gentleman's either. That *did* allow me to notice something else, however.

His eyes had deep, dark circles under them.

Well, that explains why he was so unsteady on his feet—he must be exhausted. I suppose that makes sense, considering how hard he's always working.

I soon found myself getting lost in his eyes, at which I promptly scolded myself, *You're on the clock!* and regained my usual composure.

"Yes, I'm just fine—thanks to you, I should say. Really, I'm the one who should be apologizing; I wasn't watching where I was going. Forgive me."

Sir Corydalis was a man of both status and prestige. Even though he was the one who had crashed into me, *I* would be considered at fault for failing to get out of his way. Thus, I chose to dip my head in a polite, apologetic bow—and seeing as that was a convenient way to hide the flush in my cheeks, you weren't

about to find me complaining.

Being the generous person he was, Sir Corydalis responded, “No, it wasn’t your fault at all. Please don’t apologize!”

I see he’s the straightforward type—someone who doesn’t care to throw his weight around. No wonder he’s so popular.

“Oh, but I must. Just look at what happened to all those important documents of yours.”

“Yeah... Well, I’ll pick ’em back up in a moment here, so don’t worry about it.”

So he claimed, but I knew full well that he worked in the same department as the young master. He wasn’t likely to be handling some trivial paperwork. Why, there was even a chance that a few of these documents contained crucial, top secret information.

Assuming it would be for the best if I left without a fuss, I gave one last bow before walking off and turning the corner.

And wouldn’t you know it, the moment he was sure I had left, Sir Corydalis began a furious scramble to gather up the scattered papers.

So they were *important documents.*

My gaze dropped to the floor, only to find a paper that had floated all the way over to this end of the corridor. I certainly wasn’t about to just leave it there.

I might as well help you out just a tad. Don’t worry, I’ll be careful not to read anything.

“Are you sure everything’s all right? I’ll go ahead and gather the papers that landed over there.”

I slipped the document I’d just picked up into the stack Sir Corydalis was holding, then reached out to gather up a few more of the papers strewn across the floor.

Though he spent a few moments simply watching me in a daze, he soon snapped out of his trance. “No, please! I’ll handle these myself!”

He rushed to collect one of the papers I’d made a grab for.

I see... That must be a really important one. Hmm, what to do? I'd feel bad just leaving him like this... Oh, I know! If I'm physically incapable of reading them, won't that solve the issue?

"Oh, dear me—I have terrible eyesight, so I haven't the faintest idea what this says," I said, closing my eyes.

I hope that will put his mind at ease. Of course, now there's not much I can do but gather up whatever my hands land on... Surely I can crack my eyes open a sliver to check where they landed?

"Thanks. You really helped me out here. I can take care of the rest myself," Sir Corydalis said once we'd gathered up the remainder of the papers. He then walked off in the same direction he'd come from. Perhaps he planned to get the papers in order and try his luck again.

Still, I couldn't help but notice that he was looking even paler than before. It was a bit concerning.

Though it would do little but soothe my own conscience, I wanted to help him relax, so I dug around for one of the caramels I always kept hidden in the pocket of my uniform. The candy was courtesy of my father, the head chef of the Fisalis manor. He always claimed that "a sweet treat is the best remedy when you're feeling worn down"...though of course, the real secret behind his tasty caramels is that it's my mother's favorite dessert. *Hee hee!*

Considering how mentally draining my own job could be, I always kept some in my pocket to snack on during my breaks or occasional moments of downtime. I thought that perhaps that habit could now do someone else a bit of good too.

"I beg your pardon, but you seem awfully tired."

Though the mood had been a pleasant one mere moments ago, as soon as I called out to him from behind, his hackles went up. "I'm fine."

"Really? You're quite pale."

"I'm just sleep-deprived. I've been pulling all-nighters for a few days in a row now."

“Well, I’m glad to hear it’s nothing serious...but here, have this.”

“Hm?”

The moment he turned around, I handed the wrapped caramel to Sir Corydalis.

“This is a caramel my father made for me. He always says that a sweet treat is the best remedy when you’re feeling worn down. It’s quite tasty, as long as you don’t mind sweets.”

“Ah... Nah, I like ’em just fine.”

Nevertheless, he didn’t move to accept the candy, simply staring down at it in his palm.

Oh... Anyone would be suspicious if a stranger suddenly offered them food, I suppose. All the more so when it’s someone like Sir Corydalis, who runs a serious risk of assassination.

“Oh, my apologies.” With that short interjection, I snatched the caramel out of Sir Corydalis’s hand and popped it into my own mouth. I would be his personal poison tester for the day. “There aren’t any questionable ingredients in it, I promise.”

A smile broke out across my face as I savored its familiar, subtle flavor. My father truly was a genius chef.

“Don’t mind if I do, then.”

Perhaps my taste-testing had put his mind at ease; he shoved the next candy I gave him into his pocket and walked off.

He seems so exhausted... Is the young master working his subordinates too hard? Rohtas will certainly be hearing about this!

*

Our encounter must have made an impression on Sir Corydalis—he got into the habit of greeting me whenever we passed each other in the halls. I didn’t spend all my time on duty in the princess’s chambers, so I would often have to scurry around the rest of the palace. The same went for Sir Corydalis, and thus we ran into one another frequently. Well, I suppose that was to be expected of

two people working in the same building, no matter how big a place the royal palace is.

Today, I once again spotted him with a few of his friends while I was enjoying a break with my co-workers in the cafeteria. He nodded in my direction when he noticed me there, so I smiled and returned the gesture.

Much of the time I saw Sir Corydalis, he was at the center of a crowd of his colleagues (I assumed, since they were wearing the same uniform) and having a good time. He seemed to have plenty of friends.

Yet he still makes the time to keep company with our young master. On behalf of all the servants of his manor, I thank you for your efforts.

Due to his lofty status, the young master didn't have many true friends. Likely only Sir Corydalis and the Argenteia siblings really counted, if I had to guess. *Oh dear, I'm tearing up.*

While Sir Corydalis was looking over the menu and making quite the ruckus with his co-workers, he suddenly shouted in the direction of the cafeteria entrance. "Commander! Come have a cup of tea with us!"

"Commander"? Oh, he must mean the young master!

Just as I suspected, the person who stepped into the cafeteria at Sir Corydalis's call was indeed the duke himself.

His sudden entrance set off a buzz (or a flurry of excitement?) among my co-workers and other girls sitting nearby. He wasn't the kind of person you saw every day, after all.

Hmm, he really does look out-of-place in a homey setting like this.

Still, I was relieved to see him getting along with Sir Corydalis and the rest of his men (I think). It was such a pleasant sight to see that a smile broke out across my face before I knew it.

I'll be sure to report this *to Rohtas as well—that he's been making nice with his co-workers (subordinates?), I mean.*

*

Being the kind person he was, Sir Corydalis was always sure to acknowledge

the rest of my fellow maids whenever he nodded at me in greeting.

He'd always been well-liked among the ladies-in-waiting and female staff in general for being so approachable, but since he'd been acting nicer than ever lately, his popularity had skyrocketed. It was quite possible he had even overtaken the young master in that regard.

Soon, I was catching bits of conversations like:

"I'm off to make my move on Sir Corydalis!"

"I believe in you!"

"Good luck!"

Of course, every single one of them came back with their spirits crushed.

It wasn't long before someone got so fed up, she charged right in and directly asked one of his co-workers what his type was. My, what a powerhouse of a girl!

The answer she got was: "If you gaze at him with enough passion, I bet he'll eventually smile back and give in to your charms!"

Goodness, he's more of a playboy than I thought. Now I see why he's friends with the young master.

It was only hearsay, but I found myself feeling disillusioned nonetheless. I had been so convinced he was a nice, kind gentleman.

Wait... Am I, perhaps, taking this a little too *hard? Dear me, I wonder why.*

I usually took gossip with a grain of salt, but in this one particular instance, I couldn't even bring myself to confirm its accuracy.

From then on, all the female staff took to gazing and leering and staring right into Sir Corydalis's eyes. Meanwhile, considering how disappointed in him I was, I stopped bothering to so much as nod his way.

And yet...whenever I found myself wondering if he would ever return one of those girls' smiles, my heart still ached.

In the end, time marched on, and I never once heard word of him smiling back.

Soon enough, a new rumor made the rounds: “gazing into his eyes and smiling” only worked if the one doing it was a *man*.

My gosh, he swings the other way! I didn’t see that one coming.

This time around, I was too stunned to feel let down.

What’s more, word came from the young master himself! Considering how close those two are, this rumor holds water.

And so a new story came to be passed around as the truth: “Corydalis prefers men. If another guy gazes at him with enough passion, he’ll eventually smile back and give in to his charms.”

“I saw another man pursuing Sir Corydalis today!”

“To be honest...that sounds kind of hot.”

“*That’s* your first thought?!”

I was starting to hear exchanges of this sort more and more often. Being the well-respected knight that he was, Sir Corydalis had a good handful of admirers among the men of the palace too. From the look of things, he was enjoying just as much popularity with his new audience.

Of course, it wasn’t long before this rumor, too, was struck down.

“I had the wrong idea,” the young master went around telling everyone, recanting his previous testimony.

Aha... So that was just the young master pulling a prank, was it? My, what a fuss he caused! Rohtas is going to hear about this *too—just you wait.*

*

Soon after the young master’s mischief had finally faded into irrelevance, I passed Sir Corydalis in the hall. When our eyes happened to meet, he shot a smile my way. However...

No! Why did the young master’s joke have to pop into my head now*?!*

I averted my gaze, doing everything I could to keep myself from bursting out into giggles.

6. An Unexpected Reunion

It’s me again—the guy who lived at the mercy of whatever crazy rumor was circulating that day, and who was summarily crushed when the girl of his dreams started avoiding his gaze.

Looking back on it now, however, that was a more peaceful time.

We’d received intel that the neighboring kingdom of Aurantia was planning to bring a war to Flür’s doorstep. After repeated investigations and reconnaissance, we deemed the tip accurate—and so it was decided that our Special Ops Division would make an expedition to the border, where we would serve as an advance party to prepare for the impending hostilities.

“Let’s just get this blasted war over with so I can go back home.”

Now that the war council was over, the commander and I were hurrying back to our headquarters. The satisfyingly crisp squeak of our boots echoed throughout the halls.

The commander’s zeal for completing this mission was off the charts.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “The sooner we’re done with this, the better.”

Of course, him being in a hurry to get home wasn’t anything new, but this had to be the most fired up I’d ever seen him.

Ever since the break-up with his infamous girlfriend, the commander might as well have been living entirely for his wife. Despite all those dastardly things he’d said at the outset, he’d ended up falling head over heels for his noble and adorable spouse, eventually showing the mistress he was once so madly in love with the door. It just goes to show that you never know what life has in store.

“If I’m gone for too long, Viola might not remember who I am when I get back! And though I’d never forget *her* for even a fleeting second, I can hardly bear the thought of being apart from her for any length of time, so I’ll give this all I’ve got!”

Yeah, yeah, that's enough about Viola already. I cast the commander and his feverish mutterings a sidelong glance. *Come to think of it, he's been booking it home as soon as he's done with his work these days, huh?*

"Hold on—so the reason you've been heading home early..."

"Is because Viola's there waiting for me, obviously! I know I won't be able to see her for a while, so I need to charge my batteries while I still can!"

He really just came out and admitted it! Oh, whatever. It's good to love your wife, I guess.

I'd popped over to the Fisalis manor twice before with the rest of our unit, but I was pretty sure that was the last time I'd seen her. *Wait, no, I think the commander dragged her into one of our undercover bases once. Something about countering allegations of infidelity.*

She looked like a fragile beauty on the outside, but once you got to talking with her, it was clear she had a good head on her shoulders. Given the kind of person she was, there wasn't a chance she would appraise the commander based solely on his looks or his title.

The first time I met her, I'd tried to raise her opinion of the commander by rattling off all his good points, but the Bombshell Trio had butt in and ruined everything. Just what had those girls been thinking?

From the sound of it, Mrs. Fisalis wasn't a fan of social events, so she rarely made an appearance at any evening parties. That meant sightings of her were rare, and between that and her delicate, ephemeral looks, we—no, the entirety of high society soon took to calling her The Illusory Belle.

The feeling I'd gotten thus far was that she wasn't particularly impressed with or interested in the commander. With *his* pretty face, prestige, and riches, any other high-class lady would be falling all over him... That girl really was a strange character.

Then again, the commander was *sick of women who get blinded by those superficial qualities. A girl who's got zero interest in him might be just the right amount of novel to drive him crazy.*

"Perhaps I should send her letters from the front lines. One per day, so she

doesn’t have the chance to forget about me...” The commander kept muttering to himself beside me.

Well, I couldn’t say I didn’t understand the feeling. I hoped to get back to the palace as soon as possible myself.

I wanted to see Stellaria’s smiling face, after all.

*

Thanks to the combined efforts of the commander, the rest of our squad, and the front line troops, the war ended both swiftly and with an overwhelming victory for Flür.

Hardly enough time had passed to use the word “finally” here, but we did return to Rohze for the first time in two months. Our long journey was... Eh, no, it wasn’t that long at all, actually. With how much work we had to do each day, the whole affair had felt like it was over in the blink of an eye.

After taking part in the repatriation ceremony and enjoying a whole boatload of vacation time afterwards, I went back to work for the first time in a while.

I was looking forward to seeing Stellaria again, but I couldn’t find her anywhere. It was strange, considering I used to spot her all over the royal palace.

As the days went by, I kept on looking around for her, but to no avail.

In the beginning, I tried to keep an optimistic attitude: *We work in the same building, so I’ve got to run into her one of these days.* However, as more and more time passed, that confidence soon turned into desperation.

Before the campaign, I would often catch sight of her hunting for the prince, but I never even saw that anymore. Now it was always some other lady-in-waiting chasing after him.

What happened to her? Did she get assigned to a new post? (That wouldn’t explain why I haven’t seen her anywhere.) Did she quit her job altogether? (If she left to get married, I’m gonna cry.) No, wait...did she come down with a serious illness?! (Which would mean she must have gone home, I guess?)

Despite my concerns, I was so busy with passing off my old work and

adjusting to my new department that I didn't have time to look into it.

Every single member of the Special Ops Division working under Cercis had been transferred to the Royal Guard.

"If the same people work undercover for too long, they run a higher risk of being recognized," the commander had proposed to His Majesty and his retainers. His wish had been heard, and he was reassigned to a department that specialized in domestic intelligence operations. Public safety, in other words.

"I won't be sent off on any long business trips now!" the commander (or vice captain, after the transfer went through) had gloated, but I pretended I hadn't heard that part.

Sometime after the mess of our transfer had been sorted out and I'd gotten used to my new post, I happened to overhear a conversation between a couple of ladies-in-waiting in the halls.

"It's so hard to catch His Highness without Stellaria around."

"The princess never goes to her lessons anymore either."

"She must be so bored back at home... I hope she'll return to her post one day."

And that was how I found out that Stellaria had quit her job at the royal palace and gone back to live with her family.

*

With the kind of power I had at my disposal, I could easily figure out where she lived and what she was doing now if I tried. Yet for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to actually follow through. Instead, I kept on telling myself: *If I ever decide I really want to know, I can look into it then.*

But one day, after wrapping up a long, grueling meeting...

"And that's all, everyone! Okay, I'm done for the day. Hey, I haven't seen the duchess in ages, so let's go stop by for a visit!"

"Sounds like a plan!"

The excited shouts of the Bombshell Trio filled the room.

“Excuse me?” the new vice captain of the Royal Guard demanded, shooting them a menacing glare...which had little effect.

“Woohoo! You have the best ideas, girlie!”

“I’m in!”

“Let’s do it!”

The rest of the unit chimed in, one knight after another, until everyone was bursting with excitement.

“We haven’t seen your wife since the repatriation ceremony! The healing effects of her angelic smile are gonna wear off soon, so we need to charge up while we—*ouch*!”

“Oho, so you need to *charge up* on Viola now? And where do you get off calling her ‘angelic’? Not to say she *isn’t* an angel, of course.”

“I know, right?”

“But *you* have no right to say it!”

“Owww!”

The vice captain gave his subordinate a firm kick, knocking him clean off his chair.

Of course, it would take more than that to keep our unit down.

“Oh, come oooon! It’s like *tradition* to have a wrap party after a long meeting!”

“Says who?! Even if I *were* to agree to this party, there’s no reason to hold it at my home!”

“Booooo!”

It was the vice captain vs. his entire squad. The knights whined and demanded to go to Cercis’s house and see his wife, while the aura of a roaring blizzard steadily formed around the vice captain.

They’re not getting anywhere like this. Jeez, both sides need to grow up.

“Now, now, don’t be so selfish!” I interjected, hoping to break up the fight.

“There’s nothing more important than keeping up communication with your subordinates!”

Wait, that was me taking the squad’s side one hundred percent.

“What does letting them into my house have to do with communication?”

“Tons! Nothing tears down the walls between people like a relaxed get-together!”

“Do your *relaxing* in someone else’s manor!”

“Oh, stop sweating the small stuff!”

“I’ll sweat it all I like!”

The vice captain was losing his cool, doing everything in his power to avoid having his alone time with his wife interrupted.

Our subordinates were heartened by my support. “Come on, your wife awaits your return!”

“Go on, go on!”

“Ugh...”

They gave the vice captain a shove from behind, encouraging him to head home. (Obviously, they had every intention of going with him.)

Wow, he’s being pretty stubborn about this! Looks like he still needs one last push.

I kept quiet for that whole exchange, instead calling out to someone else who had been watching us with interest. “Want to join us, Captain? We’re paying the vice captain’s manor a visit.”

“Ooh, that sounds like fun. I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Why, you little...! That’s not your choice to make! ...Wait, not you too, Captain!”

No sooner had I grinned and invited the captain along than he accepted with an amused little chuckle.

This particular individual was the captain of the Royal Guard, Cardios Permam

—our new boss. He was also head of the Permam earldom and a swordsman renowned throughout Flür. At thirty-five years old, he was devoted to his job in the Royal Guard and as loyal to the king as they come. Though he was mild by nature, he was well known for being the straitlaced type who never compromised when it came to his work. Incidentally, he was also a loving father of two sons and two daughters.

Now that he *wants to join the fun, are you really going to tell us no?*

"What's wrong? Would you rather I don't come?" the captain asked, surprisingly eager to gang up on the vice captain. I'd heard he was a real square, but he was turning out to be more fun than I'd expected.

Now that his own boss was in on it, Cercis had a much harder time putting his foot down.

"What? No, I'd never... Oh, all right already!"

"Yahoo!"

The moment the vice captain gave his reluctant go-ahead, the squad cheered and prepared to head out.

*

It had been a while since my last visit to the duke's manor. As soon as the vice captain stepped through the entrance, the rest of us poured in after him.

"As you can see, we have some unexpected guests. Sorry for springing this on you."

"Goodness!"

The vice captain explained the situation to his wife, doing his best to keep us at bay in the meantime.

Despite her surprise at our unannounced visit, Mrs. Fisalis welcomed us with a smile. Not a single look of irritation ever once flitted over her features. *Her response is the exact opposite of the vice captain's!*

"Madam! It's been too long!"

"You know how it is—we were hit with this overwhelming urge to come see

you!”

“Man, she’s so gosh darn cute!” several voices rang out in unison.

“Hey! Don’t crowd Viola!”

Soon we were graced with the usual sight of the squad flocking to Mrs. Fisalis, brushing off the vice captain’s efforts to hold them back. The man was getting desperate in his attempts to pry everyone else away from his wife.

What a pleasant sight. The fact that we get to enjoy a day like this makes all the effort of fighting and winning the war worth it, I thought as I watched over their antics from a few steps away. Someone had to hang back with our uninitiated captain, after all.

“Is it always like this?” he asked, observing the commotion in the entryway with an awkward smile.

“Pretty much,” I replied with an enthusiastic nod.

Once Cercis had successfully recovered his wife, she called for the butler and started handing out orders. “Show our guests to the parlor, Rohtas.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The Fisalis manor’s super (no—hyper?) competent butler, who had been hanging back quietly throughout all the hullabaloo, stepped forward at his mistress’s command. “This way, please. Stellaria, escort them inside,” he said, calling out to one particular maid.

“Certainly. Follow me, everyone.”

Wait, Stellaria?! Did he just say “Stellaria”?!

He’d dropped the name so casually that I’d almost missed it, but the butler had *definitely* just said “Stellaria”!

I turned my head in the same direction he’d pointed. There stood the very same Stellaria who had quit her job at the royal palace, now clad in the uniform of a Fisalis manor maid.

What’s going on?!

My mouth fell open in a silent scream, and I stood rooted to the spot, pointing and staring at her in spite of myself.

“Corydalis? Is something the matter?”

“What’s gotten into you, Corydalis?”

Mrs. Fisalis and the vice captain both addressed me when they saw me freeze up, concern evident in their tone.

Uh... Sorry, guys, but I’m in panic mode right now!

Captain Permam even grabbed me by the arm and gave me a firm shake, but all I could think was, *Hey, you’re blocking my view of her! Move it!*

“What happened to *him*?” Mrs. Fisalis pondered.

“Don’t ask me,” the vice captain responded.

The couple tilted their heads in puzzlement.

“So you don’t know either, hm?” When it became clear her husband didn’t have the answers, Mrs. Fisalis decided to ask the girl in question. “Do you and Corydalis know each other, Stellaria?”

If she answers “no” here, I’m one hundred percent sure I’m going to break down crying!

With a sweet smile, she replied, “Oh, yes, I’ve known of him for a while now. He’s made quite the name for himself—not to mention he’s our master’s subordinate. Plus, we ran into one another several times in the royal palace.”

“Oh, I see!”

“Yes. Though perhaps ‘ran into each other’ is putting it too strongly—we’ve merely passed each other in the corridor, that’s all,” she went on.

Eh. That response didn’t exactly inspire a ton of confidence. But hey, at least it wasn’t bad enough to reduce me to tears.

Am I crazy? We didn’t just “pass each other”—we did *talk, right? She gave me a caramel when I was tired and everything! What, so none of that counted for anything?!*

I couldn’t help picking all of this apart in my head.

Well, considering her crush on Duke Fisalis over here, I get why she wouldn’t want to say, like, “We’ve talked before, and I even gave him a caramel!” Still, I

know that calling us friends would be pushing it, but I thought I'd at least been promoted(?) to acquaintance! Guess we weren't even that much, in her book!

Ugh, I get the picture... I'm just His Grace*'s subordinate—nothing more.*

I was suffering from shock on so many different levels that I had yet to move a muscle.

"Corydalis? Erm...what should we do with him, Mr. Fisalis?"

"Just leave him."

"If you say so..."

The rest of the squad was escorted to the parlor, leaving me in the dust. Long after everyone else was gone, I still didn't (or maybe I *couldn't*) budge from the entryway.

Oh, but don't worry—I caught up to them the moment I snapped back to my senses, of course!

7. A Chance Meeting

I had just experienced a shocking reunion with Stellaria at the Fisalis manor.

“Shocking” was definitely the word for it.

First off, there was the fact that she had quit her job at the royal palace and started working as a maid for the Fisalis family. Now that she got to work in such close quarters with her beloved duke, I was willing to bet she was more motivated than ever.

Secondly, there was the fact that she considered me below the level of “acquaintance”!

You’re killing me here, Miss Stellaria!

We’d finally been reunited, and I now knew her whereabouts, and yet I just let time drag on, plagued by an air of malaise.

*

It was one of my days off, some time after our encounter at Cercis’s manor.

I didn’t have any particular plans, but I hated the thought of just lazing about the dorms all day, so I decided to go out on the town for the first time in a while. Though I didn’t have any specific destination in mind, I knew that if I stayed in my room, I’d wind up in an endless loop of my own misery. Going out for an aimless stroll was bound to be better for my mental health.

I changed into something casual and headed out, carrying nothing but my wallet. Well, okay, *technically* I had a dagger concealed under my clothes, but let’s not count that.

The last time I’d gone for a jaunt around town—or even gone downtown at all, actually—was before heading off to war... You know, for that sweets party we roped the vice captain and his wife into. Even then, I’d made a beeline for Lemon Myrtle’s Confectionery, so I couldn’t say I’d done much walking around the city.

Taking that into consideration, it really *had* been a while.

The weather is nice, so I might as well take my time seeing the sights.

"Huh, looks like a new shop opened up. Whoa, the bar that used to be over there is gone! Aww, I really liked that place too."

I remembered the place having a lot of top-tier booze, but the old man running the place must have retired.

Oh, so that's *the cheap, tasty restaurant Lantana and Jen were talking about the other day! I should give it a try sometime. Over there must be that restaurant the Bombshell Trio said was popular with young women. There's a line outside, and sure enough, every single person standing in it is a girl. No way I could go join* that.

I wandered around, recalling various bits of workplace gossip as I did.

*

Why don't I grab something to eat and head back to the dorm?

By now I'd toured around the most bustling parts of the city, so I figured it was time to have a light lunch and head back. Once I was home, I'd take a nap and start getting ready for tomorrow's work.

As I was walking around and debating what to eat, I stopped just outside Lemon Myrtle's Confectionery.

Man, I remember how just before we went to war, we ended up crashing the vice captain's date with his wife here. Well, I say that like it wasn't *totally premeditated.*

Taking a trip down memory lane, I peeked into the shop through the window. Though the restaurant was notorious for its long lines and how hard it was to get a table, I actually spotted a few empty seats—maybe because it was a slow time of day. All the same, it would've taken some—no, an *inordinate* amount of courage to waltz in there all by myself. That was too much to ask from me. Besides, the place was a confectionery shop; they had sweets by the dozen, sure, but no real food.

I'll go find a diner or something, I thought, lifting my gaze...only to see

Stellaria reflected in the glass.

She was still a good distance away, but I could see her walking in my direction. *No matter how far away she is, no matter if it's just her reflection, I'd never mistake her!* ...Don't tell anyone, but I cringed a little at my own line.

When I whipped around, I saw that she was dressed not in her familiar royal palace garb, nor the uniform of the Fisalis manor I'd seen her in the other day. Instead, she was wearing a trim, navy blue dress that I assumed was part of her casual wardrobe.

"Hey there," I called out, taking the initiative.

"My, if it isn't Lieutenant Commander Pulcherrima! Good afternoon."

She must not have noticed me here; a brief look of surprise crossed her face, but she quickly returned my greeting with the dreamy smile she'd always used off the clock. Her floral-patterned dress really enhanced that gentle aura she had—a complete contrast to her usual no-nonsense attitude.

I appreciated the prim and proper "work mode" Stellaria too, but I had to admit, I liked the warmth she had in moments like this the best.

"What a coincidence running into you here. Are you off work today?" she asked, glancing at my outfit.

"Yeah. I didn't want to waste my holiday loafing around in the dorms, so I decided to go for a walk and grab something to eat."

"I see!"

Crap, that's right! Her name!

I knew it already, of course, but that was only because I'd looked it up. It was just now dawning on me that I'd never heard it from the girl herself.

Good going, Corydalis—no wonder she doesn't even consider you an acquaintance!

"Erm...and you are...?"

I floundered long enough for her to connect the dots on her own. With a giggle, she said, "Apologies for not introducing myself sooner. I'm Stellaria, a

maid currently in the service of the Fisalis family. How strange to only be telling you this now, when we've run into one another so many times. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, in any case."

"Uh, same here. My name's Corydalis Cashmeriana Pulcherrima. I used to be the lieutenant commander of the Special Ops Division, but I was reassigned to the Royal Guard as a platoon leader a little while back. My title's a real mouthful, though, so you can just call me Cory."

"Cory, then."

"There you go. So you're Stellaria, huh? That's a cute name."

"Oh, you flatterer! Feel free to call me Ria, by the way."

There we were, finally introducing ourselves and buttering each other up after so long. It suddenly hit me how silly this all was, and I started cracking up.

"Pfft...aha ha ha! We're a little late to the punch, huh?"

"Hee hee, we certainly are."

"Is today a day off for you too?"

"It is, yes. Back when I worked as a lady-in-waiting, I was always too busy to go out on the town, so I thought I'd take advantage of the downtime and go for a stroll."

"Makes sense. Care to join me for a cup of tea, then? I heard this café here is pretty good," I suggested, pointing to Lemon Myrtle's behind us.

"Goodness, I'd love to! My co-workers used to rave about this place, so I had always hoped to give it a try one day."

Stellaria flashed me a soft, delighted smile, which lifted my spirits.

Maybe they didn't serve any food here, but I didn't mind the thought of a gorgeous—I mean, *gorging* myself on sweets today.

*

"You gave me a real shock the other day. I heard you had left your post at the royal palace, but I never thought I'd run into you at the vice captain's manor. Did you switch jobs?"

Supposedly the Fisalis manor treated its employees even better than the royal palace; in the servant world, it was apparently even considered the most exclusive place to be employed. Did she find those perks tempting enough to start a new job? Was she sick of always looking after that high-maintenance princess and otherwise getting run ragged?

She responded to my casual inquiry by giving me a noncommittal smile and a noncommittal answer. “You *could* say that, I suppose... Let’s just say I had my reasons.”

Is there a story behind this? Should I ask?

“Well, I bet you could do well for yourself just about anywhere.”

Nice job there, Corydalis! I can’t believe I blew right past my chance to ask any questions... Oh well.

“Aw, you’re flattering me again.”

“Not at all. I know from watching you work in the royal pala—uhh!”

“Hm?”

Oh man, I shouldn’t have said that!

Saying that was indirectly admitting to “I’ve been keeping a close eye on you.” Those were the words of a stalker.

My slip of the tongue had my heart beating a mile a minute, but she just gave a small, confused tilt of her head. *Thank god...*

“Rumors of your prowess as a lady-in-waiting made it all the way to my department. I bet you had it rough, what with having to look after that self-absorbed princess and bratty little prince.”

“Hee hee, well...I won’t deny that.”

“If you could handle the royal family, I’m sure working at the duke’s manor is a piece of cake in comparison.”

After all, Mrs. Fisalis is a sweet girl, and the vice captain doesn’t seem too demanding a master.

“Not at all! The manor servants are all first-class; I have a hard time just

keeping up. Why, I feel like a total novice next to them."

Judging by how serious she looked as she shook her head, it didn't seem like she was being modest.

"If *you're* a novice, just how good *are* those guys?!"

The Fisalis manor is nothing to shake a stick at!

"I'm nowhere near my mother's level," she said with a rueful smile.

Uh, her mother? Am I supposed to know who that is?

Now it was *my* turn to cock my head to one side, puzzled. Given the context, it sounded like her mother must have been working as a servant (or lady-in-waiting) somewhere too.

When she noticed the puzzled look on my face, Stellaria went, "Oh!" She then rushed to explain. "Apologies for the confusion. My mother is the head maid of the Fisalis manor."

"Huh?"

The vice captain's head maid? She means that pretty and dependable but stern-looking lady, right?

I reached back into my memory for an image of the head maid of the duke's manor, which I'd visited quite a few times by now. She always went about her work briskly and efficiently, and she was a competent supervisor too. I seemed to remember her as something of a stony-faced matriarch...

As soon as I'd summoned up an image of her face, I looked back at Stellaria.

Hmmm...I guess *I can see the resemblance? When it comes to her dignified aura on the clock, at least... Or should I say, their work ethic is practically identical! She must take after her father in the looks department, then.*

Evidently, I'd stared long and hard enough at her face to warrant a comment. "I don't look much like her, I know. People always say that I take after my father."

"Gotcha."

Knew it. My theory was right on the money.

Just when I thought I'd gotten the full picture, however, she dropped this bombshell: "Incidentally, my father is the head chef of the Fisalis manor."

"Huh?!"

The head chef of the Fisalis manor?! Oh yeah, I've been treated to his cooking a few times now. That was good stuff... to put it mildly! I've never seen the guy in person because he doesn't serve the guests himself (obviously), but I know his skills are top-notch! Wow...so that means the caramel she gave me was handmade by the vice captain's head chef himself.

With a pair of first-rate servants for parents, it sounds like Stellaria here is a thoroughbred maid! ...Hold on, I feel like I'm missing the bigger picture here.

"Wow, you sure have a lot of ties to the Fisalis family, Ria."

"I do indeed. I was born and raised in the duke's manor, you know."

"Oh..."

In other words...

"So those 'reasons' you mentioned...?"

"Right. I was instructed to come back home now that I've gotten enough training under my belt, more or less."

"Huh..."

The situation was actually a little more complicated than that, but that seemed to be the main gist of it. Evidently, they had been down a maid over at the Fisalis manor, so they had gone all, *We'll be taking our little girl back now!* and called her home. The royal palace saw it as "renting her out" to the duke, but neither he nor the rest of his manor had the slightest intention of ever sending her back.

So she's a true-blue Fisalis girl...

As much as I liked her, if we ever got into a relationship, I just knew there would be no hope of keeping that boss of mine out of our business. It'd only get worse if we got married—my pesky... No, complicated... No, *regrettably long-lived* bond with the vice captain would only grow that much stronger.

Just thinking about the future was enough to make me a little dizzy. Now whenever I thought of the road ahead with Stellaria, the vice captain's face would flicker across my mind.

Come to think of it, didn't she have a crush on him?

I thought back to the bashful smile I'd seen on her face when the vice captain had shown up to the royal palace cafeteria.

Could this mean that Cercis was her first love?! And she still has feelings for him even now?!

She had finally become a proper servant of the Fisalis family, free to spend her days around the man of her dreams—only to find that he had become another girl's doting husband. Deep down, did it hurt her to see him acting like that?

I suddenly found myself feeling a little worried for her—on the emotional front, mostly.

"So you've known the vice captain since you were kids, huh?"

"The vice captain? Oh, you mean Master Fisalis! I knew *of* him, naturally, but we'd never actually met. It wasn't until just recently that he learned who I was." She giggled, as if she'd just remembered something funny.

"Even though you lived in the same mansion? You've got to be kidding me."

"I'm quite serious. It *is* a rather large manor, after all. What's more, my mother held the firm belief that the son of a duke shouldn't be playing with a mere servant's daughter, so she deliberately kept me away from him."

"You said he only *just* learned who you are?"

"Right. We were finally introduced when I became the duchess's personal maid."

"He's really something else."

He doesn't know who his own servants are? Seriously? Well, I can't claim to know all the staff back at the Pulcherrima manor myself, so I guess I don't have room to talk.

“Is it, uh...difficult for you to watch the vice captain and his wife getting along so well?”

“Whyever would you ask me that? I think their relationship is a wonderful thing.” Stellaria gave a confused tilt of her head in response to my (attempt at) consideration.

“I mean, er, considering the adoring look in your eyes whenever you saw him, I sort of assumed...”

Mustering up all the courage I could, I tried to broach what was a very delicate subject.

And yet, she just laughed me off. “Surely you jest! Me, carrying a torch for the young master? Not in a million years!”

“Huh? But what about that one time back at the royal palace? You were gazing at him with a huge smile on your face, remember?”

“Hm? I can’t seem to recall. Oh—I was always quite delighted to see the young master getting along with his colleagues, I suppose.”

No way! She saw him like family this whole time?! Huh...I totally misunderstood, then. Yup, that sure clears up a lot.

“Huh, I see...”

“I haven’t been serving the Fisalis family for very long, but if I had to say, I’m more fond of the duchess than the young master.”

“Oh yeah? You like her more than your *young master*?”

“I do!” she replied, grinning.

Her firm denial put my heart at ease.

*

What with all the delicious tea and sweets we got to enjoy together—not to mention the catharsis of all those insecurities I’d been keeping bottled up—the time flew by before we knew it.

“Thank you for inviting me to tea today.”

It was finally time for us to go our separate ways. Stellaria thanked me and

gave a polite bow of her head, as she was wont to do.

“Uhh...hey! If our schedules line up, would you be interested in seeing each other again?”

Now that I’d finally told her my name and been promoted to “friend” status (hopefully), I wasn’t about to let this opportunity pass me by. I made an attempt at setting up plans for our next date.

I’d never done anything like this before, so I was nervous as hell. The wait for her response felt like it dragged on forever, my heart racing a mile a minute the whole time. If she turned me down now, it was going to be time to head back to my room, pull the covers over my head, and cry myself to sleep.

I stared at Stellaria, eagerly anticipating her reply, until she finally answered, “I’d love to.” And with that soft, tender smile she only wore outside work, to boot!

Oh man! She is so *cute!*

It was almost strange. The moment she turned that doozy of a smile on me, suddenly everything else that came along with it (like my boss, or my boss, or...oh, I dunno...*my boss*) hardly seemed to matter anymore.

“Okay, then my next day off should be...”

With that, we successfully made plans for our upcoming rendezvous.

I never used to do much on my days off; I’d just spend them lazing around in hopes of recovering from my perpetual state of exhaustion. It was amazing how one little addition to my itinerary could give me so much more to look forward to.

I walked her most of the way to the duke’s manor, and from there we went our separate ways.

It was on my way home that I suddenly thought to myself, *Holy smokes. It’s just now hitting me that she calls Cercis “the young master.”*

8. An Obstacle to Corydalis's Love?

Ever since our impromptu teatime out on the town, Stellaria and I would go out together whenever our schedules lined up. Well, technically I was the one bending to fit into *her* schedule most of the time, but let's not get hung up on the details.

"I got free tickets to a popular play, so why don't we head over to the theater after we grab lunch?"

"Oh my! I appreciate you bringing me along, Cory. What kind of play is it?"

"It's called *The Marquis and the Viscount's Daughter*. It's a comedy, so it should be a fun one."

"Are you sure it's appropriate for someone of my standing to be seen at the theater?"

"You'll be fine, Ria. Just look at how nicely you're dressed."

By now, we were close enough to call each other by our nicknames without batting an eye. *Hah! Try and call me "less than acquaintance" now! (Not that I'm still bitter or anything.)*

The two of us walked side by side, leaving an appropriate amount of space between us. We were *just* far enough apart to keep us from holding hands—and it was driving me crazy.

I'm positive this is what they call "more than friends, but less than lovers."

The more we saw each other, the more good I found in Stellaria, and the harder I fell for her. The distance between us was starting to wear on me.

I couldn't let things stay like this. Now was the time to rise to action.

It was time for me to be a man. I made up my mind to spell out my feelings for her.

*

Our next day off would be the moment of truth.

Considering that I was going to be pouring my heart out here, I needed to find a spot where there wouldn't be too many people around to eavesdrop. That said, a totally deserted place wouldn't be a great idea either—too dangerous.

A big park, maybe? Oh, I know! What about Lognes Forest?

Lognes Forest, located on the outskirts of Rohze, was a huge woodland park and a popular recreation spot for men and women of all ages. With benches scattered here and there and fields of grass that stretched as far as the eye could see, there was plenty of space to go around. As long as we didn't start shouting at the top of our lungs, there was no need to worry about anybody overhearing us.

Besides, going for a stroll was a common date activity for us at this point.

My plan was for us to grab lunch and take a walk around Lognes Forest on our next day off...and there, I would officially ask to court Stellaria!

Now that I had picked out the stage for that decisive moment, my resolve was truly steeled.

*

Stellaria and I had lunch at a trendy restaurant, then began our lazy stroll toward Lognes Forest.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Mm... I'll tell you in a bit. For now, let's just enjoy the nice weather."

"Sure. It's the perfect day for a walk, isn't it?"

I dodged the main issue at hand, and the two of us continued on our jaunt.

I was feeling pretty nervous on the inside, but I was doing my best not to let it show. *Just act casual... Be cool as a cucumber... Great, I'm just making myself even* more *nervous!*

Calm down, Corydalis. Deep breaths.

"Whew..."

"Cory? Do you need to rest?"

“Come on—just walking *this* far wouldn’t be enough to wear me out.”

Not much time had passed since we’d left the restaurant. *I* am *a knight who trains day in and day out, I’ll have you know.*

My deep breathing exercises must have gotten her worried.

After finally arriving at Lognes Forest, we spent a while wandering down the trail. I usually kept a pretty quick pace, but here I took my time, matching my gait to hers. Moments like these always served as a perfect break from my busy life—and it struck an even deeper chord today, considering I’d tackled a particularly challenging assignment recently.

By that, I was referring to the Aurantian crown prince’s attempted abduction of Duchess Fisalis.

The royal siblings of Aurantia, the kingdom we had defeated in our most recent war, had visited Flür both to commemorate the end of said war and to find themselves a crown princess and a groom respectively. The whole situation was a pain in the butt to begin with, but it only got worse from there.

Get a load of this: the crown prince fell for the vice captain’s wife at first sight, only to then try to kidnap her and make her his bride.

The duchess thwarted his plans by putting up one hell of a fight, but dealing with the aftermath turned out to be a total hassle.

“The most recent disturbance was a real headache and a half. How is Mrs. Fisalis holding up, by the way?”

“She’s been slowly getting better, but the doctor recommended complete bed rest. We servants have to keep a close eye on her.”

“I see...”

Uh, why the surveillance? Well, I guess it’s that vivacious duchess we’re talking about here—who knows what she might do.

Hell, after running all over the royal palace in her attempts to shake him off, she had even grabbed that beefy Aurantian prince and hurled him right over her shoulder. Where was she hiding all that strength in that dainty little body of hers, anyway?

“The master has been more than happy to attend to his wife’s every need.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet he has. That explains why he’s been wrapping up his work early and heading home as fast as his legs can carry him.”

Of course, during the time between the kidnapping incident and the bloodless surrender of Aurantia, there hadn’t been a whole lot to do but wait for information to come in. Still, I couldn’t help but think back to a certain conversation I’d had with him:

“All right. I’m heading home.”

“Huh? You aren’t going to wait for our subordinates’ reports?”

“We don’t get any answers until tomorrow anyway. What matters right now is that I go home and look after Viola.”

“I mean, if you’re that *determined, I’m not about to stop you.”*

Putting it off until tomorrow wasn’t going to make too much of a difference, since reports *did* tend to come in either late at night or sometime into the next day. Thus, the squad and I had simply watched over his valiant departure.

“Bellis—the gardener—made a wheelchair for her recently, so she’s been able to traverse the manor that way.”

“I’m glad to hear it. We reached a decision on what to do with the crown prince and his sister, so things are finally settling down on our end too. Oh, speaking of which—the sister was sentenced to act as a maidservant to our princess. Under the condition that she’ll be strictly supervised, of course.”

“Ah, I see! Which princess, if I may ask?”

“All three of them.”

“Now that’s what I call a cruel and unusual punishment! I’m sure she’ll find the princesses’ scrutiny much harsher than whatever official surveillance she may be under. Hee hee. Of course, that would hardly be enough to atone for what she did to our Madam. Why, I certainly hope they work her to the bone!”

Is it just my imagination, or am I detecting a hint of something evil in Stellaria’s laughter? Well, considering how much everyone at the Fisalis manor loves the duchess, I guess that’s no surprise. And hey, I get it—I’m a pretty big

fan of hers myself.

We kept wandering aimlessly, recounting other recent events and engaging in all sorts of idle chatter... but I was struggling to get to the whole point of this excursion!

While I was waiting for the right opportunity to broach the subject, we made it out of the forest and into an open field. Complete with a flower bed and pond, the sprawling lawn looked like the perfect spot to linger.

“Mind if we sit down for a bit?”

“Sure.”

I invited Stellaria to sit down on a bench just off the walking trail.

If I put this off any longer, it was only going to make it harder to bring up, so I went for it as soon as we had both taken a seat.

“I hate beating around the bush, so I’ll get straight to the point. Stellaria, will you permit me to court you with an eye toward marriage?”

My approach was about as straightforward as it gets: I looked her right in the eyes and told her exactly what I wanted.

The question must have caught her off guard; for a fleeting moment, her green eyes went wide with surprise, but it wasn’t long before she briskly rose to her feet.

“I’m afraid I must decline.” She bobbed her head in an apologetic bow.

Instant. Kill.

You’ve gotta be kidding me... She turned me down? Without even missing a beat?! Why did she even go with me on all those fun little dates, then? Don’t tell me I’ve been dragging her along against her will!

She kept her head down, and I stared blankly at the whorl of her hair.

If she wants to say no, then fine, that’s her choice. But if she doesn’t tell me why, I’m never going to be able to move on.

“Uh...hey, Ria? Can I ask why?” I attempted to ask as casually as possible. If I wasn’t careful, my voice was going to start trembling.

“Though I don’t mind dallying with you the way we have been, if you’re asking me for a formal courtship—let alone one intended to lead to marriage—I can’t help but worry about the difference in our social standing.”

When she lifted her face, Stellaria answered me with an almost feeble smile, a stark contrast from the one she usually wore.

“Dallying”?! What is she going on about?

“Hold on a second! Let’s put the matter of rank aside for the moment. Have you spent all this time convinced I was asking you out on nothing but a whim?!”

“There’s no reason to believe someone of your status and prestige would go out of your way to seek the company of a mere servant like me.”

I think I’m gonna tear my hair out. Is that really how she saw all my (desperate) advances?!

Though I was still working through my own shock, when I looked more closely, I saw that Stellaria had a miserable, distressed look on her face.

If she truly had no feelings for me whatsoever, she wouldn’t be making a face like that, right?

The moment I saw that expression of hers, the will to keep fighting surged up within me.

Oh, so she thinks I’ve just been “dallying” with her? Try again. If I back down now, she’ll be totally convinced this was all just a passing fancy! I’m not about to let that happen.

I’m going to make her see how serious I am, whether she likes it or not! She’ll never know what hit her!

“This meant more than just a bit of fun to me!”

“What?”

I grabbed Stellaria by the hands, clasped them in my own, and looked her straight in the eyes. Her green irises wavered.

“Except for a few extreme cases, the people of Flür have never been too fussy about romance between classes, have they?”

“Perhaps not. But regardless of what society at large may think, neither I nor my parents could ever approve of it. Our pride as first-rate servants wouldn’t allow it.”

“That pride may be something worthy of respect, but right now, it’s just standing in our way. I come from the family of a marquis, sure, but seeing as I’m the third son, I’ve been left entirely to my own devices. My parents would be happy with any girl I choose to marry.”

“I’m sure it’s a different story if that girl is a mere servant.”

For Pete’s sake, Ria, you really have a rebuttal for everything!

Here I was, arguing with everything I had, yet she refused to budge an inch. She just kept refuting whatever I said.

Fine. I didn’t want to say this, but you leave me no choice.

It was time to play my trump card.

“I have it on record that my family would be fine with anyone I marry, as long as my ‘bride’ isn’t a man!”

I really didn’t want to mention it, but now’s not the time to get hung up on that!

“Oh...”

That must have reminded her of the whole “you-know-what” debacle, because she soon had the face of someone struggling to stifle a laugh.

I was glad I had managed to lighten the mood a little, but being forced to dig up my own dark past felt like an innovative form of torture.

Back when *that* rumor was making the rounds around the royal palace, my parents and brothers had been among the first to hear it, and I had been called back to the manor as a consequence.

“So, I heard this rumor that you prefer men...”

“I don’t! That was my boss’s idea of a joke!”

“Really?”

“Yes, dammit!”

“Corydalis...we couldn’t care less about social standing. We only ask that you bring home a girl as your ‘bride.’”

“That’s my plan!”

My father had begged me to marry a woman. Of course, my mother and brothers had been nodding alongside him.

While I was engrossed in my flashback, gazing off into the middle distance all the while, Stellaria lowered her head with a dry laugh. “I apologize for all the trouble our master caused you.”

It sure wasn’t your *fault!*

“That mess is over and done with, so don’t worry about it. My point is, there’s no reason to get so hung up on your status.”

“But...”

“You may be a servant, but you work for *the* Fisalis family, don’t you? Not just that either. Both your parents were servants of the duke before you, so I’d say you’ve got a lot more to recommend you than the average commoner.”

Nobody could work at the duke’s manor without a proper background check. Considering the intense scrutiny each applicant faced, it was common knowledge that anyone employed there must be someone of reputable character.

“Well, perhaps...”

Stellaria’s eyes wavered in distress. I could tell this was going to take one last push.

“Do you not like me, then? If that’s the case, and you’ve only been going out with me because I’m too high-ranked for you to say no, I’ll give up on you here and now.” I threw her yet another straight pitch.

She went silent.

I’m begging you, don’t say “yes” here!

I watched her intently, praying with all my might.

“Rank or whatever aside, I’m asking about how *you* feel.”

Silence.

“Were you only hanging out with me because I’m a friend of ‘the young master’?”

“No!”

It wouldn’t be nice of me to corner her too hard. Thus, I brought up the vice captain in a deliberately nonchalant tone...and she immediately rushed to deny the accusation.

See that?

“So...?”

“I... I’m very taken with you.”

Stellaria was red to the very tips of her ears, but even so, she looked me straight in the eyes as she gave me her answer.

God, she’s cute. The cutest girl in the whole world!

“That’s what I wanted to hear!”

I pulled her into a hug, breaking into the biggest grin ever to be seen upon my face.

“I don’t know what my parents will have to say, however.”

Nestled in my arms, Stellaria still seemed to have her misgivings, but *I* wasn’t feeling worried in the least.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make them see things my way!”

How could I be so confident? Because if it came down to it, I would use my best friend (read: partner-in-crime) to make it happen.

Man, today is the best day of my life!

*

Meanwhile, at the Fisalis manor...

“Achoo!”

“Did you catch a cold, Cercis?”

“I don’t think so. No, I got the strangest feeling that someone just mentioned my name...”

“Oh?”

“Was it my imagination?”

“Must have been.”

9. Corydalis Clears the Decks

I recalled an episode from a few months back.

“Are you suuure you’re not interested in men?”

My eldest brother had been the first one to start grilling me.

That day, all the members of the Pulcherrima family were gathered in our manor’s parlor for an emergency meeting. Seated there were Marquis and Marquise Pulcherrima; the eldest son and his wife; the second son and *his* wife; and finally, me.

After my father had demanded that I “drop by the manor for once,” I’d dragged my butt over, only to find that my parents were concerned about the rumors circulating around the royal palace (the whole “men-only” incident) and had called a meeting to get to the bottom of the matter.

“I’m positive! That was a lie Duke Fisalis spread around!” I explained to my older brother as he continued to stare straight through my skull, his arms folded.

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” asserted my brainy, bespectacled middle brother, pushing his glasses up with his middle finger.

“There’s not even a spark, I swear! Argh, I’m gonna kill that bastard!”

Some brothers you are, believing a rumor over the words of your precious little sibling!

I raked my hands through my hair, languishing under the suspicious gazes of my two brothers.

That was one hell of a rumor my stupid boss started about me! And the worst part of all this is that the girl I like won’t even look me in the eye anymore!

I let out a frustrated cry, at which point my father slumped his shoulders and mumbled, “I wanted a *girl* for a daughter-in-law...”

“Yeah, I know! You don’t have to be so dramatic about it!” I shouted back,

shooting him a glare.

Beside him, my mother put a hand to her cheek. “I do my best to keep an open mind...but this is a bit too much for me,” she said, her tone full of dismay.

Hold on, you guys! You’re just running with the assumption that I’m gay, aren’t you?!

Everything was pure chaos.

“Not you too, Mother!”

I let my head sag forward, a broken man.

When he saw how frazzled my parents were, my oldest brother gave a wry shake of his head.

I’m telling you, this is all a big misunderstanding! Won’t somebody *believe me?*

“Just so we’re clear, nobody’s going to take your word on this until you bring a decent girl home.”

“I’m going to! And when I do, you’d better believe me!” I blustered.

“Oh, we will!” my father replied. “At this point, we won’t make a fuss over her status—or anything else, for that matter. Just make sure it’s a *girl* you bring us.”

My mother, brothers, and their wives all nodded vigorously.

“Bring home a cute bride, Uncle Cory,” my nephew pleaded, tugging on the hem of my jacket.

“I will—just you wait!”

In retrospect, maybe the whole fiasco had actually played out in my favor.

*

Fast forward to a few days ago.

I’d finally told Stellaria how I felt, and she had agreed to enter a courtship with an eye toward marriage.

She’d had her concerns about the difference in our social standing, but that wasn’t going to be a problem. After all, my whole family had given me their

word that “anything goes, as long as you bring home a girl.”

As soon as I’d gotten a “yes” from Stellaria, I’d headed straight to the family manor. Best to strike while the iron’s hot, after all.

“Oh? What’s the occasion, Corydalis? I can’t remember the last time you came home without a summons.”

Given that I was usually too busy with work to visit, my father looked shocked to see me swing by of my own volition. My visits were so few and far between that I’d sometimes get called home just to “prove that I was still alive.” Considering I was a full-grown adult, it was a little patronizing, if you asked me.

“I have an announcement to make.”

“What is it? Did you get engaged? Did you find yourself a fiancée?!”

The look on my father’s face held a mix of hope and trepidation. *Grr... He still doesn’t believe what I said, does he?*

“That’s right. The two of us just agreed to get married, so I came by to let you know.”

“Your bride-to-be...*is* a girl, right?” he asked, obviously dreading my answer.

“I can’t believe you’re *still* going on about that!” I shouted back, indignant. “Yes, she’s a respectable young woman!”

“Oho! That’s wonderful news! Did you hear that, honey? Corydalis found himself a girl to marry!”

He was practically leaping for joy as he called my mother over. *Jeez, does it really mean* that *much to you?*

“Don’t you want to hear anything about her?! What if she’s some good-for-nothing floozy?”

“Oh, I’m not worried. If *you* picked her out, I’m sure she’s a fine young lady. That said, I *do* want to know more about my future daughter-in-law, so why don’t you tell us over supper?”

And thus, it was decided on the spot that I would eat dinner with the family before heading back to the dorms.

“Her name is Stellaria. She worked as a lady-in-waiting at the royal palace for a long time, but she left that job a little while back. Now she’s serving as the personal maid to Duchess Fisalis.”

“She’s worked at the royal palace *and* the Fisalis manor? My word!”

“Plus, her parents are the head chef and head maid of that same duke’s manor.”

“Those credentials are about as good as it gets!”

“Yeah. I mean, she’s *technically* a commoner, but that’s no big deal, right?” I asked just to be extra sure. *Don’t forget*—you *guys are the ones who said “any girl will do.”*

“Of course it’s no big deal! Commoner or not, if she’s held positions *that* prestigious, you’ll hear no complaints from us.”

My father didn’t hesitate to nod in agreement. *Good,* I thought.

“She’s a great girl—both hard-working and considerate. I’m sure you guys are going to love her.”

“Glad to hear it, son. So, when are you planning to bring her around?”

“She has her own job to worry about, so I’ll have to check when would work best for her. Once I find out, I’ll let you know.”

“We’ll be waiting with bated breath!”

I’d gotten my father’s blessing.

That took care of getting permission on my side. Now all that was left was bringing Stellaria to the manor and introducing her to my parents.

Gotta respect tradition, after all.

*

“My mother and father both gave us their blessing.” I told Stellaria the results of the family meeting the other day.

“Even knowing that I’m a servant?”

“Yeah.”

“And that both of my parents are servants?”

“If anything, that only improved their view of your background.”

“I see... Your parents must be quite the open-minded sort.”

“To be fair, I count as more of a knight than a nobleman.”

“Well, that explains it! Hee hee.”

Married couples consisting of a knight and a lady-in-waiting were far from a rare sight around the royal palace. I figured framing it that way might take some of the weight off Stellaria’s mind.

“Anyway, Father was pestering me to bring you over, so why don’t we drop by to say hi at some point? I’m serious about the ‘dropping by’ part—we can just duck in and out!”

Just, y’know, go prove to them that you’re actually a girl! Okay, maybe I’m focusing on the wrong thing here.

“Don’t be silly. I’ll be sure to make a proper introduction.”

That was conscientious old Stellaria for you. She even had her dignified work mode face on.

My father may have been a marquis, but considering Stellaria had dealt with the duke, queen, and king on a regular basis, she wasn’t about to get cold feet now. She’d learned how to conduct herself in the royal palace of all places, and she knew how to handle just about anyone—be they an old geezer or a little ankle-biter. Her social skills were downright flawless.

*

A few days later, I visited the Pulcherrima manor with Stellaria in tow.

“Do you think I’m dressed appropriately?”

“For sure! You look damn cute, if I do say so myself.”

“Oh, stop that!”

She was dressed in navy blue yet again, but this time she was wearing a chic, elegant dress with a white lace trim along the collar and hem. It was a good match for a refined young lady like her. I was willing to bet that just about

anyone would take one look at her and assume she was a bona fide noblewoman.

“Oho! Is this my future daughter-in-law?” my father called out the moment we entered the room, getting up from his chair.

“Hold your horses, would you?” I made an attempt at reining him in as he all but sprinted over to us.

Beside me, Stellaria only said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. My name is Stellaria.”

She bowed her head gracefully. Her manner was just as polished as you’d expect, given her training at the royal palace.

“Come now, raise your head,” my mother urged. “I’d like to get a proper look at your pretty little face.”

“Very well.”

Stellaria lifted her face and flashed my parents a dazzling smile. It looked like she’d made a good first impression. Though my parents *had* approved of me marrying a commoner, I’d still been stressed over whether or not they would actually *like* her, so I was secretly feeling a little relieved.

Too bad my father had to go and cheer, “Well done, Corydalis! I’d been agonizing over what I’d do if you brought home a man, but I see you actually managed to nab yourself a woman!”

You still *doubted me?! And after how hard I denied it too! You’ve gotta be kidding me!*

“Of course I did! How many times did I tell you I would?!”

Give me back all the time I spent worrying! You not liking Stellaria should have been the least of my concerns!

“What can I say? I couldn’t stop worrying until I met her in person. Well then...Stellaria. I heard you’re employed as a servant of the Fisalis manor.”

“That’s right. I wait on Duchess Fisalis.”

“And prior to that, you worked as a lady-in-waiting at the royal palace,

correct?”

“Yes. I served the first princess, Her Highness Artemisia.”

My father and mother gleefully chattered away, and Stellaria answered all their questions without the slightest hint of shyness. All her experience dealing with bigwigs in the royal palace was really paying off.

Considering how charmed my parents seemed to be, they weren’t about to cease their endless barrage of questions without an intervention. Poor Stellaria was bound to get tuckered out at the rate this was going, so I figured I’d better step in.

“So as you can both see, she’s a real, live woman. I can go ahead and marry her now, right?” I asked my father. It couldn’t hurt to check one last time.

“Of course, son!” he replied without hesitation.

Now all that was left was to get the blessing of Stellaria’s parents.

While I was striking a victory pose in my head, my mother giggled and said, “Not that we were ever going to object to whomever your heart settled on, anyway.”

“Thanks, Mother and Father!”

As a wave of relief washed over me, a smile naturally spread across everyone’s faces.

“What name do you like to go by, Stellaria?” my mother asked, beckoning her closer.

“My friends call me Ria.”

“My, how adorable! We’re happy to have you, Ria. *You* can feel free to call me ‘Mother.’ Oh, by the way, Corydalis has two older brothers, and their wives are both lovely young ladies. I’m sure you’ll all get along just swimmingly.”

“So I’ve heard. I’ve only ever had a younger brother myself, so I’m excited to add a few older siblings to my family.”

While Stellaria chatted bashfully but merrily with my mother, I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and gave her a squeeze. “I can’t wait to meet *your*

parents too.”

“Hm? Corydalis? Surely you aren’t suggesting that you haven’t told her parents yet?” My mother’s attitude abruptly took a turn for the critical.

“Uh, well, you guys insisted on meeting Stellaria as soon as possible, so...”

I wanted to assuage her concerns about rank or whatever, so I thought bringing her home to my family was top priority!

Of course, that didn’t change the fact that I *hadn’t* introduced myself to her parents yet, so I just floundered uselessly until my mother barked, “Get your butt over there, young man!”

Sorry.

“I know! I’ll make plans to meet her parents ASAP!”

I was immediately treated to another tongue-lashing. “You’d better. Oh, and I expect you to be on your best behavior when you do.”

“I will, I will! Ria, could you find out what day works best for your parents? Oh, and by the way, the chivalric order will be holding a party sometime soon, so we should go to that together. It’ll be a good chance to introduce you to everyone.”

“What?!”

As I laid down one plan after another—meeting her parents, then announcing our engagement to my co-workers—Stellaria’s eyes nearly popped out with surprise.

Whoops, am I taking things too fast? With some of this stuff, though, it’s now or never.

“Don’t worry! Since the chivalric order will be hosting it, the vice captain and his wife will be there too. You’ll be in good company. Besides, knowing Mrs. Fisalis, I bet she’ll give you the heartiest congratulations you’ve ever seen.”

In contrast to my determination to clear the decks, Stellaria didn’t seem to be emotionally prepared for all of this just yet. I figured she’d get there eventually, though.

And with that, Stellaria was officially accepted into the Pulcherrima family.

10. Corydalis Says That One Cliché

Bringing Stellaria over to the Pulcherrima manor had successfully alleviated her insecurities about her rank. My parents had welcomed her into the family with open arms, after all. I could already tell that they were going to end up adoring her even more than me, their own son. I mean, I'd already seen the same exact scenario play out with my brothers and *their* wives before me.

Next on the list was Stellaria's parents. For me, this part was about ten times more nerve-wracking.

But if they're against it, that's when it's time to whip out the ace up my sleeve —Duke Fisalis himself!

*

To the Fisalis manor!

I'd been there several times before; however, that was always as "a friend (or sometimes subordinate) of the duke's." I had always arrived nonchalantly, without any pretenses or so much as a care in the world.

But today was different!

Today I'm stopping by to meet Stellaria's parents and introduce myself as her beau. Should I even use the front door? If I'm here to meet with a couple of servants, am I better off coming in through the kitchen door or the servant's entrance (if they even have one of those)?

Hmm...I'm not sure how to proceed here.

As I was hemming and hawing outside the main entrance, someone called out, "This way, Corydalis!"

I looked for the source of the voice, and lo and behold, the one beckoning me from the entryway was none other than the vice captain's wife herself!

"Good afternoon! You're here as Stellaria's guest today, right? Hee hee, we've been waiting for you."

The grin on Mrs. Fisalis's face was more endearing (or just mischievous, maybe?) than ever. I was almost taken aback by her candor.

And while I was still reeling over the duchess herself showing up to receive me...

"Sorry. She insisted on coming out to get you and wouldn't hear a word against it."

The vice captain popped out from behind her, a sardonic smile on his face! *Just what do you think you're doing?!*

Throughout all of this, the usual butler was hanging back with an unperturbed look on his face. *Wait, does this sort of thing happen on the daily?*

"Don't be. *I'm* sorry to make you guys go to all this trouble."

I'm actually pretty glad of it, though. If she hadn't called out to me, I could've been stuck dawdling outside the entrance forever.

"Come on—in you go!" Mrs. Fisalis said in a light, sing-song voice, ushering me inside the manor.

"Stellaria's parents are waiting for you in the parlor. Allow me to escort you," the butler offered in place of the duchess, who practically had a skip in her step.

We headed from the entryway to the parlor.

Ugh... The nerves are starting to get to me. My movements are so stiff, even I can tell how awkward I look! What's the right way to walk, again? I'm so tense my arms and legs are practically swinging in sync!

Meanwhile...

"I want to go with him!"

"That's an awful idea. You'll just be a fifth wheel."

"Okay, then how about I stay right here and keep a low profile?"

"No eavesdropping either!"

The closer I got to the parlor, the closer my anxiety levels got to maximum capacity—and yet the duke and duchess chose that moment to have a little lover's quarrel right in front of my face.

I'm about to go ask Stellaria's parents for permission to marry their daughter. Why on earth would you want to stick around for that, Madam?

"Uh-huh. Come along now, Vi."

"Boo!"

The moment the duchess excitedly pressed her ear against the door, the vice captain scooped her up in his arms and carried her off somewhere.

What was that *all about?*

"My apologies."

While I stood there watching them go, speechless, their butler apparently felt the need to apologize for their behavior.

Not your *fault. Besides, it soothed my nerves a little, I have to admit.*

Now that their little comedy act was over with, I strode toward the door. I was still feeling pretty anxious, but faint heart never won fair lady, as they say.

The butler held open the door for me, and when I stepped inside, I found Stellaria and her parents there waiting for me. Her father had a dour look on his face from the moment I entered the room, while her mother had an imposing air about her—almost like she was sizing me up.

Uhh... So I guess we're all in battle mode over here, huh? I'd really appreciate a friendlier atmosphere, guys! I already miss that laid-back mood the duke and his wife set earlier... No, no, that's the wrong attitude to have. I can't let myself lose here! Fight hard, Corydalis!

"My name is Corydalis Cashmeriana Pulcherrima. I'll get straight to the point: please allow me to marry your daughter! I promise to put her above anyone or anything else in the entire world, and I'd never, ever do anything to hurt her!"

In times like these, you had to bust out the clichés. It may have been a hackneyed line, but it accurately expressed my true feelings. I just asked for her hand in marriage point blank.

Facing Stellaria's parents, who were seated across from me, I lowered my head in a deep bow.

Silence filled the room.

I could feel myself breaking out into a cold sweat. *Somebody, please say* something*!*

Just as I started to grow impatient, keeping my head down all the while...her father finally broke the silence, his arms folded and the stern look still plastered on his face. “You think I’d hand my darling daughter over to some *nobody*?!”

My head snapped back up on reflex, and I saw the man glaring back at me.



Just as I was thinking to myself that the line sounded oddly familiar (or rather, maybe it was just the kind of stock phrase you hear all the time) and wondering whether I ought to point that out, Stellaria's mother did the job for me. "What are you going on about, dear? He's hardly 'some nobody'—he's the son of a marquis. And both a friend and subordinate of our master, at that," she retorted calmly, shooting her husband an icy stare.

Nice comeback! Thanks!

At that, the hitherto stony-faced father abruptly broke out into a huge grin.

"Oh, I'm aware. I've just always wanted the chance to say that! There, it's all out of my system now," he said, the very picture of informality.

With that, the mood in the room did a total one-eighty, shifting into something a lot more laid-back. *That's a pretty big image overhaul you just went through there, dad!*

Seeing as I had no idea which persona was the "real" him, I'd sort of been thrown for a loop. Fortunately, Stellaria leaned over to whisper in my ear: "This is what he's usually like—the easygoing type."

So his whole super overbearing shtick was just an act, then.

His smiling face—no, his features in general looked a lot like Stellaria's. She *had* claimed to take after her father, I guess.

"All right, I'll stop joking around now. I'm Cartham—both the head chef of the Fisalis manor and Stellaria's father." He introduced himself, keeping a straight face this time around.

"Right."

"And I'm Dahlia, her mother and the manor's head maid."

"We've met a few times before, I believe. It's good to see you again."

We each bobbed our heads in acknowledgment.

"As we've just explained, both we and Stellaria are mere servants. She's hardly of high enough standing to be wed to the son of a marquis, so I can't help but wonder if you'd be better off finding yourself a more appropriate

match," said Cartham, attempting to let me down gently.

That's a normal reaction, I guess. But it's fine—I already got myself permission.

"There's no need to worry about her rank! My father may be a marquis, but I'm just his third son. I left home to go live in the chivalric order's dormitories a while back, so I'm more of a knight than a nobleman in practice."

"Hardly! That may sound all well and good, but if you were to go and marry a servant girl, I imagine your parents would still have some objections."

"It's fine! Did you tell them about our talk the other day, Ria?" I checked.

She gave a firm nod. "I did."

Cartham and Dahlia backed her up on that. "Our daughter told us about her visit to the marquis's manor."

That ought to make things simple, then.

"Whether the two of you give your approval or not, the Pulcherrima family has already acknowledged Ria as my fiancée," I said, flashing them a smile.

"I see you're quite determined, Sir Corydalis."

"Of course."

"Well then...I only ask that you take good care of our daughter—our Stellaria."

"I most certainly will! Thank you very much!"

The married couple rose to their feet and gave me a deep bow. Naturally, I inclined my own head in turn.

Sweet! Now we've got the go-ahead from both families!

"We're officially engaged now," I said to Stellaria, a grin on my face.

"Indeed we are," she replied, smiling right back.

"Excuse me. There's, er...one last thing I'd like to ask you," Cartham timorously interjected.

What's this about?

“Sure, go ahead.”

“With all due respect, I’ve heard whisperings that you have a preference for, well...”

He trailed off toward the end, like he was almost reluctant to finish the sentence.

Arrrrgh! Not these accusations again! People still believe that?! And you’re telling me the rumors spread all the way to the Fisalis manor?!

I shot down his suspicions as decisively as I could. “That master of yours made that whole thing up! It’s a completely baseless rumor!”

“You’re certain our *daughter* is who you want?”

“Your daughter is *exactly* who I want!” I asserted with all my might.

*

Being my family’s third son and all, my parents had told me I didn’t have to bother making the pronouncement too flashy; thus, I decided to go ahead and announce our engagement at the chivalric order’s anniversary party.

“This is my first time attending a party, so I’m a little nervous,” Stellaria fretted. She was dressed in an azure gown that I’d given to her as a gift.

“It’s your first time attending one, sure, but you’ve seen what they’re like plenty of times before.”

“From behind the scenes, yes.”

“It’s not all that different as a guest.”

“Oh, come off it!”

I was willing to bet the events at the royal palace were way more extravagant than this one. She’d probably worked those several times before, which meant she already knew her way around a party.

Besides, considering that this was a chivalric order party, it was pretty cozy—and best of all, she had the familiar faces of the duke and duchess to help put her mind at ease.

“The vice captain and his wife are both here too. You’ll be fine.”

“I know. You’re right.” That must have done the trick to calm her nerves, seeing as she finally smiled.

I made the rounds, dragging Stellaria along with me as I did. From superior to subordinate, I made sure to let everyone know, “Hey, guess what? I got engaged!”

My bosses were super happy for me, but my subordinates all kicked up a fuss. Understandable, considering a few of the poor guys were stuck bringing their mothers as their plus one for the evening.

Stellaria turned out to be a great dancer.

“Jeez, Ria...you’ve got to be even better than me.”

“Not at all. It’s merely a hobby of mine.”

“But you used to give the princess lessons, didn’t you?”

“I did, yes.”

She admitted to that like it was nothing, but that pretty much makes her an honorary dancing master...

“Anyone from the duke’s manor could manage this much.”

“Whoa...”

Those first-class servants are not to be underestimated!

“Madam is...not with the Master, I see. My, that’s a surprise.”

“Hm? Oh, huh, you’re right.”

The vice captain was...talking to Alkanna, it looked like. Mrs. Fisalis was off dancing with one of our men.

“That reminds me, our subordinates were going on about some ‘Operation: Hog the Duchess.’”

“What on earth could that be?”

“The duchess has a lot of fans in our department. None of us get to see her too often, though, so some of the knights were planning to spend tonight’s party tearing her away from the vice captain and keeping her all to themselves.”

“My goodness! Hee hee.”

“Everyone is supposed to take turns striking up a conversation with Cercis to distract him, while someone else dances with Mrs. Fisalis in the meantime.”

“The Master is going to be furious once he finally catches on.”

“Oh, I’ll bet.”

It would take a much greater threat than that to make our subordinates back down, though.

“I’ve thought as much for a while now, but you’re quite fortunate to have such wonderful subordinates, Cory.”

“Huh? You think so?”

They’re all pretty capable, sure, but it’s practically a den of eccentrics. There’s plenty of idiots to go around too.

“I do. You’re always having so much fun with them—why, that’s the entire reason everyone fell for *that* rumor when it was going around.” Stellaria gave an amused giggle.

Uh...whoa there! You mean I dug my own grave (take two)?!

I see now... So that’s why no one denied it...

I stared off into the middle distance.

“I swear, that was just a prank your ‘young master’ pulled.”

“Don’t worry, I realize that now. Oh, that reminds me...”

“What is it?”

“From now on, I need to be sure to remember *your* subordinates—not just the master’s. Just in case anything were to happen,” she murmured.

That was my wife(-to-be) for you—always on top of her game.

*

Meanwhile, when the knights of the chivalric order witnessed Corydalis dragging Stellaria around the party...

“Look! Platoon Leader Pulcherrima brought a *girl* with him!”

“*Him*?! You mean the same guy who always talked a big game, but never showed up anywhere with an actual date?”

“It just gets better! Isn’t that the lady-in-waiting who served the princess until not too long ago? I *thought* I’d stopped seeing her around lately!”

“When did he find the time to get a girlfriend, anyway? And how’d he manage it?! Just look at me—*I* had to bring my mom along as my party guest!”

“Raaah!”

“When did this happen?!”

“I hate happy people!” came their bitter chorus.

11. Stellaria's Shockingly Sensible First Love

"Mimosa is with child. Now that we've found ourselves short a maid at the Fisalis manor, we need you to come back home."

I received this message from Rohtas just as the war with Aurantia had entered full swing. It might have been cause for celebration, but I had to wonder if quitting my job at the royal palace was really going to be that simple. After all, it was only at the staff's behest that I had begun working there in the first place.

My parents were both servants of the Fisalis family, and I myself had been born and raised in their manor, so I had always assumed I would go work for the duke upon graduating from my vocational school. That was a great part of why I had striven for success in all my classes and held onto the top spot in every subject; it was both a non-negotiable requirement and my first step toward becoming a servant of the duke's manor.

However, when it came time for me to actually find a job, the royal palace had asked me to come work for them.

"They're looking for an accomplished lady-in-waiting, from the sound of it," Rohtas had told me.

"I don't mind either way, I suppose."

"Hmm... Though you're already quite skilled, perhaps you ought to consider this another part of your training. Rest assured, we'll call you back to the manor before long."

"Hee hee! Understood."

And with that, I left to go work at the royal palace.

Ultimately (or "at long last," perhaps), I was able to return to the Fisalis manor.

It apparently took quite a bit of squabbling between the manor and the royal palace to reach that point, but I'd rather we turned a blind eye to that. For my

part, I was simply glad for the opportunity to finally work in the very same manor where I'd grown up.

*

It was around the same time the young master—pardon, *Master Fisalis* came home from the war that I arrived at the manor.

In the time I'd been away, the atmosphere there had completely changed. For one thing, the master had gotten married, meaning the house now had a "Madam." Secondly, the master's toxic "companion" (by which I mean *girlfriend*) was finally gone. Though I'll admit I never had the chance to interact with her myself, a mistress never had any place in a happy household.

I'd heard about the changes in passing, but there was nothing quite like seeing it for myself.

The Madam—the "Duchess Fisalis" who I'd heard so much about from both my parents and the rumors floating about the royal palace—turned out to be a wonderful person, and she converted me into a fan in no time at all. What a world of difference from that self-centered princess back at the royal palace! She would even go to her dance and etiquette lessons without being nagged...but then again, perhaps *that* had more to do with Rohtas and my mother ruling over her with an iron fist.

Apart from that, as a lady of the house, she could be rather unconventional...but seeing as those eccentricities were another part of her charm, that only served to boost her popularity.

Most notable of all, however, was the change she had brought about in Master Fisalis. Before anyone realized what was happening, he'd become the very picture of a love-struck husband! Make no mistake—that was a good thing. A *wonderful* thing, in fact.

The way those two changed must have shifted the mood of the mansion as a whole.

Just as I'd grown used to my new, stress-free—why, I'd even say *enjoyable* job, the master brought a few guests home with him.

"As you can see, we have some unexpected guests. Sorry for springing this on

you.”

After the master apologetically explained the circumstances behind the unannounced company to his wife, she simply said, “Goodness!” As surprised as she was by the large crowd of visitors, she never stopped smiling for a second.

Said guests were the master’s boss and subordinates from his workplace, it seemed. If these were his colleagues, I assumed Sir Corydalis must be somewhere among them; however, I couldn’t spot him from where I stood.

Of course, this was no time to be looking around for him either.

While the madam talked with the guests, the rest of us went about the preparations to entertain them.

“There’s eighteen of them in total,” said Rohtas, counting up the number of visitors in a flash.

“Got it.”

One servant went to the kitchen to relay that information, while the others split up between the dining room and the parlor to get those rooms ready for company. Everyone moved smoothly into position, mindful of exactly what it was they had to do.

Seeing as I was the madam’s personal maid, I stood by and awaited her instructions.

As I stood alongside Rohtas and watched over the commotion in the entryway, I eventually heard the madam say, “Show our guests to the parlor, Rohtas.”

That’s our cue.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rohtas was the first to act, moving to hold open the door. “This way, please. Stellaria, escort them inside,” he said, handing me the next order.

“Certainly. Follow me, everyone.”

I stepped forward, ready to guide the guests to their seats. But then...

“Corydalis? Is something the matter?”

“What’s gotten into you, Corydalis?”

That was when I heard the voices of the duke and duchess ring out in unison.

Oh, it sounds like Sir Corydalis is *here. But whatever could be the matter with him?*

The rest of the guests had paused to stare at Sir Corydalis, so I likewise cast him a glance over my shoulder.

Despite all the eyes on him, he remained frozen in place.

My, is that me *he’s pointing at?*

“What happened to *him*?”

“Don’t ask me.”

Madam and Master Fisalis both stared at him blankly.

“So you don’t know either, hm?” Likely assuming there was no point in asking the paralyzed knight himself, the duchess looked to see who he was pointing at before inquiring of me, “Do you and Corydalis know each other, Stellaria?”

Well now—how to answer that question?

We’d spoken to each other quite a few times in the royal palace, and I’d even given him one of my father’s handmade caramels when I noticed he was looking haggard, but I doubted that would constitute a noteworthy encounter for someone as popular as Sir Corydalis. What’s more, being a man of both position and prestige, I could hardly expect him to remember a mere lady-in-waiting like me.

“Oh, yes, I’ve known of him for a while now. He’s made quite the name for himself—not to mention he’s our master’s subordinate. Plus, we ran into one another several times in the royal palace.” I went with the safest answer I could think of, so as not to come off as overly desperate.

“Oh, I see!”

“Yes. Though perhaps ‘ran into each other’ is putting it too strongly—we’ve merely passed each other in the corridor, that’s all.”

I assumed he must have pointed at me and frozen up because he *did*

remember me, and he was just shocked to see a lady-in-waiting from the royal palace hanging about the Fisalis manor.

Really, I'm just touched that he remembered me at all.

*

A good deal of time had passed since my reunion with Sir Corydalis. I had the day off from work, so I decided to go out on the town by myself.

Back at the royal palace, I was always so busy dealing with that selfish princess, that terror of a prince, or whatever other work I had on my plate that I spent most of my rare days off simply lazing about in my room. I would only leave the palace a few times a year—whenever I went to visit my parents back at the Fisalis manor, mainly. My co-workers who had a little more time to spare would often go out on the town, but I rarely went anywhere unless I had an errand to run.

Still, I can't deny that I was curious about those cafés and bakeries the girls would always talk about.

Since starting work at the duke's manor, I was still plenty busy, of course—but thanks to our lovely Madam, I had a little more room to breathe. How wonderful it was that I could shoo—ahem, *encourage* her to attend her lessons without any pushback! How much easier I had it now that I didn't have to run around trying to catch that slippery prince!

Oh, dear. It would seem my bar for amazement was on the floor.

At any rate, now that I had both physical and mental energy to spare, my plan was to spend the occasional day off going out into the city.

In the time since I had last strolled these streets, many of the shops had turned over. That made my excursion a fresh, new experience.

Oh, that's the bakery everyone says is to die for! I remember Father bought a few goodies from there on the sly for research purposes. And there's Rohtas's favorite café. I really love that secluded feel it has... The last time I pestered him to take me there, he dodged the question with a "maybe when you're older." Hee hee, I should have him bring me along sometime soon.

Taking my time to look every which way, I made my way to the establishment I was looking for.

Today's destination was a confectionery shop called Lemon Myrtle's. It was the most popular shop of the moment, highly acclaimed by both my co-workers and the ladies of the chivalric order. It was always quite crowded, so I was prepared for a long wait. Luckily, I'd made sure to carve out plenty of time in my schedule.

Eventually, the adorable, apple green sign of Lemon Myrtle's came into view. Just as I'd heard, it looked to be a sit-down restaurant that served seasonal sweets—-no takeout options.

Hee hee! I'm excited for this.

"Hey there."

Just as I was walking over to the café, Sir Corydalis popped up out of nowhere to say hello. He was wearing a simple ensemble of grey trousers and a white shirt—a charming contrast to his formal, uniformed look.

"What a coincidence to run into you here," I said. "Are you off work today?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to waste my holiday loafing around in the dorms, so I decided to go for a walk and grab something to eat."

"I see!"

"Erm... And you are...?" he mumbled, scratching awkwardly at his cheek.

Oh, he's looking for my name! Come to think of it, we have yet to introduce ourselves.

"Apologies for not introducing myself sooner. I'm Stellaria, a maid currently in service of the Fisalis family. How strange to only be telling you this now, when we've run into one another so many times. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, in any case."

"Uh, same here. My name's Corydalis Cashmeriana Pulcherrima. I used to be the lieutenant commander of the Special Ops Division, but I was reassigned to the Royal Guard as a platoon leader a little while back. My title's a real mouthful, though, so you can just call me Cory."

I'd never bothered telling him my name—under the assumption that he had no use for that information—but now he knew that I was called "Stellaria."

After that, we shared some delicious sweets and tea in Lemon Myrtle's. We had so much fun conversing that time passed in the blink of an eye.

Once this was over, the two of us would go back to being "Corydalis, Master Fisalis's subordinate" and "Stellaria, a servant of the Fisalis family." Just as that realization was getting me down, however, Sir Corydalis suggested that we see each other the next time our schedules aligned.

Could he possibly feel the same way I do? As happy as the thought makes me, I mustn't get ahead of myself.

Sir Corydalis was Master Fisalis's subordinate, and now a platoon leader for the Royal Guard. What's more, he was the son of Marquis Pulcherrima. It would be unthinkable for him to return the feelings of a lowly servant like myself.

No doubt it was a casual proposition—he had enjoyed our conversation, so he felt like meeting up again. I was sure that this was all just a fun distraction to him.

So long as it was a harmless dalliance, I was willing to go along with it... though I couldn't deny the pang I felt in my chest.

*

I'd believed that Sir Corydalis had been inviting me out on a whim. I'd been so certain of that.

No matter how hard I tried to convince myself of that, however, he was always so kind to me, and I enjoyed every minute we spent together—to a degree that felt almost cruel. More and more, I started to dread the day he would get engaged to a nobleman's daughter and tell me we couldn't see each other anymore.

And yet...!

"I hate beating around the bush, so I'll get straight to the point. Stellaria, will you permit me to court you with an eye toward marriage?"

A proposal?! I didn't see that one coming!

Given all that time I'd spent dwelling on our difference in station and preparing for our relationship to end at any moment, what instinctively left my mouth was: "I'm afraid I must decline."

The initial shock of my refusal was enough to drain the blood from his face, but he was quickly inspired to bounce right back, throwing out every argument he could think of to change my mind. Why, he was even willing to dig up the "men-only" incident to do it.

Don't remind me of that rumor! You'll make me burst out laughing during this perfectly serious moment! But if that hearsay was what made his parents say that "anything goes, as long as you bring home a girl," then I suppose I really ought to be thanking the Master.

Oh, don't worry, Sir Corydalis. I know none of it is true.

*

Not long after his proposal, I was invited to the Pulcherrima manor, where Sir Corydalis's family lived.

Now that I think about it, I've yet to tell my *parents anything about Sir Corydalis. I never really found the right opportunity to bring him up... Or rather, I was sure they would be opposed to our relationship. Given how fussy they are about rank, I can already see them saying, "It would be beyond inappropriate for a servant girl to be courted by the son of a marquis—let alone* marry *him." I know they're right too. I* tried *to remember my place. Sometimes things just escalate beyond anyone's control, that's all.*

Thinking about my parents' reaction usually made me gloomy, but today it was more depressing than ever.

What if his parents are actually thinking, "A servant girl? Surely you jest!"

No, no... Judging by the way Sir Corydalis is smiling at me, it'll be fine. I'm sure it will.

When I introduced myself to the marquis and his wife, my heart was thumping wildly in my chest—and yet, they gave me a warm enough welcome to take the edge off my anxiety.

Perhaps predictably, Marquis Pulcherrima even said, “Well done, Corydalis! I’d been agonizing over what I’d do if you brought home a man, but I see you actually managed to nab yourself a woman!”

Oh, stop that! I’m really going to laugh! I’m sure this is going to haunt him for as long as he lives. Poor Corydalis... That Master of ours really is something else.

With that, we had successfully completed our mission to introduce me to the Pulcherrima family and get their blessing. Our next adversary would be my very own family.

The same day Sir Corydalis came by the Fisalis manor, I told my parents about our relationship.

“One of the master’s subordinates, Sir Corydalis, has begun courting me—and marriage is our end goal.”

“Whaaat?!” My father’s reaction was to be expected, but even my unflappable mother couldn’t hide her shock.

“That’s one big catch you reeled in,” said Father, almost incredulous.

“I can still hardly believe it myself! But it’s true.”

“His family is never going to approve,” my mother contended, heaving a sigh. *Look, I get the feeling...*

“Well, you see... We already went to see them...and not only did they accept our engagement—they welcomed me into the family with open arms.”

“Whaaat?!” they both cried out in unison. That marked the second time I’d heard that exact reaction.

“I realize it’s not our place to argue if the marquis has already given his blessing...but why on earth would they allow their son to marry a lowly servant girl?” my father wondered out loud, cocking his head to one side.

“They only cared that his wife was a woman, so—uh, wait, forget I said that!”

“Ria? What did you mean by that?” Mother asked pointedly, not one to let my slip of the tongue slide. Considering how intimidating she could be, there was no way I was going to be able to keep it a secret. I reluctantly told my parents the story of the “men-only” incident.

“Ha ha ha... Oh, Master...”

“What *does* that boy think he’s doing?”

My parents did their best to hold back their laughter, their shoulders shaking with the effort.

Oh dear... It would seem I’ve let his embarrassing secret spread that much further. I’m sorry, Sir Corydalis!

*

Rolling with the momentum he’d built up the other day, Sir Corydalis convinced my parents to give their blessing. Contrary to my expectations, Father was the one with more reservations about our relationship, but Sir Corydalis managed to break down his resistance without much difficulty.

“We’re officially engaged now,” my fiancé said, giving me a brilliant smile.

“Indeed we are.”

Of course, no matter how overjoyed he looked, in that moment I was certain that there was no one happier than me.

12. Corydalis's Concerns

The skies of Rohze had been filled with ominous clouds since morning.

"There might be a storm tonight," the vice captain said, looking up at the sky through the window and furrowing his brow.

Knowing this guy, I'll bet you anything the look on his face has something to do with his wife.

"If I'm not there for her during a thunderstorm, Vi might feel neglected!"

Called it.

As you might have inferred, that evening the vice captain and I were scheduled to be on the royal palace's night watch.

There was a band of thieves wreaking havoc in Rohze as of late, and we had been ordered to come up with a plan to take them down. Our department was officially known as "the Royal Guard," but our *actual* job was maintaining public order.

"I became a Royal Guard specifically so I *wouldn't* have to leave home..."

There he goes again. I opted to ignore the vice captain's grumblings.

It was going to be a tempestuous night. Oh, that was a reference to the weather, for the record—not the vice captain's attitude.

A light rain had already begun to patter against the windows.

I was worried about Stellaria myself, but considering she was back at the Fisalis manor, she was going to be perfectly safe unless things *really* went south. It would be no exaggeration to call that mansion as well-fortified as the royal palace itself.

*

"Based on the reports, we haven't been able to pin down the number of bandits."

“There’ve been reports that their numbers are in the double digits, but we’ve also heard word that there are only two or three of them.”

“It’s entirely possible that they adjust their numbers based on the size of the property they’re raiding that day.”

We were in the council room of the knights’ quarters. Captain Permam, Vice Captain Fisalis, a handful of our subordinates (almost all of them were former members of the Special Ops Division), and I were going over the damage reports while brainstorming countermeasures and plans to catch these crooks.

“Their targets have ranged from aristocrats to commonfolk.”

“Right, so they might bring more men along when they go after the mansions of nobles or wealthy men.”

“Exactly. I’ll bet they scale down when they raid smaller places, like shops or commoners’ houses.”

“Seems like it’s always been too dark to get a good look at their faces, but they’re a burly lot. Going by their voices, they’re all men.”

“Witnesses have claimed they had chiseled features. Aurantians, maybe?”

“My, could they be the remnants of the defeated army?”

“That’s a definite possibility.”

“Is it? Aurantians are so sneaky, I’d think nobody would be able to spot them in the dark.”

“Pfft!”

“There’s a chance they might be ex-soldiers or bandits who lost their way and ended up in Flür.”

We steadily narrowed down the list of possible culprits using the information we had.

I had no idea whether they were actually Aurantians or not, but it definitely sounded like they’d come from some other country, at least. As a matter of fact, there had been several reports of them speaking with a foreign accent.

“Looks like they tend to work in inclement weather.”

“And they steer clear of moonlit nights.”

Looking over our gathered data on the bandits’ criminal activities, it was easy to see that their raids were concentrated on stormy, moonless nights.

“Sounds like they’ll be making their move on a day just like today, then,” the vice captain posited, staring out the window with a frown.

While we’d been caught up in our meeting, more and more dark clouds had gathered in the sky, and before we knew it the light drizzle had turned into a downpour. It looked like the weather was only going to get worse from here on out too.

“Nothing hampers visibility like a heavy rain, so this would be the perfect time for those bandits to strike.”

“Plus, no matter how cautious you are, it’s easy to miss things on a night patrol—especially in a storm—so it’s a smart way to slip past our defenses.”

“Think they’ll attack tonight?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“In that case, let’s ask the captain of the watch to increase the number of knights he sends out on tonight’s patrol. Oh, I can go—it’d be quickest for me to take care of it myself.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

Just as one of his knights got up to go deliver the message, Captain Permam stopped him and offered to visit the Rohze police department himself. Nothing got a job done faster than letting a higher-up do the talking. This way, security around the city would be tightened up in no time.

“I doubt the bandits would target the royal palace, but you never know.”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“Exactly. Let’s heighten security around the royal palace until they’re caught.”

“For tonight, we just wait and see what happens.”

I sure hope *nothing happens.*

For whatever reason, I found myself gazing up at those threatening storm

clouds in the sky.

*

By sunset, the rain was coming down harder than ever, fat droplets pounding against the window of the knights' quarters. The wind was blowing violently as well, causing the trees in the garden to sway so hard they threatened to snap.

The overwhelming intensity of the gusts and rain had shrouded the world outside in a white mist.

"The visibility is terrible."

It was dark, it was pouring, and the wind was howling something fierce. This wasn't just a spot of bad weather—it was a raging tempest.

"If anything, this guarantees the bandits will be working overtime." The vice captain was likewise gazing out the window, a grim look on his face.

Immediately after our meeting, the number of guards stationed throughout the city had been bumped up, and those men had hastily set out on their patrol. Just making the rounds was going to be absolute hell in this weather. They were all decked out in rain gear, of course, but that wouldn't help them much in a storm like this one. I could already picture them coming back absolutely drenched.

Along with strengthening Rohze's security, more knights were put on guard duty around the royal palace. Even those who were off duty weren't exempt from the summons, and soon the corridors and most strategic spots of the palace were crawling with twice as many lookouts as usual.

So as you can imagine, the atmosphere was more hectic than ever.

Captain Permam had gone off to act as a personal guard to His Majesty, so the vice captain and I were holed up in the council room—where we could easily hand out orders—compiling the reports from our subordinates.

The storm outside was getting worse and worse, and the sound of the rain beating against the window was more disquieting than ever. The constant flashes of lightning made the trees in the garden stand out in an eerie silhouette. *I sure hope one of those lightning strikes doesn't start a fire... Not*

that it'd have a chance to spread in rain like this, I guess.

"Will your wife and servants be okay?"

This was the peerless Fisalis manor we were talking about, but I figured I'd better ask just to be certain—seeing as "the servants" also happened to include Stellaria.

"The mansion will be fine. Even *if* the worst were to happen, our servants train day in and day out for that eventuality." He did his best to answer calmly, but I noticed his face twitch just a smidge. Despite the words coming out of his mouth, he *was* worried. "It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Look at how terrible this storm is! Even with all those servants by her side, I'm sure Viola will be feeling lonely! Damn, if only I could run home this instant...!"

"You sure did give yourself away there..."

The vice captain pounded his fists against the desk with all his might. Apparently, he was more worried about his wife on an emotional level than a physical one.

*

Time slowly crept by. Meanwhile, the wind and rain didn't just refuse to let up—they continued to grow worse and worse.

"It'll be nice if all our worrying turns out to be for nothing."

"I wonder if Viola has gone to bed yet," I heard the vice captain mumbling to himself.

Looking over the same documents from earlier, I said, "Now's about when the bandits would usually jump into action. The *real* moment of the truth is at hand."

"Yeah...I know."

"If only we had some idea of their next target, it would make guarding against them so much easier."

“You said it. It’s frustrating how indiscriminate their attacks are.”

The districts they struck were all over the place, and the social classes of the homes they raided varied wildly too. Were those guys out to make our lives hard or what?

“Well, so far, we haven’t had any useful reports come in—”

I was just about to finish that thought with: “Want to take a break? I’m going to go make some tea.” It was in that moment, however, that there came the sound of a frantic knocking on the door.

“Excuse me!” one of our subordinates shouted, barging into the room.

“Did something happen?” the vice captain asked calmly.

“Yes, sir! The bandits have been spotted!” the knight eagerly reported.

“I see. Just as we predicted.”

“Yep. We *knew* they’d strike on a stormy evening.”

The vice captain and I exchanged glances.

“So, what’s the word?”

“The witness couldn’t determine their exact numbers due to the weather conditions, but it sounds like there’s quite a few of them on the prowl.”

“Good to know,” the vice captain commented with a nod. Come to think of it, we never *had* reached a conclusion on how many bandits there were in total.

“What are they up to?” I asked, prompting our subordinate to go on.

“Oh, right! They scattered the moment they realized they’d been spotted, but it seems they were headed in the direction of the Fisalis manor!”

“What did you say?!” Cercis and I cried out in unison.

For a fleeting moment, the vice captain went pale as a sheet. So did I, for that matter.

“You said they were headed for the mansion?”

“That’s right! We don’t know for sure whether that’s their final target or not, but they were at least moving towards it. The knight who sighted them is

chasing down the fugitives. And backup's on the way, of course."

"As if I would leave this up to my subordinates! It's *my* mansion—I'm going there myself!" the vice captain shouted, cutting in on the man's report.

I nearly echoed the sentiment, but something gave me a moment's pause. There were a million and one reasons I wanted to go with him, but we couldn't very well leave the council room without anyone around to call the shots.

Dammit! What should I do?!

Right as I was agonizing over my dilemma, there came another voice. "I'll stay behind. You two take our men with you and go after those thieves."

"Captain!"

The order had come from Captain Permam, who had made it back to the council room without either of us noticing him there.

"Yes, sir!" the vice captain and I shouted back, thanking him with a bow before we rushed out of the room.

The Bombshell Trio was already waiting for us just outside the door.

"Take this rain cloak. There's no time to waste, so put it on while you walk."

"We brought your horses around the front."

"Here, take this whip and these gloves too."

They had everything ready for us. Now *that's* what I call well-prepared.

Rushing toward the front entrance as fast as our legs could carry us, we swiftly donned the rain cloak and accessories the girls had given us.

The moment we stepped out from under the eaves, the rain pelted us hard enough to hurt. We each wordlessly mounted our horses, then waited for the signal to head out.

"Watch yourselves," the vice captain advised his men. "If you aren't careful, you're going to take a painful tumble."

"Yes, sir!" everyone shouted back, steeling themselves.

After he'd made sure that everyone else was ready, Cercis was the first to dig

his heels into his horse's side.

We galloped full speed ahead as soon as the order came. From here, we would be rushing through the streets of Rohze as fast as we could go. Unlike the city outskirts, the downtown area was full of all sorts of corners and hurdles, and the raging storm only made things harder to navigate. Considering what we were about to be sprinting through, this was going to take a lot of skill and concentration.

I pulled the hood of my coat down low in an effort to keep myself dry. That didn't stop my face from getting pelted with raindrops, but that was the least of my concerns at the moment!

Amid the violent winds, rain, and lightning, we galloped straight ahead, the vice captain leading the way.

Please, God, don't let anything happen to the Fisalis manor!

I prayed that *everyone* there would stay safe—not just the vice captain's wife, but Stellaria too.

While I spurred my horse onward, consumed by my thoughts, I soon spotted another horse heading toward us from the opposite direction.

"Everyone, stop! Halt!" came the vice captain's command, and the rest of us put on the emergency brakes.

The other man likewise came to a halt the moment he spotted us.

Is he part of the bandits' crew?

For a brief moment, tension ran through our ranks. I squinted, doing my best to make him out despite the awful visibility—until *he* called out to *us*.

"Master! There's been trouble at the mansion!" he shouted, hopping down from his horse and kneeling before the vice captain.

Whew, he's just a messenger from the Fisalis manor. ...Wait, that's no reason to relax! There's been "trouble at the mansion"? What happened?!

I wasn't the only one freaking out, naturally.

"What do you mean?" the vice captain demanded sharply.

At his master's command, the servant briefed him on the situation, nearly choking the words out. "A group of thieves broke into the manor not long ago! They've barricaded themselves inside, taking Madam Fisalis and the maids hostage!"

"What did you say?! Vi is being held hostage?!"

"My deepest apologies—they broke one of the bedroom windows and snuck in during the storm. The madam's safety is our top priority, so we've been watching their movements without putting up a fight."

"Still, I assume you lot haven't been standing back and twiddling your thumbs."

"Of course not. Rohtas is taking action behind the scenes as we speak."

"Understood. Let's hurry, Corydalis!"

"You don't need to tell *me* that!"

The vice captain kicked his horse into action once more. The rest of us kept pace close behind.

Our Mrs. Fisalis-loving subordinates felt the same way he did. So did I, of course, but there was something else that mattered to me even more.

If the madam was in danger, that meant Stellaria was in danger too!

Kicking our speed up a notch, we continued our mad dash through the streets of Rohze.

13. Stellaria's Battle

The driving rain pounded against the glass of the window; lightning streaked across the sky over and over, always accompanied by an eerie rumbling (or sometimes even a crash).

The clouds over Rohze had been threatening rain since morning, but the weather only got worse and worse as evening drew near—and by now, it was shaping up to be a full-blown storm.

"It's too bad Cercis is working tonight, of all nights. He hardly ever gets stuck on the watch, so why did it have to happen during a thunderstorm?" the madam grumbled as she gazed out the window, a flimsy robe pulled over her nightgown. "Now, don't get the wrong idea—I'm not some damsel who's afraid of a little thunder! But a storm like this just makes a girl feel lonely, you know?"

When all is said and done, she really does count on the master to be there for her.

Though she wasn't acting too differently from usual, she still managed to come off a tad bit anxious.

Mother was also looking outside as she went around closing the curtains. "This is quite the storm. I certainly hope this wind doesn't blow a tree branch right through one of these windows."

Every now and then a bolt of lightning would illuminate the area, but for the most part the garden was shrouded in a cloak of white mist due to the downpour. Visibility was simply terrible.

The trees I *could* see were swaying in the gale so hard I feared they might tip over. Just as Mother had said, there was a real danger that one of their branches might get blown away and break through the glass.

"Exactly," the madam agreed. "If one of the windows breaks, just think of all the rain that will come flooding in."

"The *rain* we can handle, but there's been some unsettling news making the

rounds. We don't need to make it any easier for some band of ruffians to get inside," said Mother, heaving a sigh as she closed another set of drapes.

She was likely referring to the band of thieves ransacking Rohze as of late. Known for indiscriminately breaking into the homes of anyone from rich nobles to the average commoner, they were a truly vile bunch.

"What ruffians?"

"A short while back, a band of thieves popped up out of nowhere and has been wreaking havoc in the capital ever since," Mother succinctly explained to the madam, who appeared to be hearing about this for the first time.

"Really?"

"Yes, ma'am. No matter how flawless the manor's defenses are, there's no telling what might happen in a storm like this. Though even in a worst-case scenario, I suppose we could always escape through the hidden passage."

"N-Now wait just a second there! *What* hidden passage?! This is the first I've heard about this!"

"We've yet to find ourselves in a true emergency, so we've always put off telling you until later, I suppose. Rest assured, if we *do* send you down the tunnels, we'll have Stellaria or one of the other maids accompany you."

"Whew, that's a relief! If I ended up lost down there, I'd be a goner for sure."

"Indeed. For tonight, I only ask that you sleep with a dagger hidden near your pillow. Think of it like a lucky charm." With that, Mother took the dagger we always kept in a bedside table drawer and snuck it under Madam Fisalis's pillow.

"S-Sure. I doubt I'll need to use it, anyway."

"Of course."

The madam was staring holes into her pillow. No doubt her primary concern was how comfortable it was going to be to sleep on.

Her gaze eventually shifted from the bed over to me. Not a second later, she asked, "Would you mind sleeping here with me tonight, Stellaria?"

Madam Fisalis always *was* the straightforward sort, but that request was crossing a line.

“Goodness! You know I can’t do that. I’ll be close at hand, so there’s nothing to be so anxious about.”

“Aww... Then you should *at least* set up a cot in my room.”

“We can sleep just fine without a bed, I assure you. Stellaria and I will be right here beside you, and tomorrow I’ll assign a few more girls to be your attendants. We won’t let you feel lonely,” said Mother, doing her best to mollify the madam.

“Okaaay...”

Reassured to know that there were plenty of maids around, the madam was finally ready to get into bed. She always had such a good head on her shoulders, but her youth really showed in moments like this. I was willing to bet that the master found this side of her quite charming.

“Well then, good night.”

The moment the madam was about to take off her robe so she could lie down, however...she was interrupted by the sound of the bedroom window being smashed to bits.

“Eek!”

“Madam!”

Rain and wind steadily rushed into the room through the broken window. It was as if the storm outside had swallowed up even her very own chambers.

Every single maid in the room rushed to huddle around the madam. It would be *our* job to protect her if something came hurtling in from outside.

“Whew! What is this, some lucky guy’s harem?”

“Man, that’s a duke’s manor for you! Even his maids are a bunch of hotties.”

It was then that a handful of burly men came climbing in through the broken window, making those crude remarks as they did. There were four of them in total.

“Why, you miscreants!” Mother shouted before blowing the alarm whistle she always carried on her person.

We maids formed a protective circle around the madam. Nobody was reaching for their concealed weapons just yet.

I swiftly retrieved the dagger from under the madam’s pillow and handed it over to her, whispering into her ear: “Hide this under your clothes.”

She gave a tiny nod, stowing it away under her nightgown. Now, if worse came to worst, she would be armed and able to defend herself.

Oh, won’t somebody please come help us?!

Unfortunately, I heard an alarm whistle sound from somewhere else within the manor. I could hear the sound of more glass shattering too. *Did the bandits break in through several different parts of the mansion?! What shall we do?!*

Courageous girl that she was, the madam leveled an imposing glare at the intruders with those big sapphire eyes of hers.

Is our only option to wait for help to arrive?

“Is that the lady of the house? Looks like we’ve found ourselves the perfect hostage.”

The men drew closer, grins plastered across their faces.

Should I put myself in danger to fight them off? I gripped the dagger under my clothes, bracing myself for the worst.



Fortunately, that was when my mother's sharp voice echoed through the room. "I should inform you that if you were to lay even a finger on our Madam, there are members of Flür's chivalric order who wouldn't take that lying down. Not just *any* knights either—their most elite squad would come for you."

"'Scuse me?"

"What are you babbling on about?"

The men briefly faltered before demanding an explanation.

"If you plan to flee with the madam as a hostage, the chivalric order will chase you to the ends of the earth—and the moment you're caught, you will never see the light of day again."

"Wha...?!"

"Hah! Some threat. Those good-for-nothing knights never managed to catch us before, so why should we be afraid of them *now*?"

"Until now, you've only had to deal with 'ordinary' knights going after you." The man had pulled himself together enough to threaten her right back, but Mother didn't so much as flinch. "The knights protecting our Madam are in an entirely different league. Once you get a taste of their abilities for yourself, it will be too late to regret it."

"Tch... Whatever! We're still gonna keep you guys hostage until we're done looking for loot in here!" The man gave an irritated click of his tongue.

Now they were clearly going to think twice before absconding with the madam or hurting her in any way. Mother's attempts at negotiation were a success.

"Tie them up," the leader spat bitterly.

"Sure thing."

All the men who had been hanging back crept toward us with lengths of rope in hand.

I slid my dagger back into its hiding place. It wouldn't do for them to find me out.

Never suspecting that we had concealed weapons, the men bound each and every one of us with the rope.

“Just you wait—I’ll slip out of this in no time!” the madam muttered under her breath. There was a fire in her eyes. *True—our madam could undo these amateur knots in two seconds flat!*

I was relieved to see that she seemed to be holding up just fine.

It was at that moment, however, that one of the manor’s knight-guards flung open the door and appeared on the scene. “Madam! Are you all right?!”

Does this count as good timing? Or bad?

“Oho, we’ve got ourselves a regular hero, don’t we! Listen up, buddy—we’ve taken custody of your precious duchess. We’ll give her back to you as soon as we’ve looted this mansion for all it’s worth. Until then, you’d better sit on your hands and wait.”

“Ugh...” Chagrined, the knight-guard chewed on his lip.

“Go round up all the servants in the mansion. The wind and rain are gonna be a pain if we stick around here, so find us a big, open space to shove everyone into. Did you hear me? Get moving!”

“...Understood.”

The knight exchanged glances with me and Mother before leaving the bedroom behind.

Perhaps you’re wondering exactly what that look implied. You see, it was a signal that he was on his way to tell Rohtas, Bellis, and Father about our current situation. Those three would then break off from the rest of the servants to deal with this emergency. By now, they were no doubt working behind the scenes to save us, with our most elite knight-guards in tow. Master Fisalis had surely been notified by this point as well...which meant word must have reached Sir Corydalis’s ears too.

I know they’ll come for us. Hang in there just a little bit longer, Madam!

After some time, another one of the bandits barged into the bedroom, accompanied by the same knight-guard from before. They ordered us to move

to the parlor, where they had apparently gathered up the rest of the servants.

We moved out, forming a protective circle with Madam Fisalis in the middle. While we walked, the madam worked steadily at loosening up her binds. *What a smart girl, making sure to do it where the enemy can't see.*

Every servant in the manor had indeed been herded into the parlor—well, *allegedly*. Rohtas, Bellis, Father, and a few knight-guards were conspicuously absent from the crowd, but the bandits had no way of knowing that.

"Is this everyone?"

"Yes, sir," replied a servant wearing Rohtas's jacket (in short, our decoy butler).

We were all gathered in one place now. I sidled as close to the madam as I could.

"Don't worry. It's just a matter of time now."

"I know. Rohtas and the rest of the guys will get us out of this mess *somehow*."

"Master Fisalis will come for us too, no doubt."

"Yeah. I believe in him."

I offered the madam a few words of encouragement in a voice too soft for anyone else to overhear.

Worry not—Master Fisalis will most certainly come for us! And Sir Corydalis will be right there with him, of course!

14. The Hostage Rescue Operation

The bandits had broken into the Fisalis manor under the cover of the storm, and now the vice captain's wife, Stellaria, and the rest of the duke's servants (excluding a few) had all been shut inside and taken hostage.

Picking up the pace, we sped towards the manor.

"Be safe, Vi!" I faintly heard the vice captain shout. We were all thinking the same thing.

But me? I was *also* thinking: *Stay safe, Stellaria!*

The road to the manor felt longer than it ever had before. Cutting through the sheets of rain, we galloped our way down the streets of Rohze.

*

We dismounted our horses just outside the Fisalis manor, then took cover to survey the situation. There was always the chance the bandits had posted a lookout, after all.

Straining our eyes against the gloom and rain, we managed to spot a figure near the gate.

Is he one of the thieves? If he is, we'll have to find another way inside the mansion.

Our subordinates seemed just as tense as I was, but it didn't take long for the vice captain to realize: "That's one of our knight-guards."

"So he's not one of the bandits?"

"Right," he replied, nodding. He then signaled the man standing outside the gate.

Once he noticed us there, the manor knight-guard came running up. From the looks of things, he'd been anticipating our arrival.

"Master Fisalis! We've been waiting for you!"

“Sorry it took us so long. Now tell me, what’s going on inside? What’s become of Viola and the servants?”

“The thieves gathered them up and trapped them in the parlor, sir.”

“What about Rohtas’s crew?”

“Rohtas, Bellis, and Cartham split off from the rest of the group, and they’re working with a handful of elite knights to apprehend the bandits outside the parlor.”

“Got it. Are all the thieves inside?”

“Yes, sir. There aren’t any left out here. We’ve secured the perimeter.”

“Understood. First things first, then—we have to sneak inside the mansion ourselves. The only question is *how*...”

The vice captain fell deep into thought. Well, if anyone knew the way around that house, it’d be him.

“Let’s try getting in from the kitchen,” he finally said. “We don’t keep many valuables in there, so I doubt the bandits will be watching it too closely.”

“Good idea.”

“Leave your horses with our knight-guards. It’s show time.”

“Yes, sir!” everyone shouted back at once.

Another knight-guard had shown up not long after our arrival, so we left our horses to him and then migrated toward the kitchen entrance, keeping our eyes peeled along the way.

Just as the vice captain had theorized, the kitchen wasn’t showing many signs of life. Nevertheless, it was with the utmost caution and not the slightest peep that we snuck inside.

“I never thought I’d see the day when I had to secretly infiltrate my own mansion,” Cercis grumbled to himself. I couldn’t really argue with that sentiment.

Once he’d made sure all our men were inside, the vice captain said, “I’m going to go check on the situation. Considering not even the Royal Guard’s vault has a

copy of our mansion's floor plan, I doubt the lot of you would know your way around."

He asked me to take care of things in our current location, then crouched down and crept out of the kitchen.

"He's got that right!" one of our subordinates whined. "The Fisalis manor is the only floor plan we're missing. Nobody'll leak the information to us either."

Wait, does that mean there's a copy of my *family manor's floor plan in there?! Are you kidding me?!*

...But let's put that aside for now.

"Once the vice captain gets back, it's time to take stock of the situation and have ourselves a team meeting. Don't forget that the lives of Mrs. Fisalis and the rest of the hostages are our number one priority, and try not to disrupt whatever the duke's servants are doing."

"Yes, sir!"

We shut our mouths once more, concentrating our full attention on our surroundings (or the surrounding *sounds*, to be more precise).

It's quiet. Too *quiet.*

All we could hear was the howl of the wind and rain outside.

"And here I thought the thieves would be making more noise than this, if they're rooting around for valuables."

"Right? It's *too* quiet."

Of course, that was just all the more reason for us to hide the sound of our own breathing as we waited for the vice captain to return.

And yet, in stark contrast to the way he'd left, Cercis ended up brazenly strutting back into the room. "All the bandits have been apprehended, except for the ones in the parlor."

"Huh? By who?!"

"Our servants."

"No way!"

Damn! Those Fisalis servants are a force to be reckoned with!

While the rest of us were still reeling from the shock, the vice captain explained, “My butler, gardener, and head chef broke off from the rest of the group to deal with the intruders.”

“Those are some mighty fine manservants you’ve got!”

I already knew they were seasoned veterans, but I didn’t think their skill set had that *kind of range! Not to mention the head chef in question is Stellaria’s dad... I wouldn’t have guessed he was such a powerhouse from my first impression.*

“The captured bandits have been rounded up in the entryway, where our knight-guards are standing watch over them. The plan is to hand them over to the backup forces once they get here. Now then, it’s time for *us* to go rescue the hostages in the parlor—let’s give it our all!”

“Yes, sir!”

Just as we were about to begin a strategy meeting, the manor’s butler caught up to us. He had Cartham, a few knight-guards, and a brawny manservant with him.

“Excuse me, Master Fisalis. Allow me to report what we’ve learned thus far.”

“Go ahead.”

“The bandits number ten in total. We’ve managed to catch the six of them who were off looting the mansion. All that’s left are the four men in the parlor.”

“Is Viola okay? What about everyone else?”

“The maids have been protecting Madam Fisalis, so no harm has come to her person. None of the girls have been hurt either; for the moment, they’re all huddled in a corner of the parlor.”

“We need to get them to safety ASAP.”

“Indeed. There’s no time to drag our feet.”

“What should we do...?” After listening to his butler’s report, the vice captain fell deep into thought, staring at a fixed point in space.

No matter what strategy he came up with, we'd just have to make it happen. In that moment, I was confident I could pull off even the toughest of missions. There was nothing I wanted more than to put an end to this mess as quickly as possible.

After a while spent quietly considering his options, the vice captain put on his fierce work mode face, only to begin briskly handing out orders. "All right. Rohtas and Cartham, I want you two to wait in the secret passage next to the parlor. Bellis and the knight-guards, meanwhile, should remain on standby just outside the door to the dining room. The second anything happens with the hostages, go ahead and rush to their aid. Lastly, the Royal Guard should go around to the garden and station themselves outside the parlor. I'd like to get the number of bandits in the room down to two, so let's see what we can do to lure a pair of them away."

"Do you have a plan for that?"

"Our best bet is to lead them into the dining room. As big as it is, there's plenty of places to hide in there. Bellis, I'll need you to make some noise to draw the enemy's attention. As soon as someone shows up to check on what happened, apprehend him."

"Yes, sir." The gardener nodded in response to his master's command.

Wait? This guy is *a gardener, right? How is he supposed to pull off a mission like that?*

"Will the servants and knight-guards be able to handle that alone?" I asked, feeling a little concerned all of a sudden. *He's a gardener, not a trained soldier! Though considering the muscles he's got on him, maybe he* will *be just fine.*

"I assure you he'll manage, sir."

"There's nothing for you to worry about."

Both the butler and Bellis himself smirked in my direction. *I-I see...*

"After you've caught one of them, I'm sure the bandits left in the parlor will get impatient and start wondering why he hasn't come back. When they send out a second scout, be sure to apprehend that one too."

“Understood,” said Bellis, nodding once more.

“Once there’s only two thieves left, it’s time for the Royal Guards in the garden, the team in the dining room, and the team in the secret passage to dive into the parlor all at once and secure the hostages.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Understood, Master Fisalis!”

“While the rest of you have the bandits distracted, Corydalis and I will bust into the parlor through the main door and take the enemy from behind.”

“Got it.”

Everyone in the group took turns acknowledging the vice captain’s orders.

“This whistle will be the signal. When I blow it, that’s your cue to rush in. Everyone, to your positions!”

“Yes, sir!”

The vice captain kept the strategy meeting brief, and everyone scattered to their respective posts.

Seriously, though, doesn’t anyone find it strange that these servants can operate on the same level as a bunch of trained knights?!

*

“I hope this works out.”

“There’s a reason we’re feeling the situation out first.”

“True.”

Everyone else was in position, but seeing as Cercis’s and my part didn’t come until the very end, the two of us were currently keeping an eye on how things unfolded in the dining room. That way if our plan hit a snag, we’d be able to switch tactics on the spot.

Bellis let the silver tray he was holding clatter to the floor.

There came a resounding *crash!* It had to be a pretty loud noise—otherwise it would’ve been drowned out by the storm outside.

How was the enemy going to react? I swallowed hard and watched to see what happened.

Not too much later, someone opened the door from the parlor to the dining room. The backlighting made it hard to distinguish his features, but whoever it was, he was a burly fellow. After casting one brief glance around the room, he stepped out from the doorway.

“Not the cautious sort, is he?”

“Well, he thinks his buddies are the only ones outside the parlor right now.”

While we looked on and made as little noise as possible, the man shut the door behind him and strode into the dimly lit dining room.

“Oh, must’ve been the sound of this tray falling over.”

Just as he crouched down to pick it up, Bellis silently crept up behind him and delivered a chop to the back of his neck.

And that’s one down! Gotta say, the Fisalis manor has got one hell of a gardener!

No wonder everyone had told me not to worry. I had to give him some serious props.

The knight-guards, who had been hanging back while this played out, stepped in to catch the man as he crumbled to the ground, only to wind a length of rope around his body.

“Looks like step one was a success.”

“Now to see how long the bandits wait. Here’s hoping they don’t draw this out.”

While we watched the knights carry the man off to join the rest of his captured comrades, we started thinking about the next part of the plan.

Ugh, I hate this! Knowing Stellaria is right behind this door, all I want is to run to her rescue this second!

“Dammit! If only they didn’t have hostages, I could just rush in and put an end to this in an instant! Forgive me, Viola!”

Oh, hey, the guy next to me is thinking the same thing.

*

"Cripes, he'd better not be off pocketing stuff for himself," came a voice just as the door to the parlor opened up for a second time.

A silent tension fell over us once more. The second scout had shown up surprisingly quickly.

Every now and then, a flash of lightning would illuminate the dining room. At a cursory glance, the place looked totally empty and deathly silent.

"Huh? What happened to the rest of the guys?"

The inside of the mansion was *so* quiet that the thief just cocked his head in confusion. Unfortunately for him, all those buddies of his were actually in our custody now.

When he noticed the silver tray still sitting on the floor, he muttered, "Oh, is this what fell?"

The moment he crouched down and reached to pick it up, Bellis landed yet another chop to the neck. Just like last time, the man instantly crumpled to the ground without so much as a scream.

Okay, now *I have to say it: sorry for selling you short, man.*

Thief number two was tied up and carried away just like the guy before him.

With that, we'd succeeded in getting the number of bandits in the parlor down to two—all according to the vice captain's plan.

*

After that, we asked Bellis and the knight-guards to wait in the dining room, while Cercis and I positioned ourselves by the door adjacent to the entryway.

"If Rohtas and Cartham haven't jumped in action, that's a good sign that the hostages in the parlor are doing all right."

"Where are they watching from, by the way?"

"From a hidden passageway. There's a peephole that lets them see inside the parlor."

“Gotcha.”

That sort of thing wasn’t exactly uncommon. Even my parents’ manor had stuff like that.

Since *we* didn’t have a peephole to look through, we took the old-fashioned approach and pressed our ears to the door to hear what was going on inside.

“Those two *still* ain’t back yet? The other guys need to get their asses in gear too. If we don’t make our getaway soon, we’re gonna get caught.”

“Everyone sure is taking their sweet time today. You think it’s ’cause this mansion is so damn big?”

“If the law catches up to us, we’d better take these hostages and run.”

“Good thinking.”

The two men inside were starting to get frustrated, seeing as none of their buddies had made it back yet. We had to hurry this up. The last thing we wanted was for them to lay a hand on any of the hostages.

“It’s time we put an end to this,” I murmured.

“Agreed,” said the vice captain with a slight nod of his head.

He put his whistle to his lips...

Tweeeeee!

And he blew a long, shrill blast.

*

Crash! Thud! There came a cacophony of sound from within the parlor.

Yikes... All the glass in the parlor is super high-end. If it breaks, I can only imagine how much money that’s gonna eat up... Uh, not that it really matters at the moment!

More pressingly, I could hear voices coming from inside.

“Dammit!”

“Calm down! There’s nothing to worry about—we’ve still got the rest of our team!”

Sorry to break it to you, but we've already detained every single one of your little friends!

"Is that our cue?"

"Let's go."

The vice captain and I exchanged glances, then flung open the door to the parlor.

The moment we burst into the room, we were greeted by the sight of Mrs. Fisalis; her maids, who had formed a ring around her; Cartham and the butler, who were poised to protect *them*; and our own subordinates.

And finally, there were the two bandits, their backs to the door—and us—and their attention focused on everyone else.

Each of the thieves was armed with a dagger.

"What do you think you're doing in *my* house?!"

"Sorry, but this is the end of the line for you!"

The vice captain and I drew our treasured swords, only to press the very tips of our blades against their unguarded napes.

"Eep!" came the bandits' strangled cries.

From just past the men, there came two familiar voices.

"Cercis!"

"Cory!"

It was the madam and Stellaria.

"Sorry it took us so long, Vi."

"I had everyone else to look out for me, so I'm totally fine!"

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ria."

"It's quite all right. I knew you would come for us."

We called out to our girls from over the bandits' shoulders. Stellaria was standing right at the center of a protective ring of knights and maids, hugging Mrs. Fisalis close to shield her. Knowing Stellaria, if the madam was in any

danger, she would have protected her at the cost of her own life. Not that I was ever going to let it come to that, of course.

"Just because you're okay doesn't mean we're letting these guys off the hook," said the vice captain and I in perfect unison. *Wow, now that's a coincidence for you.*

"What should we do? Let them suffer for a while?"

"No. Better to deal with this quickly. We can save that part for later."

"I hear you loud and clear!"

First thing was first—we had to free Stellaria and the rest of the hostages.

"Dahlia, cover Vi's eyes and ears for me," the vice captain requested of his head maid.

"Yes, sir."

Maybe he didn't want his wife to see us really cutting loose. (Was he planning to get that violent?!)

"Oh, I'll be fine. Have at it."

And yet, Mrs. Fisalis rejected the consideration. It seemed she had every intention of watching the carnage unfold.

"And you, Ria?" I checked. Better safe than sorry.

Her response was simply, "Don't mind me."

I'm not surprised. She's not the type to faint just from witnessing a little scuffle.

"No messing around. Let's finish this in one shot."

"Okie-dokie."

"All right, Corydalis, it's a race to see who can strike down one of these curs first."

"Oho, now you're getting me fired up!"

No sooner had I said that than we both sprang back into action.

The vice captain used his sword to disarm one of the bandits, immediately

following this up by sweeping his feet out from under him. Unable to take the hit, the man toppled onto his back, and Cercis finished him off with an elbow drop straight to the solar plexus.

Meanwhile, I got right up close to my opponent—keeping a low center of gravity as I did—and gave his arm a hard twist from behind. I have to assume he couldn't withstand the pain, seeing as I was able to take his dagger without much trouble.

The two thieves were laid out by our feet in the blink of an eye.

"Hmm, I'd say that was a tie."

"Agreed, Madam."

Such was Mrs. Fisalis's and Stellaria's verdict. Our match had ended in a draw, it seemed.

*

"I was faster!"

"Nuh-uh! I was!"

"There, there, boys, I'm sure you were both very impressive." Chamomile made a half-assed attempt at mediation as she went about tying up the bandits.

In the end, the fight had been over almost as soon as it had started, and every last one of the bandits had been dragged away by our knights. The parlor looked like a disaster scene after that grand entrance of ours, so the servants were busy cleaning up our mess.

Even the raging storm outside had subsided before we knew it.

"Cercis! Were you hurt?! I get the feeling it was over before they even got the chance, but still!"

Now that she was finally free, Mrs. Fisalis rushed over to her husband's side.

"Vi! What about you? Are *you* all right? I'm sorry you had to go through all that. I'm just glad I made it in time to get you out of trouble."

"I knew you would come for us. After all, you're my very own special knight. I got to see a very cool side of you today—why, I nearly fell in love all over

again!”

“I’m happy to hear that. Driving my horse through the pouring rain to get here was more than worth it.”

Is it just me, or does Mrs. Fisalis seem like a different person? Was she always the type to fawn over the vice captain like that? Well, maybe that speaks to just how scared she was.

Seeing as my boss and his wife had started flirting right in front of my face, I opted to look the other way.

There was something else that demanded my attention, anyway.

“Ria! Are you all right?!”

“Yes! Thank you for coming to save us. Oh, if only the storm hadn’t gotten so terrible, none of this would have happened...”

“Thank you for rushing here with Master Fisalis, Sir Corydalis,” said Dahlia, bowing her head. “It’s all thanks to you that everyone in the manor made it out all right.”

“We were just lucky that we’d strengthened surveillance around the city, and that we received word from the manor pretty quickly. Though I have to say, when I heard that Ria had been taken hostage, I was nearly scared to death.”

“Really? I was confident you would show up to save me, so I never worried for a second.”

“Of course I’ll always drop everything to come save you when you’re in trouble! I think it’s about time we took our leave, though. You must be tired too, Ria. Go get a good night’s sleep.”

It was pretty late by this point, and once we made it back to the headquarters, we’d have to write up a report to present to Captain Permam and the higher-ups. Just as I was thinking about all that, however, I overheard a certain conversation.

“Oh no! You two are all soaked!”

“Hm? Oh, yes—we had to rush home, after all. I wore a raincoat, but with how hard the rain was coming down, it didn’t keep me dry.”

“We need to hurry up and get you a change of clothes! No...we need to get you warmed up, or else you’re going to catch a cold!”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t give me that! Rosa, go draw a bath. Cercis, you and Corydalis need to get in there together this instant!”

“Huh? Why *together*?”

“You’ll both get warm faster that way!”

“I’d rather get in with *you*, not him!”

Excuse me, Mrs. Fisalis! Why, pray tell, are you sending me into the bath with the vice captain?!

“Uh, you know what, I’m good—”

I attempted to voice a protest, but the madam cut me off. “Oh, looks like it’s ready. Well, off you go—and take all the time you need! I’ll get you both a change of clothes.”

In one ear and right out the other.

She dragged me and the vice captain all the way to her chambers, only to shove us right into the bathroom.

“Seriously...?”

Help, I was just an innocent bystander!

*

“Can someone please explain what’s going on?”

“That’s my line.”

How come I’m not in the bath with my cute fiancée*, but with some gross (okay, well, he* is *pretty handsome) guy?*

“Hey, Vice Captain...? Wouldn’t you say your wife is a bit of an airhead?”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I’m well aware. But I still love everything about her.”

“Whatever you say.”

15. Stellaria's Relief

The clock was ticking, but we just had to do what we could.

First thing was first—Madam Fisalis and I, her personal attendant, undid the ropes binding our hands. Of course, we were sure to drape the loose cords back over our wrists to fool our captors.

Once we were done wriggling free, the rest of the maids followed suit. Slowly but surely, everyone's bonds came undone.

Now the only thing left to do was wait.

Mother kept casting glances toward the parlor's peephole. Beyond it was a secret passageway from which one could keep an eye on the room. It was harder to spot from the parlor side, but if you looked closely, there was indeed a tiny hole visible in the wall.

If anything were to happen outside, someone would likely give us a signal from that secret passage. Never one to miss a detail, Mother continued flicking her gaze ever so casually in that direction. She was being subtle enough about it that the only ones liable to catch on to what she was doing were us servants.

After some time had passed, my mother finally mouthed the signal: *They're here.*

I gave her a small nod of acknowledgment, then spread the news to the girls around us one by one.

Well then, we'd better prepare ourselves to stand and fight at any moment!

There *had* been four men in the parlor, but two of them had left to see what was going on outside and never returned.

"Those two *still* ain't back yet? The other guys need to get their asses in gear too. If we don't make our getaway soon, we're gonna get caught."

"Everyone sure is taking their sweet time today. You think it's 'cause this mansion is so damn big?"

“If the law catches up to us, we’d better take these hostages and run.”

“Good thinking.”

The two men left in the parlor were getting more and more frustrated with each passing moment. Evidently, they’d already forgotten Mother’s warning.

All of this wasn’t looking good for us—it wasn’t just the thieves who were starting to feel nervous.

Tweeeeee!

And that was when there came the sudden blare of an alarm whistle. Right on cue, three different groups burst into the room all at once: from the still-curtained window facing the garden, a handful of knights dressed in the uniform of the Royal Guard; from the door leading to the dining room, Bellis and another one of the manor’s knight-guards who had gone his own way earlier; and from the door to the secret passage, Rohtas and Father.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Madam Fisalis!”

“I hope that didn’t give you too much of a scare, *Madame*!”

“Rohtas! Cartham!”

Our team of hostages promptly sprang into action. Taking our concealed weapons in hand, we rose to our feet and formed a circle around the madam.

As the last line of defense between Madam Fisalis and the bandits, I kept her wrapped firmly in my arms.

“See?” I said to her. “We knew help would come!”

“I never doubted it for a second!”

A smile overtook the madam’s face. The true heroes of the hour still had yet to arrive, however.

“Dammit!”

“Calm down! There’s nothing to worry about—we’ve still got the rest of our team!”

The men brandished their daggers in a panic. How foolish—by this point, the game was as good as won. They certainly didn’t know when to quit.

Then, right as we and the Royal Guard were squaring off against the bandits...

“What do you think you’re doing in *my* house?!”

“Sorry, but this is the end of the line for you!”

All of a sudden, Sir Corydalis and Master Fisalis were standing right behind the two thieves, the tips of their blades pressed to the backs of the villains’ necks.

The bandits’ eyes went wide, each of them letting out a wordless squeak of terror.

“Cercis!”

“Cory!”

When we instinctively called out their names, our sweethearts responded by shooting reassuring smiles in our direction.

“Sorry it took us so long, Vi.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ria.”

I knew they would come for us!

They told me and the madam to close our eyes and ears, but we weren’t about to take that particular piece of advice! I wanted to bear witness to Sir Corydalis’s heroics myself. The same seemed to go for Madam Fisalis—and once it was all over and done with, she even gushed, “That was insanely cool, you guys! What a feast for the eyes!”

In any case, the two knights crushed the competition. They didn’t give the enemy so much as a moment to strike back. In the blink of an eye, both thieves were laid out before their feet.

Back when I was working in the royal palace, I’d caught glimpses of Sir Corydalis practicing his swordsmanship or hand-to-hand combat on numerous occasions, but there was nothing quite like having a front row seat to the action. Why, his technique was stunning enough to make me weak at the knees.

“Ria! Are you all right?!” Upon rushing over to my side, the first thing Sir Corydalis did was start fussing over me.

“Yes! Thank you for coming to save us. Oh, if only the storm hadn’t gotten so

terrible, none of this would have happened...”

After the initial rush of relief I’d felt the moment help had arrived on the scene, an aimless sense of frustration had welled up within me. I bit down hard on my lip.

“Thank you for rushing here with Master Fisalis, Sir Corydalis. It’s all thanks to you that everyone in the manor made it out all right,” said Mother from beside me, dipping her head in a bow.

“We were just lucky that we’d strengthened surveillance around the city, and that we received word from the manor pretty quickly. Though I have to say, when I heard that Ria had been taken hostage, I was nearly scared to death.” Sir Corydalis brushed his hand against my cheek, a grateful smile on his face.

Looking at him up close, I could see that his hair and his uniform were both sopping wet. *To think he weathered this awful storm just to come to my rescue! Goodness, and here I thought I couldn’t fall for him any harder.*

“Really? I was confident you would show up to save me, so I never worried for a second.”

“Of course I’ll always drop everything to come save you when you’re in trouble! I think it’s about time we took our leave, though. You must be tired too, Ria. Go get a good night’s sleep.”

Before we knew it, it was well past midnight. The storm had died down at some point during the excitement; it was now little more than a light drizzle.

Seeing as he just braved a storm and fought off a pair of thieves, Sir Corydalis must be feeling exhausted himself. I’d better let him go so he can—

“Oh no! You two are all soaked!”

“Hm? Oh, yes—we had to rush home, after all. I wore a raincoat, but with how hard the rain was coming down, it didn’t keep me dry.”

“We need to hurry up and get you a change of clothes! No...we need to get you warmed up, or else you’re going to catch a cold!”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t give me that! Rosa, go draw a bath. Cercis, you and Corydalis need to

get in there together this instant!”

“Huh? Why *together*?”

“You’ll both get warm faster that way!”

“I’d rather get in with *you*, not him!”

What had interrupted my train of thought was a curious exchange between Madam and Master Fisalis.

My fiancé and I exchanged knowing glances.

“Uh, you know what, I’m good—”

“Oh, looks like it’s ready. Well, off you go—and take all the time you need! I’ll get you both a change of clothes.”

Though Sir Corydalis attempted to put his foot down, a strained smile on his face, that headstrong madam of mine completely ignored his protests, going so far as to drag the pair off to her chambers herself!

“Seriously...?” came the men’s disgruntled chorus.

*

“Oh, what was I thinking?!”

Not long after she had thrown Master Fisalis and Sir Corydalis into the bath, the madam suddenly clamped a hand over her mouth in horror.

“What’s the matter?”

“Er, well...I shoved them into the same bathtub without giving it too much thought, but looking back on it, I should have had Corydalis bathe in a different room, huh?”

“Oh...”

You just *realized, Madam?!*

“That tub can fit two people for sure, but I bet it’ll feel a little cramped.”

And that’s *the part that concerns you?!*

16. Behind the Scenes with Rohtas

It had been overcast since morning.

I—Rohtas, butler of the Fisalis manor—was standing in the servants' dining room, currently in the midst of a meeting with Cartham to discuss the purchase of ingredients.

"Looks like a storm is on the way," the head chef remarked, staring out the window.

"Quite," I replied, likewise gazing up at the sky through the glass.

"And of course this *has* to be the one day the master won't be coming home."

"Yes. Let's hope the madam isn't left feeling too lonely."

"My thoughts exactly."

I glanced up at the sky once more. If a thunderstorm was all we had to worry about, that would be one thing, but the recent news regarding a band of thieves troubling Rohze was no less ominous than the weather. Notorious for carrying out their crimes on stormy evenings or moonless nights, the bandits had been running unchecked throughout the capital.

Seeing as Master Fisalis was known throughout Flür as a man of means, his manor was liable to be targeted any day now.

"We'd better review the emergency protocol while we can."

"Emergency protocol?" Cartham repeated, overhearing my mutterings. "Oh, let me guess—you're worried about those bandits everyone's been talking about, *non*?"

"Precisely."

"From what I hear, they're a slippery bunch. Even the chivalric order has been struggling to track them down."

"It couldn't hurt to prepare ourselves for the worst-case scenario, wouldn't

you say?”

“I agree with you completely.”

“I’ll call upon Bellis and the captain of the knights so we can all go over the emergency procedure. I’d like you to sit in as well, Cartham.”

“Yes, sir.”

We were always prepared for the worst, but nevertheless—it was important to ensure that everyone was on the same page every now and then. An ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure, after all.

*

Soon afterward, I summoned Bellis and the captain to my office, and together we consolidated our emergency response plan.

If Master Fisalis was away from the manor, contacting him would be our first priority. After that, we would get the madam to a secure location. Depending on the situation, we might even guide her toward the hidden passageway. In the event that the entire staff was incapacitated for whatever reason, I, Cartham, Bellis, the captain, and a few of the most elite members of our secret service and knight-guard unit would break off from the larger group.

We went into greater specifics than that, of course, but that was the overall gist of the protocol.

“The hope is that we won’t have to worry about any of this, but in these troubled times, we must brace ourselves for the worst.”

“Yes, sir!” all three men replied.

Later that day, I would be truly thankful that I had held that meeting.

*

The weather grew worse and worse as the day dragged on, and by sunset those ominous clouds had given way to a raging tempest. The windows were a more immediate concern than any bandits. What a disaster it would be if those turbulent winds were to send a tree branch flying straight through the glass window panes!

Crash! Almost on cue, I heard the sound of a window shattering, followed by the deafening screech of a whistle cutting through the darkness.

It was the alarm whistle—one we would blow to notify the rest of the manor in the event of an emergency. Custom-built to carry its sound over a large distance, its trill could be heard just about anywhere on the manor grounds, inside or out.

Everyone, to your positions at once!

I heard another whistle sound from upstairs. *Not the bedroom, I hope. The source of the sound on this floor... might be the banquet hall, if I had to guess.*

With how poor visibility is due to the violent winds and rain, some ruffians must have used that to their advantage and slipped past the watchful eyes of our guards!

Acting almost on instinct, I extinguished the light of a nearby candlestick, made a grab for the decorative sword hanging on the wall, and ducked behind a pillar to survey the situation.

My speculation about the windows of the banquet hall appeared to be correct; a group of ill-bred hooligans soon kicked open the door to the room and stomped their way down the corridor.

That's one, two...six of them in total, it seems. The rumored band of thieves had more members. Wait, no... I heard glass shatter upstairs as well, so it would follow that the rest of them came in from there. Figuring out exactly how many men they have with them would be an ideal place to start.

From the look of it, their plan was to split up and ransack the mansion in pairs. The men spread out, taking off in different directions.

It was then that the knights who had been standing guard outside burst into the manor—perhaps because they had only just now confirmed the breakin.

Seeing as I'd happened to stumble upon the captain of the guard, I dragged him into the shadow of the pillar to find out what was going on. "A rundown of the current situation, if you would."

"Yes, sir! A gang of thieves broke into the manor under the cover of the

storm," the captain explained, keeping his voice down. "We believe they've forced their way in through the banquet hall—and most likely, the second floor bedroom too."

"The bedroom? That's not good."

"No, it's not."

"First things first—we need to get word out to Master Fisalis."

"Certainly. I'll go fetch us a messenger."

"In the meantime, I'll go ahead and write up a note. While I'm taking care of that, summon a handful of knight-guards to the secret chamber."

"Yes, sir."

With a quick glance around the area, the captain slipped off into the darkness, keeping his footsteps light. As soon as he had vanished from sight, I used the hidden door to access the secret chamber, where I would await the arrival of Cartham and the knights.

There, I jotted down my message for Master Fisalis. It wasn't long before the messenger showed up; the very moment I handed the note to him, he turned on his heels and hurried off towards the royal palace. *I beg of you, get the word out to our Master post-haste!*

I watched the messenger go with a silent prayer—but once he was gone, there wasn't a second to lose. We needed to remove these intruders from our manor as soon as we could.

Almost as soon as the message-bearer had left, a knight who had gone to check on the state of the bedroom returned. "Madam Fisalis and her maids have been taken hostage. There are four bandits in her chambers, and they've ordered the servants of the manor to assemble themselves in a larger space," came his report.

"Four thieves in the bedroom, hm? In that case, there must be at least ten bandits in total. Very well. Go ahead and round up all the servants in the parlor—with the exception of Cartham, Bellis, the captain of the guard, and a handful of our best knights and secret service members in accordance with our set

procedure. Have someone else play the part of the butler—any manservant will do. Hide Mimosa and Daisy here in the secret chamber. I'll handle the men ransacking the mansion, so I'm entrusting Madam Fisalis to you." I stressed the importance of the task at hand, giving the knight my jacket as I did.

There was no time to have second thoughts. Sticking to the predetermined protocol, I began handing out orders.

"Yes, sir."

He took the jacket off my hands, then went back out again.

This *was* the worst-case scenario. To think Madam Fisalis had been taken hostage!

Seeing as she had Dahlia, Stellaria, and even more attendants than usual by her side, I was confident she would be all right—but that didn't mean we had any time to waste in coming to her rescue.

*

"Cartham, Bellis, and the secret service, reporting for duty!"

"The captain and his knights, reporting for duty!"

Shortly after the knight had left, Cartham and Bellis arrived on the scene—just as punctually as I'd expect of them. With this, we were finally ready to leap into action.

"Madam Fisalis and the maids were relocated to the parlor."

"Mimosa and Daisy are both safe inside the secret chamber. With how rough the storm has gotten, even if Daisy were to start crying, I doubt anyone would be able to hear her."

"...Thank you," said Bellis in response to the knight's report.

The last thing any of us wanted was for an infant to get mixed up in this mess. I could hardly imagine anything more heartbreaking.

"According to a knight who scoured the perimeter, there don't seem to be any bandits left outside the manor."

"Understood. That confirms that there's ten of them in all, then... As much as

I like the thought of apprehending every single one of them before Master Fisalis makes it back, considering the hostages, I believe that would prove difficult. First, we ought to focus our efforts on clearing away the thieves outside the parlor."

"Quick and careful is the way to go here," said Cartham, a grave look on his face. He had Dahlia and Stellaria to worry about, after all.

"That goes without saying. Be sure to stay on your toes."

"Of course."

There was no need for more discussion at this point. Bellis took the secret service with him, while Cartham, the captain of the guard, and I each brought along a handful of knights. We went our separate ways, determined to deal with these thieves.

"Take care, everyone."

"Yes, sir!"

And with that, we were silently on the move. *We'll make those bandits rue the day they broke into the Fisalis manor!*

*

As far as I was aware, no one outside the Fisalis manor had access to its floor plan. That blueprint was stored in a safe in the basement, where there was always someone standing guard. Anyone who tried to make off with it would be arrested on the spot, so I had to assume there was nothing to worry about in that regard.

Seeing as most valuables—jewelry in particular—were generally kept in the closet belonging to the lady of the house, I figured that was where they would look first. Since the madam had been there when they had entered, the thieves already knew which room was her personal chambers.

With that in mind, we rushed toward the bedroom, only to find that my prediction had been right on the money. The ruffians were busy turning the place upside down.

"Shh! They're here," I whispered.

Hiding ourselves behind the door, we took a peek at what was going on inside.

“Check out all these pretty dresses and jewelry!”

“Finders keepers!”

“Are we gonna be able to fit all this stuff in our bags?”

“Pack ’em up as tight as you can! Hey, why don’t I go call the rest of the guys over to help us out?”

“Good idea!”

From the sound of it, they were rooting around in the closet. We could hear their cries of excitement coming from inside.

“We strike the moment he walks out of there,” I instructed the knights in hushed tones, and they communicated their consent with a wordless nod.

One half of the pair stepped out of the closet, and I could sense him heading in our direction. We held our breath and waited for the right moment to make our move.

Step by step, he drew closer and closer to the door...

Now! I signaled the knights with my eyes. Then, without a moment’s delay, I slammed the hilt of my sword into the man’s stomach. His eyes popped open in surprise at the unexpected blow, and he promptly crumpled on the spot without so much as a sound.

Well, that *was easy.*

I oversaw the knights tying up the unconscious man, then crept ever closer to the closet. Pressing my back against its door so as not to make any noise, I listened in on the situation inside.

“Okay, my bag’s just about full. Heeey, you done out there?” called the other thief, who clearly hoped to leave this place with more dresses and accessories than even his greedy arms could carry. “What, not back yet? He’s sure taking his sweet time. Oh well, guess I’ll wrap some of this stuff up in a sheet and carry it outta here myself.”

Under the impression that his collaborator was still busy outside, the man stepped out from the closet. From my hiding place behind the door, I brought the hilt of my sword down on the base of his neck. It was a clean strike, and the bandit collapsed in a breathless heap.

Whew. That takes care of this room.

“Tie him up too. Remain here until further instruction.”

“Yes, sir!”

“I’ll go check on the other rooms.”

Leaving the knights to stand watch over the two captured thieves, I left the bedroom behind to provide backup wherever else it might be needed.

*

Surely there must be more thieves prowling the manor in search of loot... But where?

Just as I was racking my brains for their potential whereabouts, there came a loud crash, followed by a softer thud—the sound of something heavy toppling to the ground.

A...bookshelf, perhaps...? Has a bookshelf fallen over? Should I check the library, in that case?

Since that was my best guess, I hurried to the library and flung open the door, only to find Cartham and a couple knights squaring off against two strange men amid a mess of scattered books.

“Cartham!”

“Rohtas! Did you take care of things on your end?”

“Indeed I did. We secured the bedroom in no time at all.”

“Impressive! For our part, we found these two ruffians rummaging through another room and managed to corner them in here.”

“I see.”

“All right, boys, let’s do our best to catch these crooks. We wouldn’t want Rohtas putting us to shame.”

“Agreed.”

With a fearless grin on his face, Cartham brandished a sharpened kitchen knife. The knights drew their swords as well.

For caution’s sake, I held my own sword at the ready—though I was quite confident Cartham could handle the task on his own.

The enemy raised their daggers in turn. “It won’t take more than the two of us to take *you* wimps down!” one of the thieves declared with a grin. Confident in his abilities, that one.

“Dear me. It seems like they’ve taken us for your run-of-the-mill servants, Rohtas,” remarked Cartham, giving a wry shake of his head.

My lips curling into a grin, I replied, “Go ahead—teach them what a mistake it was to target *our* manor.”

“*You’re* the ones who’re makin’ a mistake!” shouted one of the bandits, irked by our unflinching demeanor, before rushing in to make the first move.

Light on his feet, he kicked off a nearby table, propelled himself into the air, and took a swipe at us with his dagger. He even managed to evade Cartham’s perfectly kitchen knife without so much as breaking a sweat.

“Oho, you managed to dodge that one? Color me impressed,” said the chef, an amused smirk tugging at his lips. “But...you’ll have to do better than that.”

Not a moment later, he hurled a paring knife at the man—a weapon that had materialized in his hand seemingly out of nowhere.

“Whoa! Guh...?!”

Things seemed to be going the bandit’s way as he dodged that throw with another jump—but unfortunately for him, the ever-nimble Cartham followed up almost instantly with an elbow strike. The man took the hit straight to the side, his body slamming hard against the floor.

“And here I thought he would put up more of a fight,” said my fellow servant, dusting off his hands.

The other bandit—who, until now, had been quietly watching this all unfold—made a grab for a nearby letter opener and lobbed it right in Cartham’s

direction.

“Watch out!”

I deflected the blade with my sword, at which point the knights arranged themselves into battle formation and made swift work of the remaining thief.

“I’m going to check on how Bellis is doing. I ask that the rest of you wait here and stand watch over our two new prisoners. Keep an eye on what’s happening in the parlor, while you’re at it.”

“Very well.”

I left the library, intent on finding out what Bellis was up to.

That’s four down. Now then...what’s become of the remaining two?

*

The next suspicious noise I heard came from the waiting room next to the banquet hall, and thus, I hurried off in that direction.

“Ooh, what have we got ourselves here? Some mercs?”

“Let’s get rid of ’em so we can take our loot and leave.”

“In a fight, it’s quality over quantity!”

There, I happened upon Bellis and his escorts in the midst of a confrontation with the thieves.

The intruders clearly looked down on their opponents. Of course, that came as no surprise—by all appearances, their adversaries were nothing more than a ragtag band of servants.

Grinning, the bandits drew their daggers from their belts. One glance was all it took to know that they weren’t taking this fight seriously.

It was two against five. *We* had the advantage—both in quality and quantity.

This isn’t what I’d call a fair fight. As I watched the scene play out from behind the door, I couldn’t keep a grin from spreading across my face.

“I’ve got this. You guys worry about getting the rope ready.”

“Yes, sir!”

Bellis stepped forward, advising the secret service to stand back. Of course, he was more than capable of handling this on his own. I opted to merely observe from the shadows.

Interpreting his willingness to take them on alone as a mockery of their skills, it wasn't long before the bandits lost their tempers. "Oh, you think you're tough, huh? We'll show you! Let's go!"

"Yeah!"

The pair descended on Bellis together. In the face of their two-pronged attack—one from the front, one from the side—he ducked down to skirt around their blows.

The one behind him, eh?

It only took a split second for Bellis to discern which of his two adversaries had been thrown furthest off balance by his dodge. He swept the legs of the man behind him; then, the moment the bandit toppled to the ground, Bellis hit him with an elbow drop that had his full body weight behind it—and naturally, he went straight for the solar plexus.

What technique! Quite the impressive display, if I do say so myself, I thought, almost tempted to give him a round of applause.

With one last, breathless wheeze, the first thief was down for the count.

There was just one more to go.

Bellis snatched the dagger from the unconscious bandit's hand, only to throw it as hard as he could at the stupefied accomplice. It struck home right on his opponent's sword-hand.

Now that was a feat only Bellis could pull off. He purposely threw it so it would hit with the hilt, not the blade, so I doubt the man suffered worse than a bruise.

The man instinctively dropped the dagger at the sudden jolt of pain in his hand. Bellis once again moved in swiftly, kicking the two fallen daggers across the room before landing a back kick against the still-groaning thief.

The secret service stepped in to catch him as he went flying, and that marked the end of the second bandit.

With that, we'd caught every single one of the ruffians in the mansion, excluding the four in the parlor.

"Good work, Bellis."

"Oh, Rohtas. Were you seriously watching this whole time?"

"Indeed I was. It's not as though you needed the extra help, right?"

That comment was met with silence.

"Well, that accounts for all the thieves out here. All that's left are the four in the parlor."

"...What should we do next?"

"Good question. For a start, let's round up the captured thieves in the entryway. That should make it easier to hand them over to the chivalric order when they arrive. I'll drag the other four lumps over myself, so you go ahead and get a head start. Do your best to stay away from the parlor, and do be careful."

"Understood."

Once I'd watched Bellis and the secret service head off with our captives in tow, I went to fetch the men I'd put on standby earlier.

*

Now then, how to take back the parlor?

Just as I was about to hold a second strategy meeting right there in the entryway, I heard someone call out my name in hushed tones. "Rohtas!"

Why, that's Master Fisalis! And his hair and his uniform are both soaking wet... What a storm he braved to run home to his wife!

"Master Fisalis! You're back!"

"Yeah—we only just made it inside the manor. So, what's the current situation?"

"There were ten bandits in total. There are still four left in the parlor, where they're keeping Madam Fisalis as a hostage. As for the rest...we finished apprehending them moments before your arrival."

“Seriously?!” When I pointed to the thieves passed out on the entryway floor, the master’s eyes went wide as saucers. “Er, well...all in a day’s work for you lot, I suppose. In any case, well done. So all that’s left are the men in the parlor?”

“Right.”

“Got it. We can handle them. More knights from the order ought to have arrived outside by now, so I want you to hand the thieves over to them, then meet up with the rest of us. We’re hiding out in the kitchen for now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Just as the master had predicted, there were now a great deal of knights gathered outside and poised to protect the manor. Exercising the utmost caution, I turned the captured bandits over to them, then went back inside to join up with the master.

Gathered in the kitchen were Master Fisalis, Platoon Leader Pulcherrima, and a handful of their subordinates. Though they were generally the fun-loving sort, right now they were the picture of dignified knights, their faces taut with concentration.

Master Fisalis was handing out orders with enthusiasm.

As imprudent as it may be to say so, watching the master work brought me a sense of relief—something along the lines of *Oh, good, he actually knows how to do his job.* I only ever saw how he acted off the clock, after all.

Touching though it was to see my deadbeat master hard at work, any tears of joy would have to wait until after the crisis at hand had been resolved.

Thanks to the deft command of our Master in his work mode, the four remaining bandits were apprehended in the blink of an eye, and we saw the safe release of both Madam Fisalis and the rest of the servants who had been taken hostage.

*

“Cercis! Were you hurt?! I get the feeling it was over before they even got the chance, but still!”

“Vi! What about you? Are *you* all right? I’m sorry you had to go through all

that. I'm just glad I made it in time to get you out of trouble."

"I knew you would come for us. After all, you're my very own special knight. I got to see a very cool side of you today—why, I nearly fell in love all over again!"

"I'm happy to hear that. Driving my horse through the pouring rain to get here was more than worth it."

Now that *doesn't sound like the Madam Fisalis I know! Why, I never imagined I would hear her fawn over the master like that... She really must have been scared out of her wits!* Ahem*, not to say that there's anything wrong with being sweet on her husband, of course. Something tells me this incident only served to strengthen the bond between them. "Calm follows a storm," indeed!*

As heartwarming as it was to watch the madam rushing up to her husband and the intimate moment that followed, that wasn't the only romantic sight to see tonight.

"Ria! Are you all right?!"

"Yes! Thank you for coming to save us. Oh, if only the storm hadn't gotten so terrible, none of this would have happened..."

"Thank you for rushing here with Master Fisalis, Sir Corydalis. It's all thanks to you that everyone in the manor made it out all right."

It was Platoon Leader Pulcherrima who ran over to Stellaria. The rapport between the two of them was just as gratifying to witness.

As he stared helplessly at the sight of his wife and daughter showering the knight in gratitude, I heard Cartham mutter beside me: "Hey, what about me? I fought pretty hard too, you know!"

Epilogue

And thus was The Attack on Fisalis Manor—perpetrated by the very bandits who had once shaken Rohze to its core—safely resolved thanks to the (behind-the-scenes) efforts of its extraordinary servants and the tactics of our crazed... Ahem, *enraged* vice captain and the chivalric order.

Despite their stint as hostages, Madam Fisalis and her servants had all made it out in one piece—as had Stellaria, of course.

*

"It was quite the chore, cleaning up the manor after all that."

It was one of my days off, a little while after the incident. I'd stopped by the Fisalis manor to pick Stellaria up for a date, only to find wooden boards nailed over everything. These were a temporary fix for the windows that had been smashed to bits between the bandits' home invasion and our grand rescue operation.

We'd sure broken a whole lot of custom glass panes. Just thinking about how much money it must have been worth was enough to send a shiver down my spine. Fortunately, the repairs were going to be free of charge; that is to say, a certain band of thieves would be the ones responsible for crafting the new glass.

What had happened after everything was over, you ask?

Once we'd apprehended the bandits, we had marched straight to their hideout and confiscated all the money and goods they'd stolen thus far. If we knew who owned a particular item, we returned it; the money was divided up among their victims in proportion to the damage suffered.

Still, seeing as they had already used up or sold some of their spoils, they'd had less money and loot than they'd taken. Thus, they'd been tasked with making up the remaining cost with labor. Anything they destroyed during their raids (in our particular case, the windows and carpets), they were to remake

and replace themselves. Of course, that also included everything *we* broke during Operation: Catch Those Bandits.

The first task on the list was visiting a glassmaker—under strict supervision, naturally—and helping him with his work. Since they were a pretty big group, they split up into teams of two or three men, and the others ran off to see a rug maker, a carpenter (for the door), someone who could fix up the mansion exterior...and so on and so forth.

The Fisalis manor had been far from the bandits' only target. With how much they owed in reparations, they were bound to spend the rest of their lives working for free. That said, food and shelter were provided to them as part of the deal, so they ought to have been thanking their lucky stars they had it as good as they did.

I was shown to the dining room, with the explanation that the parlor was currently unfit for receiving company.

"The parlor is still a mess, what with the glass strewn over the floor and the mud tracked all over the carpet, so we've asked Madam and Master Fisalis to relax in the dining room until the repairs are finished," said Stellaria. Sighing, she added, "But apparently, it's hard to do that without a sofa."

"The parlor is all boarded up, so it's pitch black in there even in the middle of the day!" the vice captain's wife huffed. "I can't use my own bedroom either, so today I've been taking refuge in Mr. Fisalis's private chambers!"

"Well, let's just be happy nobody was hurt," I said.

"Fair point," both girls replied.

Meanwhile, off to the side of our little chat...

"How are the iron bars coming along?"

"I placed the order. The installation work is scheduled to be done as soon as the forging is complete."

"Got it. Do what you can to hurry the process along."

"Yes, sir."

The vice captain was in the midst of an involved conversation with his butler.

Iron bars? What's that about? What's he planning to do with those? I wondered, cocking my head to one side.

"Master Fisalis ordered us to install iron grates over the windows in every room," Stellaria explained. "Oh, but nothing like what you'd find in a prison, mind you—more like a decorative lattice bedecked with delicately crafted flowers. That way we'll have the option to shut them over the windows once night falls."

"He thought that would be the best way to storm-proof and burglar-proof the manor without sacrificing aesthetic."

"Gotcha. And he wants to set those up in *every* room?"

"That's right."

"Wow..."

I bet that's gonna cost him a fortune. Leave it to the Fisalis household to pull off a project like that! And on that note, once those iron bars are installed, this mansion really will *be a fortress in all but name.*

While I was shuddering at the thought of it, Madam Fisalis suddenly grinned at me and said, "Considering you're going to be calling our estate home one day, the safer it is here, the better!"

"Uh... What do you mean by that?"

"I'm talking about a future home for you and Stellaria, silly! You're going to build it on the premises, aren't you?"

The madam tilted her head to one side, a look of innocence on her face—but that was definitely rushing things, if you asked me. I mean, we'd only *just* gotten engaged.



“Uh, hold your horses there. We still haven’t—”

“Remember, Stellaria is my very own personal maid! I don’t want her to leave me.”

Don’t say that with such a sad look on your face, Madam!

“Don’t worry, Madam! I promise to stay somewhere close by, so there’s no need to get so upset,” said Stellaria, placating her wilting mistress with a gentle pat on the back.

You too, Stellaria?! Well, guess I can’t blame her.

“That way you and Cercis can go to work together too!”

“Think I’ll pass on that.”

“Aww, we can just play that part by ear!”

“Uh-huh...”

Great, suddenly it’s a sure thing that we’re going to build our new house on Fisalis property! Fine, whatever—I’ll accept my fate. It looks like that’s what Stellaria wants, anyway.

Aww man, looks like my future with Stellaria really did *cement my connection to that stupid boss of mine! Well, as long as I’ve got her by my side, anything’s good in my book.*

Side Story #1: The Feeling Is Mutual

1. Cercis's Viola-less Days

"There's so much to do! Aren't we supposed to be the Royal Guard? Why are we so busy?"

"What kind of question is that? Working for the Royal Guard isn't meant to be the kind of job where you can slack off."

"I've been had."

"You have *not*."

At the moment, I happened to be walking down the halls of the royal palace and grumbling under my breath. I was on my way to the council room, where the king and his advisors were to hold a meeting. Corydalis accompanied me, as was customary.

"Have they drawn up the guest list for the first princess's engagement party yet? You know, the one set for the beginning of next month?"

"Yeah—we got the list from the consul. Next we have to discuss security logistics and how to allocate the guest rooms, then after that we have to meet with the other nations' knight-guards to figure out safety measures and lodgings...and *then* there's sniffing out whoever might be planning to take advantage of the nationwide festivities to get up to no good... And I think that just about covers it. We've got a lot of work ahead of us." Corydalis looked over the documents, giving a dry laugh.

For crying out loud, why did we have to make an engagement announcement *an international event?* I screwed my face into a pout that was very the picture of displeasure.

"You know why we're doing this," retorted Corydalis, almost as if he had read my mind.

"I know, I know. But it would be so much easier if this whole thing were only

for the citizens of Flür. When we add other countries into the mix, all the procedures and formalities we have to follow make preparations a hundred times more tedious. And to make matters worse, we have to waste our time rooting out any subversive elements too.” I heaved a tortured sigh.

“There, there. Now that Aurantia’s out of the way, we’ve got a lot less foreign trouble to worry about. All the countries invited to *this* party are long-standing allies.”

“There’s the Kingdom of Amber, the Empire of Japonia... Yes, I suppose you have a point.”

Several other countries that shared a border with Flür had made it to the guest list as well.

The lady of the hour—Flür’s first princess—was to be married to the margrave who occupied the border with the Amber Kingdom.

If you asked *me,* it would have been fine to send out invitations just to the Amber Kingdom and be done with it, but unfortunately, that would have led to some diplomatic problems. (*Why did they get an invitation, but we didn’t?*—and so on and so forth.)

And of course, considering everything that had gone down with Aurantia, there was a vested interest in reaffirming our ties to our friendlier neighbors. Thus, next month’s engagement party was being held with the implication of *We thank you for your continued support!*

What’s more, it would serve as a debutante party for the other two princesses—something to the tune of *By the way, we’ve got a couple more daughters—check them out!* That said, it was still up in the air whether or not the second and third princesses would marry abroad. It was entirely possible that, much like their elder sister, they would end up marrying one of our own lords in the name of “securing the border.”

*

With all the moving parts to hash out, the meetings piled up one after the other—the royal councils, the discussions among the chivalric order—and there wasn’t a day I didn’t come home late.

“Welcome home, Master.”

“Thanks, Rohtas.”

Rohtas was the only one there to greet me in the deathly quiet entryway. Since I knew I would be getting home close to midnight, I had instructed the rest of the servants to retire without me.

I’d likewise informed Viola that I would be working late for the foreseeable future.

“Rohtas will still be awake, won’t he? Then I’ll stay up and wait for you too!” she had insisted, but seeing as this was bound to be a rough hour for an early riser like Viola, I’d countered, “Fine, but don’t push yourself too hard.” And lo, I had come home to find her fast asleep each and every night.

That’s right—I hadn’t seen my wife awake for days now!

Considering she was nowhere to be seen tonight, I assumed she was once again off in dreamland. Nevertheless, desperately holding onto a bit of hope, I asked Rohtas, “Is Viola out cold again?”

“Indeed, sir. I can hardly blame her—she was on her feet all day long.”

Going by that comment, I could just picture her cheerfully messing around with her flowerbed, picking flowers and putting them on display around the manor.

I was glad that Viola was enjoying herself so much, but at the same time, it made me a little sad. I wanted the chance to see her while she was awake and talk to her—did she not feel the same way?

“I’ve heated up the water for your bath, sir. Would you care for something to eat?”

“I’m good; I had a light snack back at the headquarters. I’d rather just take my bath and hit the sack. I’m exhausted.”

“Understood.”

The dim entryway echoed with the sound of our voices. How truly desolate.

I couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like if this were a conversation

with *Viola* instead.

What would you like? Dinner? A bath? Or perhaps...? asked my imaginary wife, flashing me a coy smile.

There we go—time to escape to my fantasy world. Viola's cuteness is a universal constant, I see.

Here I was attempting to single-handedly charge my Viola batteries to distract myself from my sadness, yet Rohtas had to go and interject, "With all due respect, sir, Madam Fisalis would never say something like what you're picturing."

"Hush, you! I never said you were allowed to read my mind!"

And I can see that look of pity you're shooting my way! Cut it out!

Of course, no matter how rough things were at the moment, I just had to ride it out until next month's party was over. Patience is key, as they say.

*

In the mornings, I always had to leave before Viola woke up; I had to make sure to meet with my subordinates ahead of the royal council, after all.

Together we would reevaluate the security logistics based on the changes suggested during the previous day's council and the latest reports on domestic affairs. If necessary, we would arrange to have certain troublemakers thrown into a jail cell. If we hoped to avoid a repeat of the break-in at the Fisalis manor a while back or that incident with the crown prince of Aurantia, we had to proceed with the utmost caution here.

Thus we would come up with a new plan, which I would then present at the royal council. Rinse and repeat.

As usual, it was one meeting after another at the royal palace. I was basically only going home to the mansion to sleep; I didn't have any time to truly unwind. Quite frankly, I was fairly sure I was hovering on the verge of sleep deprivation. Perhaps the most sensible strategy would have been to set up a cot in my office instead of trudging all the way back home, but staying at the headquarters all day long would have just been depressing. It would've made

my sleep time feel like work time—and more importantly, I wouldn't get to see Viola! I wanted to at least see her face, even if she wasn't awake for it!

Hence, I insisted on coming back home to the manor.

I just have to hold on for a little bit longer, I told myself over and over as I gazed down at Viola's sleeping face.

*

On the following day, I was seated inside my office at the chivalric order's headquarters. I was waiting for the delegation from the Japonian Empire to arrive so we could dive straight into our meeting.

The room was quiet. Sitting around doing nothing was just giving my exhaustion the chance to catch up to me.

With the way I was leaning heavily against the back of my chair and letting my eyes drift shut, I'd fallen into a doze before I knew it.

"Vice Captain! Get up!"

All of a sudden, I found Corydalis standing before my desk, his arms folded and a scowl on his face.

"If only Viola were here to give me a more gentle awakening..."

"That's enough sleep-talking out of you. Wake up! Trust me, you're not the only one here who wishes he could take a nap."

"Getting woken up by *Corydalis* is just sad..."

"Oh, get it together. I take it you must *really* be tired."

"I am... Not that it matters. Is the delegation here yet?" I asked, standing from my chair and stretching my whole body.

If they *were*, I'd have to head straight into a round of talks. I combed a hand through my hair to straighten it out, then reached out to grab the jacket I'd draped over my chair—only to pause when I heard what Corydalis said next.

"Oh, about that! From the sound of it, they're going to be late."

Judging by the furrow in his brow, he looked pretty tired himself. Though that was no surprise, really—he'd been holed up in the royal palace waiting for

information to come in for a long time now.

“Japonia’s running behind schedule?”

“Yeah. The seas have been rough for the past few days, so it seems they’re going to arrive two or three days later than they had originally planned.”

“I see. That makes sense, I suppose—they do have to make the journey by boat.”

“Exactly.”

“Should I take that to mean...that my schedule is cleared up for the rest of the day?”

“Sure does.”

Since the plan for today was to discuss security measures with the Japonian Empire, I couldn’t be expected to get anything done without the very people I was supposed to meet with.

“Well then, I might as well head home on time for once.”

“Good thinking. All this non-stop work has been wearing *me* down too. And the same goes for everyone else here.”

My subordinates formerly belonging to the Special Ops Division were running themselves ragged doing all this public security work, which fell outside the scope of their regular duties. An excess of fatigue might lead to a lapse in judgment or concentration. In our line of work, that could be downright devastating.

“Tell our subordinates to head home early and get some rest themselves.”

“Will do.”

And so, I managed to head home early for the first time in ages.

*

“Welcome home, Cercis!”

Today, the entryway was well-lit, and there were plenty of servants lined up to greet me—along with Viola, of course.

It's been so long since I've seen her awake!

It was something I would usually take for granted, but now I found the mere thought of it deeply moving.

"Thanks—I'm glad I managed to get home at a reasonable hour for once. We can actually have dinner together tonight."

I gave Viola a big hug. *Ooh... Now this is what I call medicine for the soul!*

"Yeah! I heard you were going to get off work early today, so we've prepared a smorgasbord of your favorite foods!"

"You came up with the menu yourself?"

"Yep! Me and Cartham!"

"I... see."

Viola nodded back at me with a million-watt smile, but all I could think was, *Oh. Her and Cartham, huh? I don't know what else I expected.*

I had the oddest feeling of something eating away at me from inside.

*

The feast made up of all my favorite foods was just as delicious as you would expect, and I enjoyed chatting with Viola over dinner. I could practically feel my fatigue melting away, at long last.

"What have you been up to while I've been away?"

"Hmm, let's see... I do the same things almost every day. I tinker with the garden, decorate the mansion with pretty flowers... *Gosh*, that sounds monotonous."

It was pretty cute to watch her blow her own mind like that.

"What does that matter, as long as you're enjoying yourself?" If I laughed at her, I was sure she would just start pouting, so I opted to contain my mirth and say something supportive.

"True!" came her cheerful reply.

But there it was again. Something was eating at me.

“Do you feel lonely at all?” I knew it was a mean question to ask, but I couldn’t help myself.

“I mean, I do miss you and all, but I’ve got the servants with me, so I’ve been doing all right!” She gave me the same sort of answer she always did, with the same sort of smile she always wore.

She really was just being her usual self. Yet for some reason, it made my heart ache to see it.

“Oh, I see. So as long as you have the servants around, you’ll never be lonely, hm?”

“Well, yes... Um, Cercis?”

I must have sounded pretty cold, because Viola gave me a blank look and tilted her head to one side.

I knew Viola hadn’t done anything wrong. And yet, I couldn’t stop the words spilling from my mouth. “So you’re fine without me, then.”

“Hm? What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?”

She peered into my face, clearly concerned. Those sapphire eyes of hers quickly snapped me back to my senses.

Ahhhhh! What am I saying?! I’m tired, sure, but that’s no excuse to take it out on Viola! And to think she faithfully waited for me to come home!

“Just ignore me! It’s nothing.”

“Cercis?”

“Sorry. I’m going to head to bed.”

I headed up to the bedroom and left Viola behind in the dining room, still looking anxious.

2. The Same Old Viola

Mr. Fisalis had been so busy with work as of late that we would go days at a time without ever seeing each other. From the sound of it, the chivalric order had their hands full with the preparations for the first princess’s engagement

party, which was to be held at the start of next month. Oh, make no mistake—he wasn't in charge of putting together the banquet or anything like that! He was handling the security and all the other behind-the-scenes stuff.

He was already at work by the time I got up each morning, and he'd get home so late that I'd already have fallen asleep.

Is he getting enough rest? I sure hope he's not overworking himself.

He hadn't been getting much sleep for days on end now, so I was starting to worry about him.

When he'd first told me, "I'm going to be busy with work for a while, so I don't expect I'll have much time to sit down and talk with you," I'd been so hell-bent on getting to see him that I'd assured him, "I'll do my best to stay awake!" Unfortunately, keeping late hours was a difficult task for someone who lives by the motto "early to bed, early to rise," so I would always end up conking out before he made it back to the manor.

I'd hear about how he was doing from Rohtas, who always stayed up to greet him at the door, but I couldn't truly relax until I'd laid eyes on the man himself.

Then, one day, Mr. Fisalis actually came home on time, claiming that his work had finished up ahead of schedule. He seemed to be in an even better mood than usual—because he was so happy to get home early, I had to assume.

Though he was all smiles, there were dark circles under his ordinarily striking eyes. I could have sworn he'd lost a bit of weight too.

Well, I'm sure he'll be back to normal once his work does the same.

This was going to be my first dinner with Mr. Fisalis in a long time. He'd sent word ahead that he was going to be home soon, so Cartham and I had planned out a meal that had all his favorite dishes.

"The entrée should be that meat dish Mr. Fisalis loves so much. And then...a salad with a light dressing would be easier on his tired body, don't you think? For dessert, let's go with that bittersweet chocolate cake I know he adores."

"Yes, yes, *Madame*. That's the second time today you've said 'that something-or-other Mr. Fisalis loves,' you realize?" Cartham had interjected, poking fun at

me as I rambled off ideas.

We made it through most of dinner peacefully chatting away, but by the time the dessert came around, Mr. Fisalis was acting strange.

*

"What's the matter with Mr. Fisalis?"

"Hmm..." Stellaria responded with a strained smile. Everyone else around reacted more or less the same way. *Wait, am I the only one who doesn't already know?*

He'd been in such a good mood when he'd come home. That hadn't changed much while we were eating dinner either. But then out of nowhere, he'd gone and said, "So you're fine without me"...

"Did I say something wrong?" I murmured, gazing at the door through which he had just left.

"Er, well...if I had to venture a guess, he wanted you to say you missed him while he was away," Rohtas suggested, struggling not to laugh.

"Huh? But I *did* say that!"

"Yes, and you immediately followed up with: 'But I have the servants with me, so I'm all right.'"

"Uh-huh... Wait, what?! Oh, so *that's* it..."

So that *set him off...*

But you know what, I'm used to having the servants around, and right after we first got married—back when he never came home to the main house—they *were the ones who always kept me company so I never got too lonely!*

Not that I'm ever lonely these *days, since I've got Mr. Fisalis by my side.*

"Men are so complicated..."

"Not at all. They're quite simple, in fact."

"You really think so?"

"That I do, Madam."

Considering I had zero experience in the romance department, expecting me to read my husband's mind was way too big a demand.

Well, since he already escaped to the bedroom, maybe I ought to leave him be. Given how busy he's been as of late, he must be exhausted.

"Should I just leave him alone?"

"No, Madam. Go bring this up to him." Rohtas pointed to a nightcap set prepared by one of the maids. "I'm sure he's wallowing in guilt as we speak."

"Huh?!"

Guilt? Oh, Mr. Fisalis...

*

When I went up to the bedroom, I found Mr. Fisalis lying facedown on the bed.

Oh dear, he didn't even bother to change into pajamas. You're not even going to take a bath before you start sulking?

"Cercis?"

No response.

He's not answering. Is he asleep already?

I approached the bed and put the nightcap set down on the bedside table. Part of me had wondered if he was so tired he'd fallen right asleep, but when I came up beside him, he stirred slightly. He was definitely awake.

"Oh, Ceeerciiis! Lookie here, I've brought you some liquor! Why don't you take a bath, have a nice drink, and get to bed?" I said, shaking him back and forth.

"Don't want it."

Well, there you have it.

Mr. Fisalis mumbled his answer, refusing to lift his face from the bed. *What a child.*

"Okay, then—bath and bed it is! I'm sure you're tired, aren't you?"

“...Fine.”

He was willing to take a bath, at least.

Upon hearing his response, the maids scurried off to go prepare his bath.

I sat down beside my husband, gently stroking his beautiful, dark-brown hair. “You’re always so busy these days. Be sure to look after yourself, okay?”

Silence.

“If you ever feel like you can’t go on, make sure to take a nap.”

“...I wouldn’t get any rest on a bed in my office. It’d just feel like I was still at work.”

Oh, I see. That’s fair, I guess—it certainly wouldn’t compare to this bed right here. But what did he do on the front lines, then? Surely he must have managed somehow.

Maybe being in Rohze just makes him more picky? Hee hee... Whatever am I going to do with him?

“There’s only a couple weeks left until the party, right?”

“...Yeah.”

“And it’s going to be a pretty lavish occasion, isn’t it? I can already imagine the first princess dressed to the nines.”

Just thinking about the giant party looming on the horizon was enough to make me miserable.

Whoops! This is no time for me *to be getting down in the dumps! Remember, Viola—you came here to cheer up your husband!*

“...I’m going to be busy until then. Sorry.”

“It’s fine! I can be patient.”

Mr. Fisalis squirmed atop the bed until he’d wrapped himself around my waist. He almost reminded me of a pet or something. How adorable.

“...Do you miss me?” He asked nearly the same question he had back in the dining room.

There! There's the trigger! I have to stress how sad his absence is making me!

"Of course I do! You keep asking the silliest things today, Cercis."

"You mean it?"

"Yes!"

"...Sorry about how I acted. The fatigue must be getting to me."

What's this? Is he embarrassed?

Keeping his arms coiled around my waist, he apologized for his earlier behavior.

Wow, Rohtas, I never should have doubted you! He really is *sim— Uh,* ahem*. But that's a good point—he must be tired from work. He's feeling stretched to his limits as it is.*

And so...

"That must be it. Make sure to get a good night's sleep tonight. You have to rest up while you've got the chance, if you want to recuperate."

"Okay."

It looked like Mr. Fisalis was feeling a little bit better now.

*

I went to bed earlier than usual that night, and when I woke the next morning...

"Oh, he's already gone."

"Yes, Madam. He left at the same early hour he always does."

"Whoopsie."

By the time I got up, Mr. Fisalis had already left for work.

Does that mean it's going to be a while before we see each other again?

When he went on a business trip, it was easier to accept his absence. Now, even *I* was starting to get sad about us always missing each other when he was so close by.

Did what I said yesterday get through to him? I have the sinking feeling it didn't...

3. Cercis's Frustrations

I was happy to see Viola awake for the first time in a while, but I couldn't help getting frustrated that everything was just business as usual for her.

Viola is having a great time without me. After letting myself get caught up in a spiral of negative thoughts like that, I ended up taking it out on my wife.

Aghhhhh! I'm such a jerk! Viola didn't do anything wrong, and the servants have been working hard to keep her from feeling lonely! The exhaustion must be getting to me. My patience is at an all-time low.

I headed back to the bedroom first, only to dive straight into bed.

Ugh... How am I ever supposed to face her again? I need to figure out a way to apologize. It's always hard to find the right timing for this sort of thing.

No doubt I would once again have my hands full with work starting tomorrow, so I had to take care of it before it could fester.

"Ughhhh..."

I had to say I was sorry right now.

Okay, tonight it is... I just need a little more time to work myself up to it, that's all.

While I was lazing around all on my own, sunken face-first into the bed, Viola came in with a nightcap set in hand.

Darn it. I missed my window to get up.

My first instinct was to pretend to be asleep, but I stirred when I sensed Viola getting close. I had almost certainly blown my cover already.

Nevertheless, I stubbornly insisted on playing possum, only for Viola to say, "Oh, Ceeerciiis! Lookie here, I've brought you some liquor! Why don't you take a bath, have a nice drink, and get to bed?"

This was the perfect chance to apologize, but my mortification over getting

caught doing something so childish kept me from saying what was on my mind.

“Don’t want it.”

“Okay, then—bath and bed it is! I’m sure you’re tired, aren’t you?”

“...Fine.”

Viola responded cheerfully in the face of my gruff mumblings. As she gently stroked my hair, I could practically feel all those useless feelings of embarrassment and vexation melting away.

I didn’t want her to see my face, so I kept it hidden from view as I wrapped my arms around her slender waist. We carried on with our conversation in that position.

Incorrigible fellow that I was, I couldn’t help asking her one more time, “Do you miss me?” She smiled and answered, “Of course I do!”

She does *miss me, doesn’t she?*

I went on to apologize for my behavior during dinner, and it wasn’t long before the burden on my heart had vanished.

Now this *is a problem. When I get too tired, I start wallowing in negativity.*

Starting tomorrow, it was back to that chaotic work regimen. Since I had been lucky enough to get the chance to charge up my reserves of Viola energy, I’d just have to do my very best to push through the next two weeks.

*

Once again, I woke up and headed to work while Viola was still fast asleep.

“Did you get a good night’s sleep?” asked Corydalis, who showed up in my office first thing in the morning with the color back in his cheeks. He must have gotten a good rest himself.

“That I did. It made me realize just how tired I’d been lately.”

“I feel that. Anyway, here you go—the materials for today’s meeting.”

“Thanks.”

I flipped through the pages he’d handed me and gleaned the main points of

today's meeting.

"Oh, and also, the Japonian delegation is set to finally arrive tomorrow evening, so we'll jump straight into a conference as soon as they arrive," Corydalis reported, glancing over another memo in his hand.

Japonia, hm? They made up the lost time faster than I expected. Word has it they'll be here tomorrow evening, but it's not uncommon for such ETAs to end up being way off.

"We're going to be stuck at work incredibly late that day, aren't we?"

"Wow, you catch on quick."

"Am I even going to make it home?"

"Might as well just resign yourself to sleeping in your office."

"Anything but that!"

Even if it has to wait until the middle of the night, I want to sleep at home—next to Viola!

Soon after that, the delegates sent by our international invitees started arriving one after another, and my meeting-filled days dragged on.

We had to attend plenty of conferences with these guests. Often their arrival would be delayed, and my own schedule would get thrown off to accommodate theirs. I was frequently forced to do what I'd been trying my hardest to avoid: spending the night in my office. Oh, how I longed for the days I'd actually been able to go home, no matter *how* late it was.

"I'll never feel at ease sleeping on that bed in my office."

"True, true, it's not really built for comfort," Corydalis chimed in. Everyone who lived in the dormitory of the chivalric order sure had it easy. There was nothing keeping them from going back to their own room; it was right next to the headquarters, after all.

"Maybe I ought to spend the night in *your* room, Corydalis."

"Don't even think about it. It'd be one thing if it were Ria, but why should I let *you* into my room? Are you *trying* to get under my skin?! Listen, buddy, I'll have

you know I haven't seen *my* girl in ages either!"

I'd suggested it because I thought it would be preferable to staying in my office, but it seemed that comment had really set him off.

*

There were only a few days left until the engagement party. Maintaining public order, drafting a security plan to protect the guests from arrival to departure—almost all of the preparations were complete.

At present, we were going crazy working to receive the international invitees—playing the role of their escorts, mainly. It wasn't just the guests themselves we had to account for, but their attendants and bodyguards too, so the numbers really added up. Considering how many of these groups kept showing up, the royal palace was busier than ever.

"Oh, man," I grumbled. "I think I'm hitting max levels of sleep deprivation."

"Same here."

"We *will* have time to head home the day before the party, right? I can't very well escort Vi if I'm a worn out mess."

"Just cover it up through sheer willpower," said Corydalis, giving me a tired, rueful smile.

Things would stop being so damn hectic once the flow of guests tapered off. We just had to follow the set procedure after that, so I expected everything to become significantly more chill.

The final guest was arriving this evening, so once that was taken care of, I could go home.

I wasn't about to stand beside my sweet, beautiful Viola looking like a shabby, exhausted disaster!

"Next up is a royal council, hm? I'm pretty confident I'll end up nodding off during that. Will anyone mind if I fall asleep? I'd like to go visit Viola in my dreams."

"What? Leave the sleep-talking for *after* you fall asleep. Well, I can't blame you—those meetings *are* pretty boring. How about this? I'll make you a cup of

tea so you can head in all refreshed."

"Aww, man... I really have to go, don't I?"

"Stop whining! Drink your tea and get to it!"

I downed the tea Corydalis had brewed for me in one gulp, then headed to the royal palace for the council meeting.

*

Since the most urgent matters—or rather, the most important details—-had already been sorted out, the main topic of today's meetings was who would escort the second and third princesses to the party.

Why am I here for this? You and the prime minister can figure this one out, Your Majesty. Did you really need to call all these high-ranking officials and knights just to discuss this?!

With all the pent-up irritation I'd built up between my recent fatigue and sleep deprivation, I was close to snapping. If *this* was what the meeting was going to be about, I might as well have taken a nap in my office instead. At the very least, I could have come to work a little bit later. That way, I would've been able to enjoy a full night of sleep back at the mansion.

Come to think of it, I haven't seen Viola since that day.

I had lost my concentration as soon as I found out this wasn't an important meeting, and soon my head was filled with thoughts of my personal affairs.

I'd hardly been back to the mansion whatsoever since our last encounter, so I hadn't even seen Viola asleep for a while now, let alone awake. My Viola deficiency was getting serious.

Does she miss me, I wonder...? Nah, she has the servants with her. I doubt she's even noticed I've been gone.

I ought to have learned from my past mistakes, yet here I was stupidly getting myself worked up all over again.

If she really missed me, wouldn't she ask someone to pass along a message for her? ("No, she wouldn't." —Corydalis) *I bet she only* said *she did to make me feel better! That's got to be it!*

Right about now, I'm sure she's blithely messing around in the garden with the servants, or planning out a menu with Cartham—doing whatever her heart desires. She can always eat with the servants, so it's not like she even has to take her meals alone. If that weren't the case, I just know she would have sent me some sort of message by now. ("Again, she wouldn't have." —Corydalis)

Hold on just a second here. Does she actually need me for anything? Won't she be perfectly happy so long as she has the servants around?

The dull meeting, my stockpiled exhaustion, the lack of sleep—it all came together to thrust me deeper and deeper into a negative spiral. My own thoughts were starting to wear on my patience.

The sensible part of my head was saying, *You know that's not true. You're just tired.* And yet another part of me refused to listen, taking my pessimistic assumptions to be the truth.

Ugh... I wanna go home. I want to see Viola and hear her tell me none of this is true!

As I was sitting there in a fog of drowsiness, I suddenly heard His Majesty's voice calling out to me. "...Fisalis? Duke Fisalis? Hello? Is there a problem?"

I felt like someone had slapped me awake. *Oh, that's right, I'm in the middle of a royal council meeting.*

"Er, no, Your Majesty. Not at all."

I assumed he had meant, *You seem awfully tired—is there a problem?* Thus, I thought my answer was communicating that I was just fine.

And yet, the wretch went on to say, "Good. Then it's decided—the second princess's escort will be Duke Fisalis."

"Huh? What? Hold on just a second!" I shouted.

How, pray tell, did I end up the second princess's escort?! Perhaps you're not aware, but I've already been assigned the vital role of "Viola's escort"!

Despite my protests, everyone just moved on to the topic of the third princess's escort, almost like I hadn't said anything at all.

What...? How did this happen? Can someone please explain what's going on?

*

After the meeting, I flagged down Consul Argenteia—Celosia—and dragged him into my office.

“Tell me, *how* exactly did I end up the second princess’s escort?” I asked Celosia without the slightest effort to hide my displeasure, throwing my feet up onto the desk.

“This is your own fault. You should have been listening.”

“I was busy running simulations of this evening in my head—you know, what to do when the guests arrive and all that.”

“Liar.”

I wasn’t about to tell him I was thinking about Viola, but Celosia shot my story down without missing a beat. *Well, yeah, of course it’s a bald-faced lie!*

“Never mind that. Why was *I* picked to escort her? I happen to have the most crucial, noble duty to escort *Viola* already.”

“Yeah, yeah, go off. To put it simply, the second and third princesses are right in the middle of their fiancé hunt, so we can’t hand the role over to some ignorant bachelor. So there you have it—it falls to you.”

“There are other married men you could have asked!”

“There were a lot of factors to take into account—age, looks, status, you name it. Besides, if *you’re* her escort, everyone will just think, ‘Oh, but the duke already has Viola.’ No chance anyone will get the wrong idea, right?”

“You have a point, yes! But what is Vi supposed to do, then? I’m not about to let anyone *else* escort her!”

“Uh-huh. Your parents are coming, aren’t they? Just leave it to them.”

“Dammit!”

There was no point in yelling at Celosia over something that had already been set in stone during the meeting, but I didn’t know how to quit while I was ahead.

If only I’d stayed awake... I regretted all the choices that had led me to this

point.

“If you’re going to get mad at anyone, get mad at yourself. You’re the one who said no when he asked you if there was a problem.” He was quick to add, “And it’s your own fault for daydreaming too!”

Buzz off! I feel bad enough about this already!

There was nothing more miserable than only having myself to blame. How could I possibly vent all this frustration?

“...I’ll go do some sword practice.”

I decided I’d go exercise to blow off some steam. I left my office to head to the training grounds.

*

“Mother and Father Fisalis? They said they should be here by tomorrow morning.”

It was three days before the party. The last guest of honor had arrived, and I’d finally reached a stopping point in my work. Security had gotten on board with the original plan and everything too, so I was able to come home to the mansion.

It was a relief to be treated to Viola’s usual, cheerful smile. But at the same time...there was a dark part of myself that thought, *I knew it.*

Not good. I’m being far too pessimistic.

I couldn’t bring myself to mention the whole escort business, so I’d instead asked when my parents would be arriving, something completely irrelevant to the issue at hand.

“Tomorrow morning? I see. I won’t be here, so you’ll have to receive them for me.”

“Got it!”

“About the party...”

“Yes?”

“Did you pick out a dress yet?”

“Yep! I decided to match your uniform again, so I settled on a dress with crimson as the primary color. Mimosa got so excited that it was a little overwhelming.”

“I see.”

Her dress is going to match my outfit...and yet I won’t be able to escort her! I feel even worse now! I bet I won’t get the chance to see it until she shows up at the royal palace the day of either. Man, this sucks.

When I let a sigh slip past my lips despite myself, Viola peered into my face with concern. “Cercis? Is it the exhaustion again? I know you’ve been spending the night at the royal palace a lot lately.”

“Yeah, you got it. I’m feeling pretty tired. I still have one last job left to do, you see.” I gave another sigh.

“One last job? What is it?”

I can’t keep quiet about this. If I have to tell her, I might as well do it right away.

I made up my mind and gave her the news. “About that... I’ve been appointed to escort the second princess the day of the party.”

How is she going to react? I watched her face carefully.

Her eyes went wide, but it wasn’t long before that gave way to an adorable smile. “Wow! That’s a pretty big task! Gosh, the second princess? You two are both so beautiful that I know where all the eyes in the venue are going to be!”

And there you have it. She responded without batting an eye.

Yeah. No surprise there. It wouldn’t be like Vi to get jealous over this. I already knew that.

“Sorry about this. Can I ask you to stick with my parents instead?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll explain everything to them tomorrow.”

“Roger that!”

She okayed the whole thing without a second thought.

*

As soon as Viola left her seat, I heard an exaggerated sigh from behind me. “As I’ve told you before, Master, Madam Fisalis isn’t that kind of person.”

“I know that! You don’t have to rub it in, Rohtas!”

4. Even Viola Gets Jealous Sometimes

Before long, it was back to the days of never crossing paths with my husband. From the sound of it, some days he wouldn’t even come back to the manor—instead, he slept on a bed in his office at the knights’ headquarters.

“Wow, he must be awfully busy.”

I remembered him complaining about how he’d never get any rest on a workplace bed, so he must really have been caught between a rock and a hard place. *Just goes to show how hard he’s slaving away, I guess.*

“He said that things should calm down after the last guest of honor arrives, so I assume his schedule will be back to normal within a few days,” Rohtas explained. I was pretty sure that he was the only one of us who’d seen Mr. Fisalis in person as of late.

“Got it. On another note, when are Father and Mother Fisalis going to get here?”

Seeing as they were on the guest list for the upcoming party, my in-laws were going to be paying us a visit from their manor on Fisalis territory. Showing up at the last minute would have made getting ready for the event a nightmare, so they were planning to arrive in Rohze with plenty of time to spare.

“They said they’re due to arrive two days before the party. We’re not yet sure of the exact time.”

“Oh, I see. We’d better start getting their room ready, then. Are they planning to stay in the cottage again?”

“It would seem so.”

“They must have taken quite a liking to the new and improved retreat!”

“Indeed—particularly Lady Fisalis.”

No surprise there—the renovations were lovely. Of course Mother Fisalis would love it.

*

Three days out from the party, Mr. Fisalis finally got enough of a break from the constant stream of work to come home. It had been quite a while since I’d last seen him awake.

I’d made him take it easy the last time we’d seen each other, but that had clearly amounted to basically nothing in the long run. Exhaustion was evident on his gorgeous face—though I must say, I had to hand it to his good looks. He managed to make even *that* look sexy in a languid sort of way.

We enjoyed a relaxed dinner together, chatting about this and that over our meal. I figured he really *must* have been tired, because his gaze would dart restlessly around the room every now and then—or was that just my imagination?

He was getting some heavy sighs in there too.

Oh no, he must be even more drained than I thought!

“Cercis? Is it the exhaustion again? I know you’ve been spending the night at the royal palace a lot lately.”

He was looking a little green about the gills, so I couldn’t help feeling concerned. *Should we wrap up dinner early so he can go get some rest?*

But as I was fretting over what to do, he heaved another ennui-filled sigh and said, “Yeah, you got it. I’m feeling pretty tired. I still have one last job left to do, you see.”

One last job? Oh, he must mean his Royal Guard work. Guarding the venue on the day of the party can’t be an easy task.

“One last job? What is it?”

I’d been convinced he was referring to security detail or something along those lines, but his answer surprised me. “About that... I’ve been appointed to escort the second princess the day of the party.”

Wow, he's going to be her escort?! Leave it to my super prestigious, super elite, and super handsome husband to get assigned such an important duty! Now that's the kind of guy you can parade in front of all our international friends☆ I mean... ahem*.*

Oh... So Mr. Fisalis is going to escort the second princess. I guess that means I'm stuck flying solo. The thought of it makes me a little bit sad, I've got to admit.

Still, a job is a job! Mr. Fisalis is already exhausted as it is. I can't make things worse for him by whining about how lonely I am!

"Wow! That's a pretty big task! Gosh, the second princess? You two are both so beautiful that I know where all eyes in the venue are going to be!"

I highly doubted that he had volunteered himself for the job. I mean, this was my husband we were talking about. Therefore, it was up to me to put on my bravest face and give him the extra push he needed.

Was that a convincing enough smile, I hope?

The second princess is a knockout beauty, so I bet she'll make a perfect match for a looker like Mr. Fisalis—way more than a plain Jane like me.

Huh, weird. What's that little pang I feel in my chest?

"Sorry about this. Can I ask you to stick with my parents instead?"

"Of course."

"I'll explain everything to them tomorrow."

"Roger that!"

Mr. Fisalis's eyebrows had a dejected slant to them.

Don't worry about me! I know this is your job!

...I'll just, you know, do my best to keep my eyes off you two during the party.

*

Mother and Father Fisalis arrived right on schedule the following day, and our preparations for the party were now well underway.

In particular, the dress I was going to wear was all ready to go.

“Now’s our chance to make you two a perfectly matched set! C’mon, isn’t it fun to do this sort of thing every now and then?”

Mimosa had been staring me down with stars in her eyes, so it was hard to tell her no.

“If it’s really just ‘every now and then,’ then sure.”

“Great! All right, we’d better get this done before you change your mind!”

She’d summoned Madame Fleur practically the moment she got my consent, and they had taken my measurements in the blink of an eye. After that, it was time to make some calls on the design. By this point, I was getting left in the dust—not that I really cared that much.

“Crimson should be the primary color.”

“Let’s embroider it in gold so it matches the master’s uniform!”

“Now, to make her sapphire accessories really shine...”

Madame, Mimosa, and Stellaria were having the time of their life hashing out all the details. As for me, I was just looking forward to seeing the final product!

The resulting dress was just barely finished in time for the party. Apparently, Madame Fleur’s shop had gotten a flood of rush orders in advance of the ball. From the sound of it, the place had been a total madhouse, and she’d had to put every last one of her apprentices to work to get everything done. Her boutique was so popular, it really was in a league of its own!

As a result, contrary to our tradition, I never got the chance to show it off to Mr. Fisalis before the event.

*

And then, the day of the party rolled around.

Mr. Fisalis left for work, just like any other day.

“I’m off. See you at the party.”

“Good luck with your big job.”

“Don’t remind me of that—it’s just depressing. Once my assignment is over with, I’ll come find you. Wait for me, okay?”

“Sure thing.”

“I mean it!”

“I just *said* I would!”

“And do whatever you can to avoid dancing with any young, single guys!”

“How am I supposed to know if they’re single or not?”

Mr. Fisalis made sure to drive his point home. He *really* didn’t like seeing me dance with eligible young noblemen these days.

“And make extra, *extra* sure you’re wearing your ring!”

Next he got on my case about what accessories I would be wearing. His matching ring was already on his finger. Usually he wore it on a chain around his neck to keep it from getting in the way during his training, but not today.

“I will—promise.”

“I’m already wearing mine!”

“Yes, I can see that. I’ll put mine on later, I swear.”

“You say that *now*, but there’s always a chance you’ll forget in the last-minute rush. I want to *see* you put it on. Fetch it for us, Stellaria.”

“Certainly, Master.”

Only after Stellaria had brought us the ring and put it on my finger did Mr. Fisalis finally seem satisfied.

The significance of this ring—it was a foreign custom, in which married couples would wear matching rings on the fourth finger of their left hand as proof of their union—had osmosed into Flür high society soon after we had started wearing them. As a result, more and more people would see it and know it meant that I was already married.

But come to think of it, everyone in Flür high society already knows we’re a married couple, whether I wear it or not!

“Ugh... I truly despise myself for dozing off that day...!”

“What? You fell asleep during a meeting?!”

No wonder you got stuck in this situation, then. You had this one coming, mister!

And I’ll have you know that I’m not too happy about spending the night apart either. I mean, this is the first event we’re attending since we finally got our feelings across to one another!

A job is a job, though. I’ve had to tell myself this who-knows-how-many times now, but this is his work we’re talking about here! It’s not my place to be selfish!

I saw Mr. Fisalis off with a smile.

*

The party was to start in the evening. Until then—as was customary before any social event—I was jostled around by the lovely Spa Squad, had my hair and makeup done by Stellaria, and was helped into my dress by Mimosa. Through their combined efforts, it wasn’t long before Social Mode Viola was ready to go.

“You look gorgeous as always!”

“A crimson dress would be a chic look on anyone, but *you* manage to make it look absolutely resplendent!”

“Go shove your beauty in the faces of all those other nobles!”

Mimosa and the maids took turns praising me.

Still, it felt hollow without Mr. Fisalis chiming in to complain, “Oh, I’d rather keep the sight of you all to myself! Why don’t we just skip tonight’s party?”

Man, he’s really corrupted me.

Jostled about inside our carriage, I headed to the royal palace with my parents-in-law. Seeing the space beside me—the one usually reserved for my husband, I mean—empty made me feel kind of lonely. The feeling was only exacerbated when I was forced to watch Mother and Father Fisalis cooing over each other right in front of me.

“Neither the second nor third princesses have fiancés yet, so they couldn’t

have any old bachelor serve as their escort," Father Fisalis explained to me.

That makes sense, I guess. At a special party like today's, anyone seen escorting an unmarried princess is going to get pegged as a potential fiancé.

"And that's why they picked Cercis?"

"Precisely. Everyone knows for a fact that he's a taken man—and one who's madly in love with his wife at that. There's not a single citizen of Flür who could possibly get the wrong idea." He flashed me a reassuring smile, but now I just felt embarrassed.

"But how are our foreign guests supposed to know that?"

Take a certain Aurantian princess, for example... Tee hee, I let that one slip☆

"Well, that's what the ring is for," said Mother Fisalis, taking my hand and showing it off to me.

Oh, right... I almost forgot this started out as a foreign custom!

No wonder he had been so adamant about having me wear it. Everything suddenly made a lot more sense now.

*

The grand hall of the royal palace was teeming with guests. More of the room had been opened up than ever before due to the enormous number of invitees, so it was quite the struggle to find anyone I knew. Thankfully, I saw that the usual faces of the Soirée Quartet and Miss Verbena were present and accounted for!

But they're too far away to go talk to, as hard as that is to believe. Man, just how many partygoers are *there tonight?! If I wander away from Mother and Father Fisalis, I might never find my way back. Even if they end up sitting front and center, I have to stick with them no matter what! Heck, maybe I ought to grab hold of Mother Fisalis's hand while I'm at it. As much as it pains me to wedge myself between a lovey-dovey couple, tonight I must wield the full power of my insensitivity!*

I followed after my in-laws like a baby duckling, and it was as we were in the midst of going around saying our hellos that the royal family entered the room.

At long last, the curtain was rising on the first princess's engagement party.

The princess was nestled close to her fiancé, looking more beautiful than ever before. I'd heard rumors that it was a political marriage, but things seemed to be working out well for the two of them. Come to think of it, she *had* once asked me something along the lines of: "How do you get your husband to fall head over heels for you when it's just a political match?" You know, during that one tea party we had. I had no idea whether my answer had been of any use to her, but regardless, I was glad to see her looking so happy.

The second princess made her entrance next, taking care not to upstage the two stars of the evening. She was hanging off Mr. Fisalis's arm.

Wow, what a handsome couple! They look great together! I privately showered them in praise that half came from a place of desperation. *Don't get me wrong—they really* are *a good-looking pair. I'm just being a brat about it☆ It's so easy to think, "That's where* I *should be standing."*

But, uh, Mr. Fisalis...?! You look way too serious! Lighten up! If you don't crack a smile, it'll look like you're not enjoying yourself one bit!

Hm, what's that? It's just a job, so he doesn't really have to enjoy it? Well, I guess if he looked like he was having too *much fun, it'd just bum me out anyway.*

Next came the formal announcement of the princess's engagement and the introduction of various guests of honor, after which the party carried on in a relaxed fashion.

Despite my initial determination to stick with Mother and Father Fisalis no matter what, being smack dab in the center of attention was wearing me out fast! I couldn't drop my smiling mask for so much as a second, and I had to stay hyperaware of my every move and gesture.

On top of that, it meant I had to see Mr. Fisalis and the second princess together, whether I liked it or not.

"I'm going to step outside for some air."

"Oh, no, you mustn't! Don't leave the hall, dear."

I figured leaving my seat and getting a breath of fresh air would help me to get my bearings, but Mother Fisalis put a stop to that plan right away. *Oh, that's right! Last time I tried to do that, it was a big mistake that landed me in hot water. N-Not that I'd totally forgotten about that whole fiasco or anything!*

"How about if I stick to the walls?"

"As long as you stay where we can see you, that should be fine."

"Okie-dokie!"

Wallflowering was Mother-approved, it seemed—but with the condition that I stay in her sight. *Jeez, why is everyone I know so darn overprotective of me?*

With that, I slipped away towards the edge of the venue.

Up next to the wall is really where I belong! Talk about a load off my mind. If standing in the spotlight is an away game for me, then the wall is my home turf—my sanctuary!

"This is *so* much more relaxing."

Here, I was free to people-watch, and I didn't have to keep my social persona up all the time.

It feels easier to smile when I'm over here*, and I'm not sure what to make of that.*

I leaned back against the wall with a drink in one hand, taking in the view of the room as a jaunty waltz started up.

Ooh, Miss Iris is dancing with an unfamiliar face. Is he a guest of honor, perhaps? Looks like Miss Verbena might be doing the same. I hope she manages to find herself a nice fellow—for her father's and brother's sake as well as her own.

While I was looking out over the venue, one man was generous enough to approach me.

"What are you doing all the way over here, Duchess Fisalis?! If you're all by your lonesome, would you care to share a dance with me?"

The speaker looked to be a young nobleman. Since he knew who I was, he

must have been the son of some aristocrat from Flür.

But of course, my husband had urged me to reject any invitations to dance just this morning.

“I was a little tired, so I’m just taking a break. Sorry—maybe another time.” I turned him down, putting on my best facade of weariness.

“Oh, I see—apologies for bothering you. I’ll try again later, then.”

You’re going to come back and ask me again*?!* I valiantly refrained from shouting back.

With one last charming smile, the young nobleman took his leave.

Thank god he gave up without a fight, I thought, relieved.

I then turned my gaze back to the dance floor—only to spot Mr. Fisalis and the second princess getting ready to share a waltz.

For crying out loud, those two are gorgeous enough to stand out from the crowd no matter where *in the room they are! I mean, it goes without saying that my husband is as handsome as they come. And meanwhile, the second princess inherited all the queen’s good looks. Compared to the two of them...a plain Jane like me doesn’t stand a chance. A beauty like her looks way better with Mr. Fisalis.*

Man... I said I was just being a brat, but I think I might actually be a little jealous.



No, Viola! You've told yourself this a million times now, but this is his job! He said he didn't want to escort her, and one look at his face and his attitude is enough to tell you it's true!

But! But, but, but...!

Ugh... I never used to feel like this. When did I end up falling for him this *hard? Can't believe I'm getting reminded of how much I love him* now*, of all times. But, I mean, c'mon! This isn't fair!* He *gets to go dance with a top-of-the-line beauty, but* I'm *not allowed to dance with any young guys? Not that I have any real interest in that, mind you.*

While I was watching their dance in a bit of a sulk, another young nobleman approached me. "Not planning to join the action today? If you'd be so inclined, I'd be honored to share a dance with you."

While he couldn't hold a candle to Mr. Fisalis, he was quite a hunk in his own right. I didn't recognize his face, so I assumed he had to be the son of a nobleman who wasn't listed in the almanac. Or perhaps he was one of the international visitors?

What should I do? If he'd asked me just moments ago, I would have turned him down on the spot, but now I'm torn... If Mr. Fisalis gets to dance, why shouldn't I? Besides, if he is *a guest of honor, it'd be rude to say no.*

"I'd love to," I replied, taking the offered hand.

5. Cercis Runs Out of Patience

The day of that accursed party had finally come. As always, there was plenty of work to be done, so I left for the royal palace early in the morning.

In the end, I never got a sneak peek of what dress Viola would be wearing to the ball. Oh, how I hated to think that I wouldn't be the first one to lay eyes on her all dolled up and more beautiful than ever! (What's that? Her maids always see her before I do? That doesn't count, *obviously*.)

Swallowing my regrets, I gazed straight into Viola's sapphire eyes. "I'm off. See you at the party."

Ugh, I really *don't want to go...*

Viola, meanwhile, just sent me off with a smile. "Good luck with your big job."

Ngh... Now that she's said that*, I don't have much of a choice.*

"Don't remind me of that—it's just depressing. Once my assignment is over with, I'll come find you. Wait for me, okay?"

"Sure thing."

"I mean it!"

"I just *said* I would!"

The *second* I was done with my duty, I was going to run right to her side. I made sure there was absolutely no room for confusion on that point.

There was one other thing I had to stress.

"And do whatever you can to avoid dancing with any young, single guys!"

"How am I supposed to know if they're single or not?"

I don't want any of them to see you up close and personal! I need you to put yourself in a man's shoes here... Ah, though I suppose that's a bit of a tall order.

Viola is high society's golden child. Everyone and their mother is dying to have a dance with her, and she's so oblivious that she doesn't catch on to their ulterior motives whatsoever. She hasn't the slightest clue that the mere opportunity to share a waltz with a cute, pretty, and kind girl like her is enough to make some guys jump for joy! I've heard my own men bragging about "scoring a dance with Duchess Fisalis," you know!

Harumph... The very least I can do is try to rein her in.

"And make extra, *extra* sure you're wearing your ring!"

I was referring to my and Viola's matching rings, which I'd had made for us a little while back. I wanted to see hers on her finger today.

"I will—promise."

"I'm already wearing mine!"

"Yes, I can see that. I'll put mine on later, I swear."

“You say that *now*, but there’s always a chance you’ll forget in the last-minute rush. I want to *see* you put it on. Fetch it for us, Stellaria.”

“Certainly, Master.”

I wanted to see her slip it on her finger with my own two eyes, so I asked Stellaria to go get it. Wise girl that she was, she must have understood both the ring’s meaning and my own feelings on the matter; with a knowing smile and a quick bow, she hurried off.

It hadn’t taken long for the significance of our rings to be passed along by the chatty noblewomen of high society. Since it was *Viola* wearing it, it had only been a matter of time before word got around. As a matter of fact, a few other married couples had even taken to wearing sets of rings just like ours as of late.

What’s more, although the tradition originated from the Empire of Japonia, the custom had spread to several other nations invited to the party. Thus, anyone could take one look at Viola’s hand and know she was taken!

Ha ha ha... Haaah.

“Ugh... I truly despise myself for dozing off that day...!”

But I still don’t want to go. Oh, how I wish Viola would beg me to stay...but there’s no point in dwelling on that. My wife isn’t that kind of girl.

While I’m wrapped up in all these gloomy thoughts, Viola is doing her best to see me off with a smile! I’d better get going...

*

“Be it within the bounds of the royal palace or anywhere else in or around Rohze, we haven’t encountered any problems thus far.”

“Got it. Keep security running as planned.”

“Yes, sir!”

I was in the knights’ headquarters, where I had just received a report from my subordinate. We had yet to run into any problems. Everything was proceeding according to plan.

“So the party’s this evening, hm?”

“Better start getting ready,” Corydalis proposed with a grin when he saw how glum I looked. *Damn you! You think this is funny, huh?!*

“I’m planning to come down with nausea, a migraine, and a terrible stomachache momentarily. Corydalis, I’ll need you take my place as—”

“Nope. I don’t remember putting anything like that in the protocol,” he shot back, cutting me off before I could even finish.

“Ugh, what a pain.”

“You’ve only got yourself to blame for zoning out.”

“I know! I’ve already lambasted myself for it plenty!”

“Suuure you have. I’m serious, though, you’d better go get yourself ready! Leave all the work stuff to me and go have a wild time at the party!”

“Blast it! Oh, but I suppose I’ll be going home with Vi, so I’d better make sure I look my best!”

“You really have a one-track mind!”

While the two of us bickered back and forth, the moment of truth was drawing near. I changed into my spare uniform, then left for the royal palace.

*

“Think of me as your Viola for the day and handle me with care, okay?”

When I met up with the second princess, that was the very first thing out of her mouth.

Viola would never say that, you featherbrain! Whoops, I nearly said that one out loud.

Hmph. What a shrew she is—not a single thing in common with my dear Viola!

“*We’re* supposed to be the stars of the evening, but with Duke Fisalis and Elettaria paired up, I bet you *anything* we’re going to get upstaged,” said the first princess, her lips twisting into a pout. “Why didn’t you pick someone else to be Ellie’s escort, Father?”

There was one fundamental flaw in her logic, however.

“You have nothing to fear. Since it won’t be *Viola* on my arm, I doubt I’ll draw too much attention,” I corrected her with a smile.

Now it was the second princess’s turn to puff out her cheeks. “Excuse me?! What is *that* supposed to mean?!”

*

Once the king, queen, the first princess, and her fiancé had all made their entrance, the second princess and I walked into the grand hall.

Viola should be here already. What sort of dress is she wearing, I wonder? I recall her saying it would match my uniform...

“I know exactly what you’re thinking, Duke Fisalis—I bet Viola looks gorgeous tonight. I bet she’ll get tooons of invitations to dance,” the second princess said, looking up at me with a grin. *That’s quite enough out of you!*

“That won’t be an issue. I’ve already taken preventative measures.”

By which I mean I just told her to wear her ring, but...you know.

“My, how prudent of you. Oh, look, there she is.”

As the pair of us strode into the hall, talking to each other under our breath with superficial smiles on our faces, we caught sight of Viola with my parents. She was by far the most stunning person in the room, easy to spot no matter where she was standing.

A crimson dress with gold embroidery, is it? It looks beautiful on her! Oh, I want nothing more than to run up and embrace her this instant!

“Eyes forward, Duke! You’re staring too hard at Viola!”

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t be so careless as to get caught in the act.”

“Wait, you were doing it on purpose?!” The second princess sounded unimpressed, but all I could say was that she was underestimating a nobleman’s skill set.

Although I would be playing the role of the princess’s escort for the evening, I was keeping a keen eye on Viola. There wasn’t going to be a repeat of that “Aurantian Prince Incident” on my watch.

At some point or another, Viola had left my parents' side to camp against the wall by herself. *She really likes that spot, doesn't she?*

No matter how much others extolled her as "The Flower of High Society," Viola herself would rather be a *wall*flower any day of the week. I almost had to laugh. "Pft..."

"Gross."

"Hush, you."

The second princess kept casting dubious glances my way, but I couldn't have cared less.

It was just then that a strange man struck up a conversation with Viola. *She looks exceptionally pretty today, so I can't blame you for approaching her, but—knock it off! If looks could kill, I bet you anything I'd shoot this rascal down in two seconds flat!*

I watched the interaction between Viola and the man play out. She told him something with a conflicted look on her face; he smiled and left. *Oh, good. He backed off rather easily.*

While I was basking in my relief that he hadn't been more persistent in his approach, the second princess poked me in the side. "We have to share a dance sooner or later, you know."

"Will you let me go after two or three songs?"

"Hmph—I can tell your heart's not really in this! Fine, have it your way."

"Thank you."

I only have to hold out a little bit longer! Once I've gotten this over with, I can rush to Viola's side!

The moment the princess gave me the okay, I could feel the muscles in my face relaxing.

*

I took the second princess by the hand and led her out to the dance floor. While we were waiting for the music to start playing, however, I witnessed a

shocking (well, relatively) scene.

Viola was heading this way, getting ready to share a waltz with some *nobody* of an aristocrat!

I could practically *hear the* impact on my psyche.

“My, it looks like Viola’s planning to have herself a dance too.”

“I distinctly remember telling her *not* to...”

“Oh, what’s the harm? It’s just a little waltz.”

“I’m not about to let some stranger get up in my beautiful, cute, kind, and charming Viola’s personal space! Even *I* haven’t gotten that close to her tonight!”

“God, you’re so embarrassing. Why did *this guy* have to be my escort for the evening...?”

Now she’s grumbling about how she wishes she could’ve gone with anyone else, but let me tell you—the feeling is mutual! If someone else had gotten the job, I *would be the one dancing with Viola right now!*

Preoccupied though I was, I went on to share a dance with the second princess, keeping one eye on Viola all the while.

My wife seemed to be enjoying herself, wearing her usual smile. I knew it was just a mask, but I felt something snap inside me regardless.

“Could I ask you to settle for only one dance, Your Highness?”

“Sure, why not? I’m getting sick of you myself, so I’ll let you go once this song is over.”

“Thank you very much!”

My freedom is finally at hand! Just you wait, Viola—I’m coming for you! Oh, but of course, you did *disobey my instructions. I’d say a bit of discipline is in order.*

*

Once the song was over, I left the second princess behind and marched over to Viola. She and her partner were waiting for the music to start up again,

apparently intent on sharing a second dance.

Even I *haven't so much as touched Viola today. You think I'd let you dance with her* twice*?!*

Jealousy gripped me the instant I glanced at his hand on her waist. I wanted nothing more than to tear him away at once.

"Vi." My voice came out in a growl so low that even I was surprised.

Before Viola even had a chance to turn around, I wrapped an arm around her slender body and pulled her close, peeling her away from the other man.

Then, I shot him a sweet smile over her shoulder and said, "I'll be taking my wife back, thank you."

He seemed taken aback for a brief moment, but as soon as he got a look at my face, his shock gave way to an awkward smile. "Of course. My apologies," he replied, surrendering Viola without a fight.

Well, I'm glad he was such a reasonable fellow.

*

"Hey, Cercis! That was really rude!" Viola complained, shooting me a sour look.

The moment I'd snatched her back from that aristocrat, I'd started dragging her all the way out of the grand hall by the hand. With the brisk pace I had set, she was forced to scurry to keep up.

The first thing out of her mouth was the aforementioned objection.

"It's fine. He knows who we both are."

Indeed—I was "the world's most devoted husband," and Viola was "my beloved wife"!

As soon as we'd made it out of the hall, I pulled us behind a pillar in an abandoned corridor. *Hmm, this was an oversight. I'll have to make sure this area is covered on our next security plan...* ahem*, but that's a problem for later. At the moment, I should be glad for the blind spot.*

I reeled Viola in and pushed her up against the wall. There came the thud of

her back hitting the surface.

That was a little too rough, sorry. I'm a bit high-strung at the moment.

Placing my hands on either side of Viola's head, I boxed her in between me and the wall.

The way she was gazing up at me with tears in her eyes just wasn't *fair*, if you asked me. It made me inclined to let her get away with anything—but no, I had to stay firm.

"C-Cercis...?"

Viola stared up at me, her face bright red. *Ugh, she's so gosh darn cute!*

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't set out to make me jealous. I know that smile of yours is fake, but it makes my rationality go up in smoke nonetheless."

I hooked my fingers under her chin, forcing her to look up even further before capturing those sweet lips of hers in a kiss.

She let me have my way for a bit—but then all of a sudden, she shoved me back by the chest in protest. The action left me momentarily stunned, under the assumption that she had rejected me. However...

"And what about you, Cercis?! You and the princess were smiling so nicely at each other! You looked like such a perfect match that I couldn't *help* getting jealous!" Viola glared at me, puffing out her cheeks—which was far too cute to look even the least bit intimidating.

And with that, she cupped my face in her own hands and pulled me in—this time, pressing *her* lips to *mine*.

Whoa... I think...this might be a first.

The fact that *she* had been the one to initiate this kiss moved me beyond words. It told me that she felt the exact same way I did.

I could feel all the emotional strain I'd been under melt away in an instant.

*

"Vi. About what you said before... I was faking it, and so was she. The reality is that neither of us can stand the other."

To put a finer point on it, I wasn't paying attention to anything but Viola, and the second princess kept getting on my case about it.

"I know, I know!"

"Moreover, she came out and told me that she doesn't go for slim men like me. Apparently she prefers the beefy, manly type."

"Wow, really? Well...still! Jealousy doesn't have to be rational!"

"Then shall we call it even for today?"

"That seems fair."

The two of us gazed into one another's eyes...and simultaneously burst out laughing.

"Let's head home, shall we?" I suggested.

"Oh? What about your assignment?"

"All done. I'm off the clock now."

"Well, we should pop back in to say goodbye to your parents fir—"

"I'm not a child anymore. They wouldn't kick up a fuss over me leaving without... Oh, but they might kick up a fuss over *you* leaving without a word, so I'll ask one of my subordinates to relay a message for me."

"Hee hee. Off we go, then!"

I held out my hand, which Viola then took in her own. A familiar pose.

"I still haven't had the chance to escort you tonight."

"Tell me about it!"

"Man... I really wanted to share a dance with you."

"So did I."

We each broke out into another fit of laughter.

"Say, Vi. I don't want to waste a second getting home, so what do you say we sprint to the entrance?"

"You're on! I'm used to dashing down hallways dressed to the nines!"

“Impressive!”

Hand in hand, the two of us ran the whole way out of the palace.

Side Story #2: Lettie and Her Daddy

Two years had passed since my contract marriage to Cercis, the Duke of Fisalis. Somewhere down the line, our union had ceased to be one of pure convenience, and at long last, the two of us were blessed with our own child.

Our adorable daughter—Violet, nicknamed Lettie—grew up fast, raised with love by everyone around her. By the time she turned one-and-a-half, she was walking around and speaking a word or two at a time—a child at the very peak of her cuteness!

Her father's adoration for her was particularly charming! Why, she was truly the apple of his eye. Whenever she waddled around these days, he would tag along behind her and fret, "Are you okay, sweetie? Don't fall now!"

One day—when the weather was getting cooler and the range in temperature on any given day could get quite extreme—that little girl of ours caught a chill. The sudden cold seemed to be the cause, and she'd been suffering from a fever for a few days now.

"What should I do? She looks like she's in pain."

It had been a few months since her first birthday, and yet she'd managed to go all that time without ever once getting sick. Now that we were facing her first real ailment, I was at a loss for how to handle it.

"The doctor said it was nothing but a cold, so she'll be better in no time," said Dahlia.

"It doesn't take much for a little one's fever to run high," Mimosa added. "I'm sure it'll be fine!"

"Yeah, you're probably right."

The two more experienced mothers did their best to reassure me. It was definitely comforting to have people I could turn to for advice so close by. Even better, Mimosa's daughter—Daisy—was just one year older than Lettie; their proximity in age made the young maid the perfect person to consult.

All I could do for now was nurse Lettie and make sure she took her medicine.

It'll be all right, Lettie! Let's trust the doctor and the nice ladies and do our best to get through this!

I administered her medicine and kept her warm, and within two days, Lettie's fever had gone down just like everyone said it would. Unfortunately, now that her temperature was down from its peak, she ran into trouble breathing due to a terribly runny nose.

When meal time rolled around, stuffing her mouth with food meant she couldn't breathe properly, but she was so hungry that she tried her best to eat regardless. It looked like she was really struggling.

"Waaaah!" Lettie began to cry in a fit of frustration, her cheeks flushing red. *I know, I know—you're upset because you want to eat, but you can't. You poor thing!*

Despite my sympathy, the tiny little sneeze she made was so cute that I couldn't help breaking out into a smile. *Sorry, sweetie! If I could trade places with you, I'd do it in a heartbeat.*

Meanwhile, there was one other person lamenting Lettie's cold as if it were the end of the world. You guessed it—it was Mr. Fisalis.

Perhaps because my husband was going into work each day with a look of despair on his face, it wasn't long before word of Lettie's illness had spread like wildfire. From Miss Verbena and Miss Iris—who were always coming around to dote on my daughter—to the Bombshell Trio and many more of Mr. Fisalis's subordinates, we had received get-well-soon gifts from everyone under the sun.

It's just a cold, you guys... Well, all the more reason to let them see her hale and hearty! For Lettie's own sake and the sake of everyone worried for her, we need to get her back in good health ASAP!

I fed her a little more carefully than usual, then cradled her in my arms until she fell asleep.

The moment I was sure she'd finally dozed off, however, I laid her down on the bed—at which point Lettie immediately burst into tears.

“Lying down must have made her nose stuffy again. Poor thing,” remarked Dahlia. She lifted the crying baby into her arms and gave her a gentle pat on the back.

“Yeah, maybe so. Perhaps she’ll have an easier time breathing if I just hold onto her.”

The cradling must have put Lettie at ease again, seeing as she drifted back to sleep. But the second we put her down, she went right back to crying. Rinse and repeat. By this point, I’d been holding her so long that my arms were starting to get tired.

“At this rate, I’d better be prepared to hold her all night long.”

When I looked outside the window, I saw that the sun was going down. Mr. Fisalis was bound to be home soon.

“Let Mimosa and the rest of the maids take care of her,” Dahlia suggested. “Go get some rest, Madam.”

“I couldn’t! I’m the one with the least to do around here. I can tough out *one* all-nighter!”

“But...”

“Don’t worry about it. Besides, I could never abandon Lettie when she’s having such a rough time, even to get some sleep!”

Dahlia had recommended that I let Mimosa—Lettie’s nanny—handle this, but she already had her own little Daisy to worry about. Not that I doubted that she and the maids would have been delighted to look after Lettie, of course.

Still, Lettie is my *little girl! I can’t just leave her like this!*

I’d grown up knowing a mother’s love, so I wanted the same for my own child. My goal was to rely on a nanny as little as possible. Thus, I overrode Dahlia’s objections and chose to give Lettie my undivided attention.

Lettie usually slept in her nursery—with a maid staying in the room next door, naturally. I thought about bringing her into my own bedroom for the night, but a fusser like her was bound to start wailing before too long, so there was a good chance she would keep Mr. Fisalis from getting any sleep.

I didn't doubt my husband was going to come home from work exhausted, so I needed to make sure he got a good night's rest. Going to Lettie's room myself was the best option here.

"As part of Project Help Lettie Get Better, I'm going to be sleeping in her room tonight," I told Mr. Fisalis as soon as he got home and came to check up on Lettie—and I didn't leave any room for argument.

"What? That came out of nowhere."

"Thanks to her cold, she can't seem to sleep unless I'm cradling her in my arms. And if she can't get any sleep, she's never going to get better. So there you have it—I have to stay with her all night long. But if she starts crying in the middle of the night, then *you* won't be able to get any sleep."

"There's no reason *you* have to stay with her. Can't one of the other maids take care of it? Besides, isn't this exactly what you have a nanny for?"

"I'm not about to slip off to dreamland while Lettie is suffering!"

"I suppose not. You're right."

Mr. Fisalis must have felt pretty bad for Lettie himself, seeing as he gave me the okay to spend the night with her instead.

The remainder of my night was devoted to breastfeeding Lettie whenever she started crying, rocking her back and forth in my arms...you name it. It was just before dawn by the time the two of us had tuckered ourselves out enough that we both fell fast asleep.

*

Though it had taken her until dawn to fall asleep, it was at her usual wake-up time that she once again burst into tears.

"Morning, Lettie. Still having a bad time?"

Still groggy, I lifted her up in my arms and let her drink a bit of milk. Judging by the way she was sucking it up, she must have been feeling a lot better than yesterday. *She's drinking well! I'm so glad.*

Her nose had stopped running, and the stuffiness seemed to have cleared up too.

Just as I was cradling my full and satisfied daughter in a sleepy daze, there came a light knock on the door. Moments later, my husband popped his head into the room. “How’s Lettie doing?”

“A lot better. She drank a decent amount of milk this morning.”

Mr. Fisalis came closer, and I showed him Lettie’s face. When he saw his daughter sleeping peacefully, he broke into a relieved smile. *Yeah, I forgot you’d been all doom and gloom yourself.*

“I see. That’s great news. But, Vi...you look like you’re having trouble keeping your eyes open.”

“Oh yeah...?” *Now that he mentions it, I* did *notice I wasn’t seeing too well.*

“I bet you’ve barely slept a wink.”

“Ha ha ha...”

No sooner had I laughed in response, my eyes still half-lidded, than I abruptly felt my arms get a whole lot lighter. *Huh, where’d Lettie go?*

The sudden disappearance of Lettie’s body weight snapped me out of my drowsy haze almost instantly. When my eyes shot open, I was greeted by the sight of Mr. Fisalis holding Lettie in his arms.

“Cercis?”

“I have the day off, so it’s my turn now. You ought to get some sleep, Vi.”

“Huh? Whoa, wait a second!”

“Yes, yes. Off to bed you go,” he said, giving my shoulder a light shove.

I tumbled back onto the bed without further ado, and Mr. Fisalis was quick to pull the covers over me. He then walked out of the room, cradling Lettie in one arm.

Well, if he insists*, I suppose I’ll take him up on his offer!*

While I was drifting off to sleep, I heard the sound of Lettie wailing at the top of her lungs in the other room, shortly followed by Mr. Fisalis’s panicked cry of “Agh! She won’t stop crying! What do I do, Rohtas?!”

Hee hee! Do your best, Mr. Fisalis!

In the spirit of accepting his generosity, I pretended I hadn't heard anything. He could figure this one out on his own.

*

I slept long and hard enough to wipe the slate of my sleep debt clean; by the time I came to, it was just before noon.

"Man, that was a good nap... Hm?"

Since Lettie had been in the midst of a pretty dramatic crying session right before I'd conked out, I'd been straining my ears to listen for how things were going now. However, I couldn't hear even the faintest of sounds coming from the other room.

Did they both go out for a walk, perhaps?

Just as I was getting out of bed to see what was happening in the room next door, Stellaria came in to check on how I was doing.

"Oh, you're awake!"

"Yes—I got up just moments ago. Say, where are Cercis and Lettie?"

"They're in the bedroom."

I took advantage of her good timing to ask Stellaria where my husband and child were, only to hear that they were, in fact, in the other room.

"They're so quiet, I never would have guessed!"

"Hee hee. Why don't you go find out the secret behind that for yourself?"

"Huh?"

Prompted by Stellaria's amused giggling, I went to the bedroom to go check on my family.

*

When I cracked the door open quietly and peered inside, not a single sound greeted me back.

How strange—Stellaria said *they were both in here.* Confused, I looked all over the room, until my eyes finally landed on a giant lump in the bed.

“Hm?”

Oh, are they taking a nap?

I tiptoed over to the bed and peeked through a gap in the canopy, only to hear the rhythmic breathing of two people fast asleep. My husband appeared to be taking a nap, holding Lettie close as he slept.

Lettie seemed to be slumbering soundly herself. *Don’t you feel nice and safe in Daddy’s arms? That spot is usually reserved for your mom, but I’ll make an exception for you... just this once!*

After seeing how peacefully the two of them were sleeping, their chests rising and falling in a steady rhythm, I decided to let them be just a little bit longer.



Short Story Collection

To commemorate the completion of the main story, please enjoy these bonus short stories—originally included with certain stores' editions of Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?! Vol. 1, *and now collected in print for the first time!*

Cartham the Chef and Bellis the Gardener

It was just after Cartham's midafternoon break had ended, when he still had a good chunk of time before he had to begin the preparations for dinner.

In order to procure the herbs and spices he would use in that night's meal, the chef paid a visit to the garden greenhouse. The herbs weren't grown in the building itself, but it was actually the gardener—Bellis—who he had come looking for.

"Hey. I'm here to pick up some Raula, Orale, and Black Pepe Fruit," he called out to Bellis, who was going about his work with his back turned to the door. The chef's typical, flirtatious way of talking was nowhere to be heard; right now, he was nothing but an ordinary—no, not just *ordinary,* but a good-natured and handsome man.

According to Cartham, his gallant persona was reserved for women only, with his thoughts on the matter being: "Who would act like that around another man?!"

"...Sure. There should be plenty ripe for the picking," answered Bellis. He stopped whatever task he'd been absorbed in and slowly turned to face Cartham, wiping soil on his pants as he rose to his feet.

With that, he led Cartham out of the greenhouse, heading for the section of the garden where all the herbs were grown, medicinal or otherwise.

*

As soon as he'd made sure no one else was around to hear, Cartham abruptly opened his mouth to say, "I heard Master Fisalis is going to be married. The news was so sudden, why, it took me by complete surprise."

"He is, apparently."

"Judging by the fact that he hasn't announced it to the servants yet, I assume it's still up in the air."

"Yeah," Bellis agreed, taciturn as ever.

Incidentally, Cartham knew of the matter because he was always the first to get news from both Rohtas and Dahlia. Bellis, on the other hand, was the gardener—and furthermore, one who would sometimes act as the "shadow" of the ducal manor. He had learned of this marriage-to-be when Rohtas had ordered him to look into the Euphorbia family.

That likewise explained Cartham's next remark. "What kind of *mademoiselle* is she?"

"It's hard to find much information on her, so I can't say for sure. As far as appearances go, she's just your average girl. Plain, I guess you could say. She doesn't act much like an aristocrat; if anything, she's more like a servant, considering all the chores she does around the house."

"Huh, interesting. Knowing our master, I was convinced he'd eventually net himself some brainless, ostentatious noblewoman."

"...Well, she's definitely the exact opposite of that."

"Hmm..."

The pair lapsed into silence.

"Still...marriage? When he hasn't shown the slightest willingness to break it off with that companion of his?"

Despite his usual aversion to conversation, Bellis responded without missing a beat. "It *is* hard to imagine."

"I haven't the slightest idea what he's thinking, but whatever it is, I'm afraid it may be too much to ask of your typical *mademoiselle*."

“Probably.”

“Well, if nothing else, we’ll just have to do what we can to make that girl feel welcome here.”

“Yeah.”

To sit back and let an innocent girl despair was anathema to Cartham. Bellis, meanwhile, was simply resentful of his master’s unethical behavior. Though the philosophy behind the sentiment was slightly different, both men felt sympathy for their soon-to-be new mistress.

“Sorry to bother you. I’ll take my herbs and go.”

With that, Cartham retreated to the manor with a bundle of freshly picked herbs in hand.

*

One year later—their new madam, Viola, would arrive at the manor. At the time of their conversation, how could either of them have imagined just how much they would come to adore her?

An Account from the Head Maid, Dahlia

When Master Fisalis suddenly announced that he was going to be married, why, he sent the entire manor into a tizzy! We had to get everything ready to welcome our new mistress, all while simultaneously preparing for the wedding ceremony itself. The Fisalis manor, which had been steeped in an air of resignation for so long, sprang back to life at long last.

That said, Master Fisalis had a lover, and the two of them had been involved for quite a while now. Worse still, he had yet to make any attempt to break off relations with her.

My word—could he be planning to get married and keep his mistress on the side?! What a cruel man our master is!

I cursed him in my heart of hearts—though I’m afraid that detail must remain strictly between the two of us. I thank you for your discretion.

Silently vowing never to cause that pitiable young lady any discomfort or inconvenience, I put more effort than ever into the preparations.

When the ceremony was over, I met the young lady—or rather, the madam—for the first time and found her to be a lovely girl. I was charmed to see the surprise on her face when the entire staff assembled to introduce ourselves to her. Figuring that she must have been tired, Mimosa and I helped her get ready for bed, but her mind seemed to be elsewhere the entire time.

At first I had taken her for the timid sort, but one look into her eyes told me how mistaken I had been.

The moment she picked up on what a lifeless shell the Fisalis manor had become and declared her intent to do something about it, I could just see the vibrant spark in her blue eyes. There wasn't a hint of the misery you'd expect from a show wife who had been trapped in a marriage of convenience.

As the head maid, I admit I had my reservations about letting the lady of the house play "servant"; however, her sheer delight as she scurried about the manor was truly a priceless sight, so Rohtas and I came to the mutual agreement to stand back and simply supervise her antics.

The more time the madam spent with us, the more we fell for her charms.

As a result of her initiative to breathe life back into the mansion—along with the way she put herself in the servants' shoes, never once bossing anyone around—every single servant in the manor came to adore her. Our growing fondness for the madam only served to make the mansion an even brighter place. At the same time, she was capable of handing out orders when the situation called for it. Despite her young age, I believed she had quite the good head on her shoulders.

The former duchess had been no less wonderful, but I was just as pleased to serve a madam with a different sort of charm.

Though Master Fisalis has become quite the slacker as of late, I believe that boy may have brought home a bigger catch than he bargained for.

Bonus Short Story: An Account from Mimosa the Maid

It had been seven years since I'd first begun working at the Fisalis manor. All that time, I'd kept my modest ambition of one day serving a mistress locked deep within my heart, slaving away in preparation for that future. To wait on the lady of the house was the ultimate mark of an elite servant, after all.

Seeing as the former duchess had kept a team of veteran maids close at hand—including but not limited to the head maid, Dahlia—there had been no room for a rookie like me to penetrate their ranks. That was only natural, of course; it was because of those circumstances, however, that I was determined to work for the manor's next madam instead.

Back when I had first begun my service, Duke Fisalis had been a distinguished young man. He had displayed enough aptitude to garner respect within the chivalric order at a young age, and he had good looks to top it off. He had studied regal principle since he was a child, which made him wise in the ways of the world. *That* was the man whose wife I would be working for! Of course I assumed he would bring home a wonderful lady!

And yet, the master made no attempt to find himself a bride. To the contrary, he ended up sheltering his girlfriend in a guest house we referred to as the "cottage," spending all his time over there and shirking his duties as a result.

After that situation dragged on for six years straight, the servants were starting to get fed up with his behavior. No, even worse—we had reached the point of resignation. Despite the pessimism running rampant through the manor, however, my own dedication to honing my skills never faltered.

Then, at long last, all my hard work paid off!

Rohtas announced the good news at a morning meeting among the servants.

"Master Fisalis is engaged to be married. His bride is to be the eldest daughter of the Euphorbia family—a girl by the name of Viola. I ask that you all put your whole heart into serving her. Regarding her lineup of attendants, I've put Dahlia and Mimosa in charge of leading the team. Lady Viola is still quite young, so I imagine she would be happier with a maid closer to her age; in which case, I feel quite confident I can leave the task in Mimosa's hands."

Rohtas glanced over at me with a smile. Dahlia gave a vigorous nod of agreement.

In that moment, I had gained the acknowledgment of Rohtas—the flawless butler—and Dahlia—the embodiment of the perfect maid. I was so overcome with joy that it took me some time to come back to earth.

*

I met my new mistress for the first time a year later, on her wedding day. I had been called upon to get her ready for the ceremony—but I must say, I was quite amazed by her unassuming sort of charm.

At a first glance, she was nothing more than a nondescript, run-of-the-mill noblewoman, but there was a quick-witted gleam to her glittering, sapphire-blue eyes. Even without makeup, she had clean features; with a touch of polish, I could no doubt transform her into a stunning gem. Her hair and skin both had a silky sheen to them too.

It was love at first sight.

All of us servants used to frown and question the master's tastes, but...goodness, what a diamond in the rough he had managed to find!

Bonus Short Story: An Account from Rohtas the Butler

"I know this is sudden, but I'm thinking about getting married."

I'd been summoned to Master Fisalis's study, a room which hadn't seen any use in quite a long time—and as soon as the master turned up to meet me, he dropped *that* bombshell straight into my lap. I was so shocked by the announcement that, for a fleeting moment, I froze up completely.

No matter what wonderful marriage prospects his father—or anyone else, for that matter—had brought to him before, he had adamantly refused to nod his head. And *now* he was thinking about finding himself a bride?

However, Master Fisalis presently and indefinitely had a lover of his own, one who resided in a guest house located on the premises. Not only had he shown little interest in breaking off relations with her, but he was living with her in all but name. Where did marriage fit into that picture?

"Are you planning to cut your ties to your companion in the cottage, then?" I

ventured to ask, despite knowing how presumptuous a question it was.

"Surely you jest! The marriage will be only for appearance's sake, of course. My bride is to be the daughter of the Euphorbia family. In case you were wondering, I've already gotten Callie's permission for this," the master responded with the utmost nonchalance. Surely I wasn't the only one to think him a monster after hearing *that*.

"Is that right?" I replied with a deliberate air of indifference, putting a lid on my inner thoughts.

"Though I hesitate to call it a bridewealth in this scenario, I've agreed to take over her family's debt. I'll leave those arrangements to you."

That single remark was all I needed to confirm that this was indeed a mere contract marriage—one she had agreed to in exchange for clearing her family's debt.

"Very well, sir."

With a silent bow, I left the study.

I returned to my own office and began calling upon those skilled at conducting investigations to look into several matters of import: What was the history of the Euphorbia family? How much was their debt? What kind of girl was their daughter?

We had to find these answers as soon as possible. I lived by the motto: "eliminate any and all threats to the Fisalis family." If I discovered anything that seemed even the slightest bit suspicious, I had no qualms about making it so this engagement never even happened.

*

However, my worries turned out to be for nothing.

The Euphorbia family was indeed poor, but their reputation was largely positive. The earl was a good-natured man, and his wife had a good head on her shoulders. As for the debt, it wasn't one of their own making—admirably enough, it was a burden they had taken on to save their own citizens. Of their three children, the eldest was Master Fisalis's fiancée—but seeing as she rarely

showed her face in high society, it was a struggle to find much information regarding her character. Neither were there any unsavory rumors floating around about her, however, so there likely wasn't anything to worry about.

Seeing as she had agreed to such fiendish conditions to save her family from their crushing debt, surely she must have been the heroic sort.

Despite the sympathy I felt for my yet-unknown madam, I arranged for her bridewealth. When I met her in person, I learned that it was not *exactly* with a heavy heart that she had accepted the conditions and that she was quite the independent, lovely young lady. Never mourning the situation she had found herself in, she spent her days milling about with a positive attitude—the sight of which always brought me great relief. Before long, I had found a new motto to live by: "by our powers combined, let us servants strive to protect the sight of our madam joining our ranks and prancing about the mansion each day with a smile on her face."



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Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?! Volume 7

by Tsuredurebana

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Frontier Works Inc.

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Ebook edition 1.0: November 2021