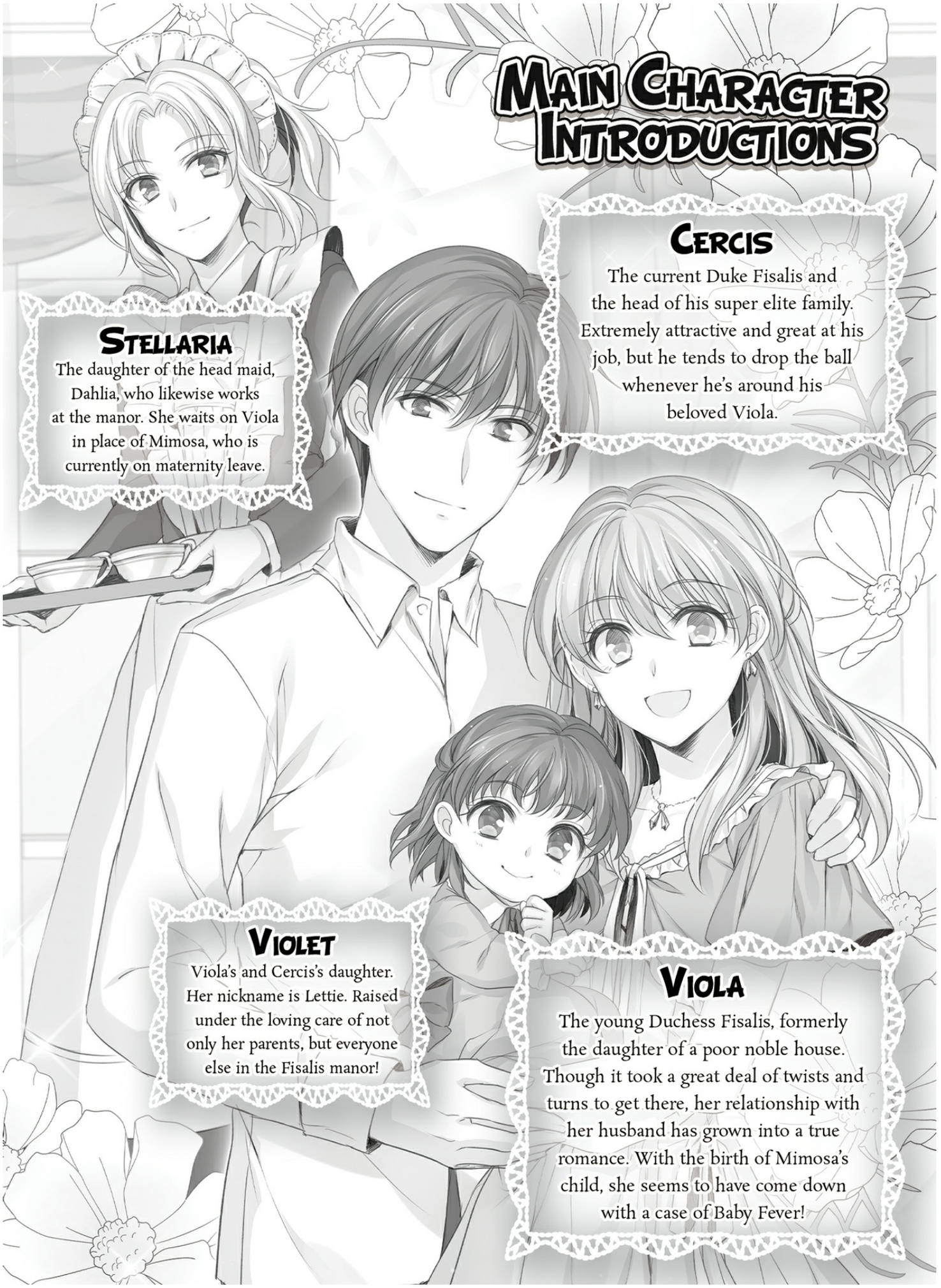

Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?!
8
~The Contract Couple's Happily Ever After~
Author: Tsuredurebana
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Main Character Introductions
Cercis
The current Duke Fisalis and the head of his super elite family. Extremely attractive and great at his job, but he tends to drop the ball whenever he's around his beloved Viola.
Stellaria
The daughter of the head maid, Dahlia, who likewise works at the manor. She waits on Viola in place of Mimosa, who is currently on maternity leave.
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!
Viola
The young Duchess Fisalis, formerly the daughter of a poor noble house. Though it took a great deal of twists and turns to get there, her relationship with her husband has grown into a true romance. With the birth of Mimosa's child, she seems to have come down with a case of Baby Fever!

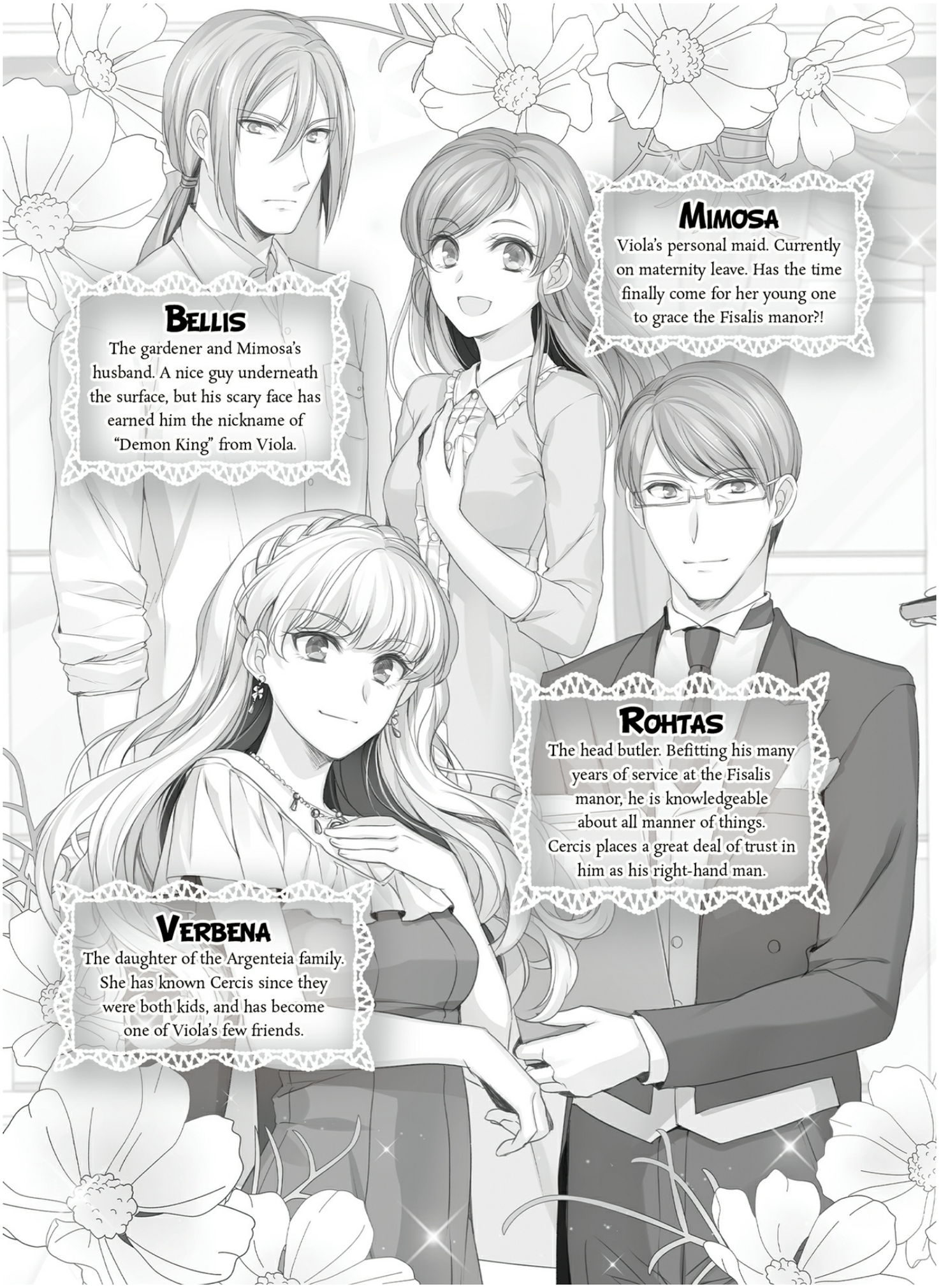

Mimosa
Viola's personal maid. Currently on maternity leave. Has the time finally come for her young one to grace the Fisalis manor?!
Bellis
The gardener and Mimosa's husband. A nice guy underneath the surface, but his scary face has earned him the nickname of "Demon King" from Viola.
Rohtas
The head butler. Befitting his many years of service at the Fisalis manor, he is knowledgeable about all manner of things. Cercis places a great deal of trust in him as his right-hand man.
Verbena
The daughter of the Argenteia family. She has known Cercis since they were both kids, and has become one of Viola's few friends.

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Prologue

"Wewcome home, Daddy!" exclaimed our home's own little Princess Violet as she flung herself at her father—Cercis, the duke of Fisalis. Our Violet—or Lettie, as we call her—was such a big daddy's girl that she'd jumped at the chance to be the first to greet her father at the door, dashing down the hall with light steps and throwing herself right into his arms.

Violet was the apple of his eye, so Mr. Fisalis caught her and lifted her up off the ground without a second thought. "I'm home, Lettie. Were you a good girl while I was gone?"

"Yeah!" she answered, flashing him a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

So cute!

Apparently I wasn't the only one who'd been thinking that exact thing; a smile rose not only to Cercis's face, but to the faces of the rest of the servants standing around too—our butler Rohtas and the head maid Dahlia among them.

Aww, look! This little angel of ours has the power to put a smile on anyone's face!

It was a snapshot of an incredibly normal—no, a *happy* family's life. Whoever could have predicted that a future like *this* awaited us back when we first got married?

*

I, Viola Mangelica Fisalis (née Euphorbia), and my husband, Cercis Tinensis Fisalis, began our relationship purely as a marriage of convenience...or more accurately, a *contract* marriage. Worse, it was an unequal treaty—one the words "balanced" or "well-matched" could never hope to describe.

I hailed from the Euphorbia family, an impoverished noble house—and one saddled with a boatload of debt to boot. Meanwhile, Duke Fisalis was one of the most distinguished aristocrats in all of the Flür Kingdom. That's enough to tell you just how much of a mismatch it was.

On top of that, between how incredibly good-looking and elite he was, Cercis himself was a real catch of a guy. I, on the other hand, was a homely, wilted flower of a lady. Any way you sliced it, he was way too good for me!

Naturally, any marriage *that* unbalanced has got to come with a catch.

And lo and behold—at the time, Mr. Fisalis had a lover named Calendula, and he had to find himself a "show wife" if he hoped to stay with her going forward.

Being a mega-prestigious aristocrat and all, everyone around him was always getting on his case about "getting married" or "producing an heir"—but of course, he didn't want to break up with his girlfriend. And so, this was the solution he arrived at: he would pick any old girl off the street to be his bride.

Given the situation, a noblewoman who actually had feelings for him would have been a non-starter. That's how *I* ended up being the chosen one. Despite Mr. Fisalis being so famous and accomplished that there wasn't a single soul in high society who didn't know his name, I had so little interest in him that I barely even remembered who he was. Honestly, I really have to hand it to him for managing to find a girl like me—though maybe "dig up" would be more accurate.

Seeing as I didn't have a sliver of interest in him, I couldn't have cared less about whatever he did with his girlfriend.

To sum it up, due to various complicated, grown-up circumstances, Mr. Fisalis came to me proposing a contract marriage—one which would allow him to keep a mistress in exchange for shouldering my family's debt.

"You're free to do as you please, of course. I don't mind if you find yourself a lover, so long as you remain discreet about it. Food, clothing, shelter—I promise you will never want for anything."

I must say, that line of his sure left quite the impression on me. Why, I don't think I'll ever forget those words.

In any case, he was happy with the arrangement, and so was I. Seeing as we both only stood to gain from this engagement, I couldn't think of a good reason to refuse. Thus, I okayed it without a second thought!

Amid Mr. Fisalis's ongoing absences, I began my new life at the ducal manor. I

met the butler, Rohtas; the head maid, Dahlia; the chef, Cartham; and the gardener, Bellis. I even had a maid named Mimosa waiting on me hand and foot. Living among them and the rest of the mansion's numerous servants, I never even had the chance to feel lonely. If anything, I may very well have *preferred* having my "husband" out of my hair...

I took his assurance of "you're free to do as you please" and ran with it, blending into the servants' ranks and filling my days with hard, rewarding labor like cleaning and laundry.

But then, in an unexpected twist of fate, Mr. Fisalis actually started to take an interest in me. His girlfriend lost her temper after he began shunting her off to the side in order to spend more time with me, and after the two of them got into a big, dramatic fight in front of everyone, she left the manor for good.

We went through a lot of ups and downs after that.

But these days, the two of us were known throughout Flür high society as "the world's most devoted husband" and "his beloved wife." So much for that whole "show wife" deal, huh?

*

Whoops, I got caught up reminiscing there.

Mr. Fisalis and Violet were still standing in front of me, being as affectionate with each other as ever.

No matter *how* much of a little angel Violet was, I couldn't just hang back and watch their father-daughter bonding moment forever. I hadn't even had the chance to welcome Mr. Fisalis home yet!

"Welcome home, Cercis. Hee hee—Lettie was so excited to talk to you that she's been waiting around in the entryway for ages."

"Thanks, Vi. Oh, but what's that? What did she want to talk to me about?"

"I couldn't say. She's been full of questions these days; maybe she wants *you* to answer 'why this' or 'why that' for her."

Yes, indeed—in recent days, Violet was starting to take an interest in all manner of things, and she'd developed the habit of flagging down the nearest

servant to bombard them with an endless stream of questions.

"I see. Then why don't we have a nice, long chat once we're done with dinner?"

"Okay!" responded Violet, giving her father a tight, delighted squeeze around the neck. *Hmm, I'm starting to get a little jealous over here.*

*

When supper was over and we were unwinding in the parlor, Violet was sitting on Mr. Fisalis's lap, looking pleased as punch.

"Um! Ummm!" Violet blurted out, doing her best to talk even though she still had trouble stringing full sentences together.

Mr. Fisalis looked absolutely enchanted. "Yes, sweetie?"

How precious—they're like the perfect picture of a loving father and daughter, I thought, watching them with a smile as I brought my cup of tea to my lips.

"Why did Mommy and Daddy get mawwied? How did you meet?"

Her perfectly innocent question almost made me spit out my drink.

V-Violet?! That *was what you wanted to ask him?!*

I swallowed my mouthful of tea in such a hurry that I nearly choked. Mr. Fisalis didn't look too thrilled at this turn of events either.


Contract
?

Given Violet's day-to-day interrogations—and given her fondness for Rohtas and Dahlia in particular—I *had* noticed the sharp, dramatic increase in her knowledge of the world, but I never imagined she would turn around and ask her father *that*.

Looking unsure of what to do with Violet's pure, sparkling eyes turned on him, Mr. Fisalis flicked his gaze over to me and Rohtas. That was probably his way of saying, *Help me!*

Hmm, what should I do here? The servants and I have to deal with my daughter's questions day in and day out. Maybe it's for the best if Mr. Fisalis answers this one in his own words!

And so I decided that ignoring him was the way to go.

Rohtas and the rest of the servants seemed to have come to the same conclusion, judging by the way they all glanced off in different directions.

Cottoning on to the implication of those looks, Mr. Fisalis gave Violet an awkward smile. "Let's see... The first time Daddy ever saw Mommy was at an evening party, if memory serves."

"So you liked Mommy first?"

"Indeed I did!"

That's the one thing you can *say with confidence, huh? I guess it* is *technically true. Nobody's saying whether those feelings came before or after the wedding, though!*

"How did you ask Mommy?"

"Huh?"

"Did you say, 'Will you mawwy me?'"

Violet was being awfully pushy today.

If I remembered correctly, Mr. Fisalis had first proposed the marriage in the garden of the Euphorbia manor. And when he did...

"Of course I—" That was as far as Mr. Fisalis got in his explanation to Violet before he trailed off.

You've got "I didn't say that" written all over your face! Makes sense, since I don't remember hearing it either!

That initial encounter had been nothing more than a glorified signing ceremony for our "contract marriage," after all. Together we had hashed out the terms of our marriage and anything else of relevance; everything about it had felt like the conclusion of a business deal. It certainly wasn't anything as mushy as a proposal.

Mr. Fisalis wasn't about to come out and say that, of course, so he was clearly stumped for a response. All the while, Violet kept gazing up at him with those pure, earnest eyes of hers. *Oh dear, he's starting to look a little green about the gills.*

Perhaps it was about time I threw him a lifeline.

"Well, you see, Daddy helped Mommy out when her family was having a tough time! And Mommy was so taken by Daddy's kindness that the two of us decided to get married!"

I mean, it's technically true. But even if it's not a lie*, exactly, it sure doesn't sound right. And it barely makes any sense. But it* sounds *like a good answer, so it'll do!*

Mr. Fisalis was visibly relieved.

"Ohh, I see!"

"Yes. There you have it."

My answer was all over the place, but if it's good enough for Violet, it's good enough for me! It won't be long before she's old enough to start poking holes in it, though, so Mr. Fisalis and I had better get our story straight before she has the chance. This is a highly urgent matter.

But putting that aside...

"What about when I was bown?" Violet launched right into her next question.

"Oh? You want to know about how you came into the world?"

"Yeah!"

She wants to know how we ended up having her, hm? Mr. Fisalis and I each started reflecting back on the past. *Hmm, that one's a long story...*

1. Just Before Violet Was Born

It had been over a year since I, Viola Mangelica Euphorbia, had married Duke Cercis Tinensis Fisalis.

I know I just summed up that whole year in passing, but it was actually a pretty jam-packed and turbulent time. During those twelve months, Mr. Fisalis and I went from having a superficial contract marriage to being a normal couple. And a truly *loving* couple, at that.

Between the “Neighboring Prince Incident” a little while back and the surprise Mr. Fisalis put together for me (a do-over wedding in my own personal garden), it was safe to say that our bonds as husband and wife had grown much deeper.

Meanwhile, I was well on my way to becoming a first-class duchess...*not*!

I was still keeping up with my various etiquette lessons; however, being such a fast learner, I’d more or less mastered every subject (by my standards, anyway), so these days my lessons amounted to little more than laid-back review sessions. Of course, it was going to take more than mastery of the basics to make me “first-class,” but at least I was making progress there.

As a dyed-in-the-wool impoverished aristocrat, I’d settled into my life at the manor more as “a fellow servant” than “the lady of the house.” The second my husband left for work, I would rush to change into my maid uniform and take my meals with the rest of the staff. For lunch, I would eat in the servants’ dining room, sitting among the chattering maids and chowing down on a staff meal. Now that’s what I call pure bliss!

Any days where I didn’t have to socialize were devoted to cleaning the mansion, doing the laundry, and working in the garden! Nobody was going to stop me now!

*

The day had started out with gorgeous weather, making it the perfect chance to do some cleaning.

Once I'd seen Mr. Fisalis off, I jumped at the chance to switch into my maid uniform.

"I bet the laundry will dry nice and quick in this weather! Hee hee—oh boy, I'm pumped!"

"Now there's a line I never thought I'd hear from such a well-to-do lady... Well, I suppose I can let it slide," said Stellaria, heaving a sigh as she helped me get changed. She had an air of resignation about her. *Good. Knowing when to quit is an important life skill☆*

She tied back my hair for me, and then it was time to get to work.

We finished the laundry before lunchtime; in the afternoon, I went about polishing the windows. I left the really high places to the other servants, focusing instead on wiping down whatever my hands could reach. Anywhere too far off the ground would take a ladder to get to, so Rohtas and company would start yelling that it was too dangerous if I even tried. I really wished they'd let me have a go at it at least once—I was hardly a child!

Oh, wait... Part of the reason they act like that is because I climbed a tree without asking and fell on my butt once. (I've only got myself to blame for this, huh?)

Everyone was still so gosh darn overprotective of me, though.

Brushing my disgruntlement aside, I did my share of the chores, going from room to room and making the windows shine. Hustle, hustle. Squeak, squeak.

Whew. I've been cleaning windows ever since I lived with my parents, so I can give the servants a run for their money in experience here. I may be an amateur when it comes to technique, but I'm *the one who bestowed the art of cleaning with citrus peel unto the manor! Besides, spending every day working among these first-class servants has got to be strengthening my skills. I'm not what you'd call "the best of the best," no—but I'm around the same level as your average servant, if I do say so myself!*

Okay, I got a little carried away tooting my own horn there. Sorry about that.

As I carried on with the cleaning, lost in my own dumb thoughts, the Window Wiping Squad (myself included) finally made it to the room next to the

entrance. From here, it was quite easy to spot anyone coming in or out of the manor.

Uh-oh, here comes someone right now. From this distance, all I can tell is that the mystery guest is dressed in a crimson... Hmm? Wait just a minute, isn't that a knight's uniform—and more specifically, the same one worn by Mr. Fisalis's Royal Guard?!

He drew closer and closer. And then—*bam.*

Shoot! I made eye contact!

With whom, you might ask?

Why, the uniform-clad Mr. Fisalis, of course!

H-Hold on a second! Why is he coming back to the manor at this *hour?! It's not even afternoon teatime yet!*

Clearly I wasn't the only one surprised; Mr. Fisalis was staring back at me goggle-eyed.

Oh, crud! I'm in my MAID UNIFORM!

"It's Cercis! He's home!" I shouted, hastily peeling myself away from the window and informing my fellow cleaners.

"What?! Master Fisalis is back from work already?!"

"This is a disaster! Madam, head to your room and change clothes at once!"

"We'll tidy up after you, so get going!"

Faced with the untimely return of their master, the Cleaning Squad went into panic mode.

"Got it! I'll leave the rest to you guys!"

I did as the servants directed, dropping my cleaning supplies and dashing off to the bedroom as fast as my legs could carry me.

I need to hurry and get changed before Mr. Fisalis comes inside the mansion!

Unfortunately, just as I had left the room behind and started running for the stairs, the jig was up!

“What’s going on? Care to explain?” came a voice, paired with an oh-so-sweet smile.

Mr. Fisalis had made it to the entryway one step ahead of me, and there he was blocking the path to the stairs, his arms crossed. He knew me too well.

It’s over. So long, my fun servant life...

*

I recalled a similar scene once playing out between the two of us, right around when we first got married.

One time, when I was wearing my maid uniform and doing chores around the house, Mr. Fisalis had just happened to pass by and catch me in the act. Back then, however, he hadn’t realized who I was. He wasn’t the least bit interested in me at the time, so he had just assumed I was the latest young addition to the staff.

But now...

After getting dragged off to the parlor, still in uniform, I took my usual spot on the sofa next to Mr. Fisalis.

“Tell me, Vi... What, precisely, were you doing dressed like *this*?” my husband asked, lifting the hem of my uniform’s apron ever so slightly.

He didn’t sound angry; if anything, his tone was quite gentle. Somehow that made me even *more* scared, though.

“Uhh... I was cleaning with the servants,” I mumbled in response. I drew in on myself as much as possible, and I did my best to keep my voice just as small as the rest of me.

There was no point in lying here—he’d caught me red-handed, after all!—so I chose to come out and tell him the truth.

“Yes, that’s about what I expected. I’m not sure what else this *could* have been. Then my next question is this: how long have you been doing this?” he followed up, sounding no less mild than before. No matter *how* soft his tone was, however, the fact that he was in full uniform made this feel a lot like a cross-examination...

“Since morning.”

“I didn’t mean when you got started *today*. I meant in general.”

No dice, huh? I’d hoped playing dumb might work, but sadly, he saw right through it.

“Oh! Pretty much since I arrived at the manor, then. Tee hee☆”

Time to bust out my signature move, “Laugh It Off”! I flashed him a dazzling smile.

“What do you mean, ‘since you arrived at the manor’?”

“Since we first got married...I guess?”

At that, my husband heaved the loudest sigh I’d ever heard out of him, then looked over at Rohtas. “You lot...*had* to have known about this, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir.” Rohtas, who had been hanging back behind us, gave a quiet nod. *Well, yeah, it would’ve been impossible for him* not *to know.*

It wasn’t just Rohtas, either; Dahlia and the rest of the servants in the room all bobbed their heads meekly.

“Seriously?” Mr. Fisalis was shocked to see everyone else confirm it. *You were just about the only one who* didn’t *know!* “Rohtas, what is the meaning of this?” he then demanded, glaring at his butler.

Hold on, I don’t like where this is going. Is this about to end with him furious at Rohtas and all the rest of the servants? Is he going to be like, “It was your *job to stop the duchess from mingling with the staff and demeaning herself”?*

Nooo, I can’t let that happen! I made *them humor me, so it’s not the servants’ fault! If he’s going to get mad at anyone, it should be me!*

“Rohtas and everyone didn’t want to let me do it, but I *made* them! I wasn’t exactly brought up as a sheltered maiden, so I couldn’t stand the thought of staying put in the mansion all day long; if I didn’t have anything better to do, I figured I might as well help the servants out with their work! Besides, you’d told me I was free to do as I pleased back then!” Before Rohtas could even open his mouth, I launched into my own explanation.

Mr. Fisalis's head snapped to face me. His eyes went wider and wider the further I got into my spiel, but by the end, he just held his head in his hands and said, "I'm having trouble understanding how you would arrive at *that* conclusion..."

Oh? He doesn't get it?

"Huh? I mean, given the situation, there was no telling *when* you might relieve me of my position and kick me out of the manor. In that case, I figured I might as well learn a few things from your top-notch servants while I was here. What could be more enticing than getting first-rate tutoring for free?! That way, when I moved back in with my parents, I'd have the skills to jump straight into the workforce!"

I was all ready to strike out on my own!

"*That's* what you were thinking, Vi?" Though I'd been quite confident in my answer, Mr. Fisalis looked absolutely dumbfounded. *Was that a little too blunt?*

"Yeah!"

Of course, I didn't think that *now*. Still, it was fun to do all kinds of tasks with the servants, so I couldn't bring myself to quit.

I'd given him what I thought was a good answer, a smile on my face. And yet...

"I would *never* relieve you of your position! To the contrary, you only become more and more precious to me with each passing day! Don't ever say something so terrible again—not even as a joke!"

"Eep!"

Having gotten himself all wound up, Mr. Fisalis pulled me into a tight hug.

*

"If this is something you want to do, go right ahead. Nothing that transpires within the walls of our manor would ever be leaked to the outside world. Isn't that right, Rohtas?"

"Indeed, sir." The butler nodded.

"That no one outside the manor has heard a word of this thus far is proof

enough of that. Myself included... Now, hold on just a second! Does that mean *I* count as an outsider?! Say what?!”

That silly Mr. Fisalis went and pointed out the hidden implication in his own words. Even worse, he was actually getting upset over it. The servants’ shoulders were shaking with mirth. Not that I had much room to talk, since I was doing my best to stifle a laugh of my own.

Anyway, what mattered here was that I’d gotten the okay from my husband to do as I liked!

“Thank you so much! I’ll keep doing my very best to make our manor a comfortable place for you to be when you get home!”

And that’s a Viola guarantee☆

“Good grief! If you’re going to be so *cute* about it, there’s no way I could tell you no. I only ask that you don’t do anything too dangerous. Got it?”

“Loud and clear! Nobody ever lets me try stuff like that anyway!”

“Oh? Name some examples.”

“Well, I’m not allowed to use ladders or step ladders to reach high up places!”

“Good—Rohtas, Dahlia, keep enforcing that rule. I’m counting on you.”

“Yes, sir,” Rohtas and Dahlia both responded to their master’s order, drawing their mouths into firm lines.

I suppose I’ll never see the day when I can climb a step ladder and clean all those hard-to-reach windows, huh?

2. Mr. Fisalis Got Viola-tized?

The jig was finally up: I'd been putting on a maid uniform to go about cleaning, doing the laundry, and more while Mr. Fisalis was away. For my part, I'd been certain that getting busted was going to spell the end of my carefree servant life.

But wouldn't you know it, Mr. Fisalis had been totally open-minded about the whole thing, and now I was doing it with my husband's full permission! Though naturally, it was to remain a secret to the rest of the outside world☆

I've got a lot more flexibility now! This ought to be a huge improvement to my quality of life—a big thanks to my magnanimous husband!

That said, I wasn't about to parade around in full uniform in front of Mr. Fisalis. Whenever he was home, I would wear a proper dress—my "good wife" style.

*

One morning, I was seeing my husband off as per usual.

"I won't be getting home until late today, so go ahead and have dinner without me," he said to me and Rohtas, the thought occurring to him just as he was heading out the door.

"Are things getting busy at work again?"

"Not exactly. There's a royal council this evening, that's all," he replied, flashing me a pleasant smile. He then went on to add, "But why *did* His Majesty have to schedule his meeting *then*? Whatever—I'll do my best to wrap it up and get home to you as quickly as possible."

For that last comment, he spun around and glared in the general direction of the royal palace. *What, is he trying to cast some kind of spell on them?*

"Don't rush through it! Make sure you discuss everything properly!" I chided Mr. Fisalis amid his grumblings. Knowing *my* husband, he was liable to say

something like, “Let’s get this worthless meeting over with” right to the king’s face.

“I won’t, I won’t. That’s precisely why I can’t say how long the meeting might end up taking. I won’t ask you to wait around for me if I have no idea when I’m going to get home.”

“Copy that!” I answered, a contented smile overtaking my features despite myself. After all, if Mr. Fisalis was away, that meant I would get to eat dinner with the servants in their own dining room!

When he saw how pleased I was by the news, Mr. Fisalis started sulking. “Why is it that you get so very animated in moments like this...?”

Oh dear—is it just me, or are those beautiful, dark-brown eyes of his getting a little misty? No, it’s definitely just me. Definitely just my imagination running away with me.

“Come now, I wouldn’t say *that*! Anyway, good luck at work today!”

I saw him off with an even brighter smile than usual.

*

“Hee hee hee... I wonder what’s on the menu today!”

I was heading to the servants’ dining room, an extra bounce in my step.

I’d spent the whole day putting my all into the cleaning and laundry. Though I’d already had a staff meal for lunch, it had been so long since I’d had a servant *dinner* that I was practically on cloud nine. It was like I’d been transported right back to the very beginning of my marriage!

“For tonight’s dinner, it seems we’ll be having grilled chicken—the Cartham Special,” Stellaria explained as I skipped down the hall.

“The Cartham Special?! My mouth is watering already! Oh man, I can’t wait to see what it is!”

“When he heard how much you were looking forward to the meal, he decided to pull out all the stops.”

“Yay!”

Though it goes without saying that the formal dinners he made for the exacting Master Shift were amazing, the more laid-back meals he whipped up as the friendly neighborhood chef were always tantalizingly delicious in their own right! Now that I knew today was going to be a “special” on top of that, I was beyond hyped to see what he had in store for us.

By the time I arrived at the servants’ dining hall, there was already a delightful smell wafting through the room. With the spicy scent of the herbs stimulating my appetite, my hunger was reaching critical status. *C’mon, let’s get ready to eat!*

“Come get your spoons!”

“Here’s the forks.”

“I’m putting the cups down over here, so everyone help yourself.”

“Okay!” came the chorus of replies.

After the maids and I were done laying out the cutlery, I went to the kitchen to get my food. The servants’ dining room was self-service, more or less. Every now and then the maids would fetch me something or clear away my plate, but I did my best to follow the house rules!

I helped myself to my share of Cartham’s cooking and a piece of bread, then quietly took my seat.

Drowning in colorful vegetable sauce, the grilled chicken was cooked to exquisitely juicy perfection! Now that was “Cartham” *and* a “special” for you!

“Bon appétit!” I cheered.

“Bon appétit!” everyone else mimicked.

Once everyone was at the table, we dug into our meal. I cut up my chicken, happy as a clam.

I picked up a bite with my fork, and then it was ready, set...*munch!*

“Mmmm! This is sooo good!”

The juiciness of the chicken and the perfect balance of the sweet and tangy in the vegetable sauce are out of this world!

“Why, it’s tasty enough to make the exhaustion of a long day’s work slip away!”

“Oh, could you pass me the butter?”

“Here you go.”

I enjoyed the dinners I spent chatting with my husband about this and that (the fact that I could definitively say I “enjoyed” them was a sign of my growth!), but sharing a meal with the crew for the first time in ages was a real blast. *I can’t get enough of this atmosphere!*

“By the way, what’s on the menu for Cercis tonight?” I asked Cartham, who was off in the kitchen.

“His entrée is to be herb-roasted chicken with a light side of grilled vegetables.”

And there you have it. Hmm, so chicken’s still the main course, but Mr. Fisalis’s veggies come as a side. The staff meal had those drizzled on top as part of the sauce.

What the heck does “light” mean in this context, though?

Just as we were all in the midst of licking our lips over this delicious supper, one of Mr. Fisalis’s maids rushed into the servants’ dining room in a panic. “We have a problem, Madam Fisalis! The master is here!”

“Whaaat?! Wasn’t he supposed to be home late today?!”

Taken by surprise, I set my cutlery down on the table and jumped up from my seat. *Wow, that meeting sure must have been over fast! Maybe* too *fast.*

“It seems the meeting was canceled at the last minute due to a change in His Majesty’s schedule.”

“Oh dear... Well, it is what it is—I’d better get a move on! As much as it pains me to put this meal on hold, I’ll be sure to finish it later, so go ahead and set it aside for me!”

I left my half-eaten dinner where it was. I took the stole handed to me by the ever-conscientious maid, pulled it over my current outfit, and rushed to the entryway. The plan was to keep my uniform covered up for now—just to be on

the safe side.

*

“I’m home, Vi!”

“Welcome back!”

When I made it to the entryway, Mr. Fisalis was in the middle of one of his usual talks with Rohtas. As soon as he spotted me there, the look on his face softened. I have to admit, I was always a bit tickled to see those little changes reserved especially for me—but that’s just between you and me, okay?

Once I’d come close enough, he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into a loose hug.

“I managed to get off work a lot earlier than planned. What were you up to, Vi?”

“I was just in the middle of dinner.”

“Aha, I see. Is it that hour already?”

“Have you had anything to eat, Cercis?”

“Nope, not a bite. I’m fairly hungry myself, so why don’t I join you at the table?”

At that, I went totally stiff. “Huh?”

“What do you mean, ‘huh’?” Mr. Fisalis eyed me suspiciously, confused by my strange response. “What’s wrong? If you were in the middle of eating, shouldn’t that mean *my* dinner is ready too?”

So went his logic, but unfortunately, he was a little bit off the mark there. What *I* had been eating was the servants’ meal, not the formal dinner I was supposed to share with Mr. Fisalis.

“Vi?” my husband questioned as he peered into my face, which was frozen in an awkward half-smile.

I slid my gaze away from his dark-brown eyes, then shot the butler beside me a look that said, *How fast can you whip up Mr. Fisalis’s dinner?*

It’ll take some time yet, was the answer I gleaned from our brief moment of

eye contact.

Yeah. That was the answer I should have expected.

“Whatever. I’m starving, so let’s go.” Tired of waiting for somebody to respond to him, Mr. Fisalis eventually just grabbed me by the hand and marched off to the dining room.

However... “Hey, Vi? As far as I can tell, nobody’s touched the dining room. You *did* say you were in the middle of dinner, didn’t you?”

“Uh... More or less.”

When he found zero signs that the dining room was in use, Mr. Fisalis narrowed his chocolate-colored eyes into a squint.

This was an extremely awkward situation for me, so I just glanced off to the side.

“Tell me: what exactly were you eating, and *where*?” he asked with the most gorgeous of smiles, trapping my face between his hands and forcing me to look at him. *N-Nowhere to run!*

“Err... Since I thought you were going to pass on dinner tonight, I went ahead and ate a simpler meal.”

Left with no other choice, I bit the bullet and fessed up. But hey, at least I managed to keep the “where” and “with whom” parts of it hidden!

“Hmm. A simpler meal—I see. But where?”

Nooo! Did you have *to go splitting hairs?! I purposely omitted that part! You’re not supposed to press me on that! Learn how to take a hint, Mr. Fisalis!* But of course, I couldn’t very well come out and *say* any of that.

“...The servants’ dining room,” I answered as quietly as possible.

“Vi... You mean to tell me your exploits don’t stop at the maid uniform, cleaning, and laundry?”

“Uh... More or less.”

“Well, it is what it is, I suppose. So, what were you eating?”

“Huh?! You’re just *fine* with this?! Erm, it was today’s staff meal.”

I never imagined I'd see my husband let me off the hook twice over! Is this really okay?!

Mr. Fisalis made a dubious face when he learned what my dinner had been. "Hmm... My first thought was that it sounds just like something you'd do—is that a sign that I'm too soft on you, I wonder? Did you enjoy dinner, at least?"

The way his expression had shifted into a strained smile by the end of that was a sign that he was definitely *way* soft on me!

"You bet it was! Today was the Cartham Special!"

"Huh, that *does* sound pretty tasty."

I did a one-eighty from the meek attitude I'd had going into this conversation, cheering right up the second I remembered how good the food had been. The look on my face must have been enough to tell Mr. Fisalis just how delicious it was, seeing as that awkward smile soon gave way to his usual dazzling grin.

"It was absolutely scrumptious! And it wasn't just the *taste* that was good. For a staff meal, it was a real feast for the eyes. Why, it felt like a waste to leave it unfinished. Oh, but still—Cartham's food is so good, it even tastes great cold."

I managed to hammer home the wonders of Cartham's cooking!

And then...

"The 'staff meal' shouldn't be too hard to whip up on short notice, should it? Perhaps I'll give it a try myself. Would that work, Rohtas?"

For a second there, I couldn't even process what he was saying! I never thought I'd hear a request to eat the same meal as the servants leave *Mr. Fisalis's* mouth!

"...If you're quite certain, Master."

Rohtas likewise went wide-eyed for a moment, but it wasn't long before his face eased into its usual expression and he gave the okay.

*

I'd never dreamed the day would come when my husband would be eating the staff dinner in the main dining room.

And yet now, the meal set out before him was not “herb-roasted chicken with a light side of grilled vegetables,” but “Cartham’s Grilled Chicken Special.” It was the exact same dinner the staff and I had been eating in the servants’ dining room not too long ago.

Mysteriously enough, even *that* managed to look like a lavish dinner when it was laid out before him. Incidentally, the exact same dish (or rather, my leftovers from earlier) was sitting in front of me, but mine somehow looked like an entirely different meal... Was this what they called “the halo effect”? (It’s not, I know.)

Regardless, I had to hand it to Mr. Fisalis’s good looks for making even a servants’ meal look truly gourmet.

While I was busy scrutinizing my husband (and his dinner), he had begun to dig into his food.

“It looks simple, but it tastes as great as ever.” After taking an elegant bite off his fork, Mr. Fisalis seemed surprisingly satisfied with what he was eating.

“I know, right?! That’s why I just can’t resist the siren call of the staff meals!” I said, once again stressing the point with all my heart and soul.

“But if it’s the servants’ food you’re after, couldn’t you just ask Cartham? There’s no need for you to go out of your way to eat in their dining room,” he commented, another dubious look on his face. *He really doesn’t get it.*

“I’d hate eating in this giant dining room all by myself. It feels so lonely.”

“Lonely? Should I take that to mean it wasn’t your first time dining in there?”

“Oh, definitely not.”

“And how long has *that* been going on?”

“Uh... Since I first arrived at the manor, pretty much.”

“...I’m getting déjà vu.”

“I mean, before I came here, I would always eat dinner with my whole family around the table! Dining all by my lonesome in a strange, new home was too much to take. That’s when I pressured the servants into letting me eat in their dining room.”

It feels like I threw some shade on Mr. Fisalis there, but eh, he'll get over it.

"Right... Uh, my bad," he replied, refusing to look me in the eye. *Wow, he's sharp! Looks like he perfectly understood what I was getting at there.*

"Cercis?"

"Oh, sorry... Anyway, if you're ever feeling lonely while I'm away, feel free to go eat with them."

"Really?!"

"Yeah."

"Thank you so much!"

I was two seconds away from jumping for joy and throwing my arms around my husband!

I did it! I got the okay not only to wear my maid uniform and do the cleaning, but to eat in the servants' dining room too!

With that out of the way, nothing was ever going to stop me from living my best life!

3. Rohtas's Proposal

The fact that I spent most days wearing a maid uniform and joining the servants' ranks to clean and do laundry—not to mention eating staff meals in their dining room—was finally out of the bag to Mr. Fisalis.

And yet, not only did he *not* order me to stop—he even said the equivalent of, "Well, why not?" and gave me the official go-ahead!

With that episode behind us, I spent each day hard at work alongside the servants, an extra touch of pep in my step. Such was the relaxed daily life I enjoyed as a duchess. It was probably quite different from the life everyone else had envisioned for me, but who was I to care about that?

*

Just as I thought things had finally settled down between me, my husband, and the mansion as a whole, there was a certain big...incident? Event?

Wouldn't you know it, the very glue holding our estate together—uh, I mean, *Rohtas*—got married!

For my part, I hadn't even realized he'd had a girlfriend. It was once again as I was cleaning that I happened to learn the truth.

I was surreptitiously going about my work that day, you see...

*

Upon receiving a summons from the king instructing them to "show up to an evening party every now and then," Father and Mother Fisalis had traveled up to Rohze from their home in Pied de la Montjuc, and as per tradition, the couple was currently staying in our cottage.

"Now that my in-laws are here, I'd better be extra careful."

"You have an interesting idea of what constitutes 'being careful.'"

"Oh, it'll be fine!"

Ignoring that barb from Stellaria, I went about my chores as discreetly as possible.

Neither of my in-laws were home at the moment, as they'd both been summoned to the royal palace first thing in the morning. Since they weren't around anyway, I would've hated to waste the day keeping up my "prim and proper lady" act. I'd changed into my maid uniform, joined up with the servants, and was currently having the time of my life cleaning.

"No window wiping for you today. It'd be too easy to spot you from outside."

"Okie-dokie!"

When it came time to clean the windows in the room next to the entryway, one of the maids asked that I desist. No one could see inside the mansion when the curtains were drawn, but whenever we did the window cleaning, everything was on full display. The fact that we had a clear view to the outside meant that the reverse held true too. Besides, that was exactly where Mr. Fisalis had caught me red-handed.

I opted to be a good little girl and polish the furniture instead.

Wow, the chairs and tables are all a beautiful, lustrous chestnut! That's antique quality for you.

Mesmerized, I polished the various furnishings one by one, leaving a chest positioned near the window for last—and that was when I spotted someone walking back to the manor.

It was Rohtas.

He had the day off, so I assumed he must have gone out somewhere. That clearly hadn't been a *solo* excursion, however—there was a lady walking right alongside him!

"It's Rohtas! And that woman with him is...Amaryllis, I think? Mother Fisalis's personal maid."

Heedless of how easy I was to spot from the outside, I pressed myself up against the window. I stared holes into the man outside, wondering if perhaps it was some other servant who just bore a striking *resemblance* to Rohtas—but

no, that was definitely him.

“Did they happen to bump into one another when he went out for a stroll? Or was it a date? Oh, a date would be so much more romantic!” I squealed, practically bursting with excitement. But meanwhile...

“Oh, it’s Amaryllis.”

“They were probably on a date.”

“I’m not surprised; it’s perfect weather for an outing.”

The other maids just gave me the brush off! *Seriously, guys?!* Rohtas *found love, of all people! This is big news!*

“Whaaat?! How can none of you care about this?!” I protested. “We just caught Rohtas in the middle of a date!”

“I mean, it’s hardly anything out of the ordinary.”

“It’s a bit late to be surprised.”

“Quite.”

My objections were summarily shrugged off.

“Huh?!”

It’s a bit late?! It’s hardly anything out of the ordinary?! What are they talking about?!

“Come now, if we don’t finish up the cleaning soon, the old duke and duchess might just walk in on us!”

Here my confusion was only growing with each answer they gave, and yet they barely even acknowledged my distress!

Oh, right, the cleaning! Gotta finish before Mother and Father Fisalis get back.

As for the date? You better believe I’m going to get the f-u-l-l story from the man himself later on!

*

“Oh, Rooohtas! Wherever did you go today?”

“Oh? Were you cleaning the room by the entryway again, Madam?”

“Sure was!”

“You ought to know from experience that you run a great risk of being seen from the outside there. The former duke and duchess didn’t spot you, I hope?”

“Nope! I was being super careful!”

“That’s reassuring, at least. And you didn’t climb to any hard-to-reach places?”

“Of course not!”

“I appreciate all your hard work today.”

“It was my pleasure! Wait... Huh?”

“Is something the matter, Madam?”

Hmmm? What were we talking about, again?

I’d come to Rohtas planning to ask him about his date, but before I knew it, I was giving him a report on the daily housework instead... *Ahhhh! He completely dodged the question! Looks I’m still far too green to take on Rohtas and win!*

Determining that a change in target was in order, I tried going after Amaryllis next.

Amaryllis wasn’t someone I’d call a knockout beauty, per se; more accurately described as “cute” than “gorgeous,” she had a gentle sort of aura about her. She was a comforting presence, you might say. I could easily see how Rohtas, who always seemed to be busy with something, would be drawn to a warm, charming lady like her. Yeah, this checked out for sure.

“So? How long have you been seeing Rohtas?” I asked, cutting right to the chase.

Seeing as the two of us had barely interacted before, she’d been left to wonder what on earth she could have done to warrant me pulling her aside—only for the first question out of my mouth to be about her beau. Although she was initially taken aback by this bizarre development, it slowly dawned on her what exactly I was asking. She blushed and replied, “Um... It’s been six or seven years now, I believe. We began our relationship not long before my master left to go live in his territory.”

“It’s been *that* long?! Wow, and the two of you have been apart for so much of your time together... That’s so sad.”

“Perhaps, yes...but we’ve grown used to it by now.” She smiled with something like resignation.

A long-distance relationship, huh? Just missing him is one thing, but doesn’t she ever worry about him cheating on her? Or... Nah, this is Rohtas we’re talking about here; I couldn’t imagine him ever being unfaithful. Heck, I’d be willing to bet money on that.

Hm? What about Mr. Fisalis, you ask? I wouldn’t have to worry about him either...I think. Though it didn’t end up lasting too long, we have *gone through that once before. With all those letters he was writing me, I doubt he’d even have time to find himself another girl.*

“But if you’ve been together so long, how come you’ve never gotten married? I’m sure you’ve had plenty of good opportunities.”

Like when Father and Mother Fisalis first went back to their territory, for example, I was about to add, but Amaryllis spoke before I could. “The timing never quite worked out for us. Just as we’d gotten settled in our relationship, the former duke and duchess decided to retire. And after that, Rohtas always had his hands full with work...” She forced a smile after that last part, as though it was awkward for her to mention.

That was totally Mr. Fisalis’s fault, wasn’t it?!

Amaryllis had done her best not to name names, but Father Fisalis’s retirement coincided with him handing the headship of the family over to my husband. That *also* happened to be when Mr. Fisalis was at his most incompetent. Back then, he’d spent all his time cooing over his girlfriend in the cottage, blowing off whatever tasks he was supposed to do around the estate and leaving everything in his butler’s hands. No wonder Rohtas could never catch a break.

I’m sorry. I am so, so sorry!

Who could have known the fallout of Mr. Fisalis’s negligence would be so widespread? It pained me to see it.

“Oh no, I feel just awful... I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! Allow me to apologize on Cercis’s behalf. Trust me, I’ll be sure to give him a stern talking-to later! So... I know it’s not right of me to ask you this, but do you think you could find it in your heart to forgive him? Or if that’s too much, at least not hold it against him...?”

Since Mr. Fisalis wasn’t around to speak for himself, I apologized hard enough for the both of us.

The minute you get home, I’ve got a lecture waiting for you, young man!

“Oh, I would never think ill of him! It’s not the young master’s fault, I assure you,” she insisted, encouraging me to play nice with my husband. *Gosh, what a sweet lady.* “Of course, ever since he married you, the master and madam have gotten into the habit of visiting Rohze much more often. I’ve had a great deal more chances to see Rohtas than I used to.”

“Well then, I bet you’re really happy to have this chance to be together now!”

“Huh? Oh, well...yes, I suppose so.”

Amaryllis’s bashful smile had such a soft, tender vibe to it that it made *me* feel happy just standing beside her. Plus, the kind way she worried more about hurting my feelings than her own? Yeah, I’d been right on the mark with the whole “comforting presence” thing.

*

Fast-forward to a few days later.

It was time for Mother and Father Fisalis to return to their territory. Under normal circumstances I would be silently rejoicing over regaining my freedom, but it was hard to feel too good about it this time around. After all, their return home meant separating Rohtas and Amaryllis once more.

Say, could this be my chance to do them a solid? It’s about time I cleaned up Mr. Fisalis’s mess!

“Pardon me, Mother Fisalis. Would it be at all possible for you to leave Amaryllis with us?” I begged my mother-in-law, having barreled into their cottage right as everyone was bustling around packing their things.

“Amaryllis? But whatever for? Have you taken a shine to her, Vi?” Mother Fisalis returned my sudden imposition with a blank stare.

“Er, not exactly... I mean, there *is* that too... But no! The truth is, Rohtas and Amaryllis are in a relationship, so I’d hate to see the two of them torn apart!”

I debated how I ought to explain myself, but in the end I decided that honesty was the best policy here. *Sorry for spilling your secrets, Rohtas and Amaryllis!*

Still, considering how nice my parents-in-law were, I just knew they’d understand.

“What?!”

“Really?!”

This was clearly news to them, judging by the way they glanced over at Amaryllis with looks of surprise.

With all eyes now turned on her, the maid once again turned red as a beet, only managing to squeak out: “Y-Yes...”

After that, Mother and Father Fisalis went through all the same questions I’d asked earlier.

Once she’d heard the full story behind Rohtas and Amaryllis’s romance, my mother-in-law threw her arms around her servant and cried, “Why didn’t you say something sooner?! If I’d known, I never would have dragged you off to our territory!”

“Rohtas! How could you neglect to tell us something this important?!” Father Fisalis demanded, though the butler in question wasn’t around to answer.

“I’m sorry—I’m so sorry! We never would have done it had we known, but we still kept you away from your love for so long!”

“Forgive us, Amaryllis!”

Just as I would have expected from such a kindhearted pair, the former duke and duchess apologized profusely to their maid.

Looks like everything worked out!

“So... Mother, Father? Now that you know the situation, would you be willing

to let Amaryllis stay with us?" As much as I hated to cut their theatrics short, I figured I ought to confirm with them.

"Of course! Are *you* all right with that, Amaryllis?"

"Most certainly. Thank you very much."

"It's a shame to lose such an efficient, thoughtful worker, but I'm sure the rest of the girls will work hard enough to make up for it."

Mother Fisalis was fully on board. The rest of her personal attendants, who had stopped tidying up long enough to listen in on our conversation, offered us a smile and a nod as well.

"Thank you, Mother Fisalis!"

"Oh, Madam...!" I caught Amaryllis wiping tears from her eyes.

"While we're at it, why don't you two take this chance to get married?" Father Fisalis proposed to the maid.

"What?!"

"That's a great idea, Father!" While Amaryllis looked shocked by the suggestion, I practically jumped on the idea. "Should we hold the ceremony in a church somewhere, you think? Or should we make it a secular affair and use our own garden?"

"That's a wonderful idea! I love the thought of the whole manor getting together to celebrate, so garden it is!"

"I'm glad we're on the same page! What should we do for her dress? Shall we call on Madame Fleur?"

"Yes, let's! We'll need a white tailcoat for Rohtas too."

"No, black would be better!"

With Mother Fisalis getting in on the fun now, we got more and more wrapped up in our excitement, until Father Fisalis suddenly snapped back to his senses and asked, "Uh...*ahem*! Are *you* all right with that, Amaryllis?"

"*I* would be overjoyed...but I'm not entirely sure about Rohtas," she replied, a tiny, uncomfortable smile on her face.

Oh, she's got a point. We need to ask Rohtas what he *thinks about all this. Silly me—I got so carried away that it nearly slipped my mind!*

"She's right, Father! We forgot to ask Rohtas how *he* feels about this!"

"Righty-ho! Someone fetch Rohtas post-haste!"

"Yes, Master!"

My father-in-law's word was law. As soon as he gave the command, one of the maids dashed off towards the main residence.

*

"...So there you have it. Since the plan is to return Amaryllis to this estate, we thought this might be the perfect opportunity for the two of you to get married."

"I see..."

When Rohtas had first come out to the cottage at the behest of the maid, he'd seemed wary of the reason behind the summons, but as soon as Father Fisalis summed up the situation for him, the look on his face had taken a turn for the pensive. I mean, as you'd expect from our unflappable butler, it was only a *very* subtle change in his expression. Still, was something nagging at him?

Rohtas said nothing after his initial response, and nobody else could bring themselves to speak up either. Amaryllis seemed to be getting quite apprehensive about that demeanor of his.

Oh man, I'm not liking the vibes in the cottage living room right now. What should I do?!

While I was on the edge of my seat watching the scene play out, Rohtas's gaze finally softened, a faint, bittersweet smile overtaking his face. "If I were to agree now, it would seem like I was only doing it at Lord Fisalis's behest. What a dilemma."

Huh? What does that *mean?* I tilted my head to one side, wondering what the issue here could be.

He went on, "I would prefer to ask in my own words, rather than simply go along with my master's proposition." There, he turned to Father Fisalis and

asked, “Would that be all right, sir?”

Oh, so that’s *what it was! He’s got a point—it’s important for* him *to do the talking here!*

“Of course!” my father-in-law agreed with a vigorous nod.

Once he had his former master’s permission, Rohtas strode right up to Amaryllis, who was still gazing at him with trepidation in her eyes. “Amaryllis, if you are to be joining us here in Rohze, could I ask for your hand in marriage? I apologize for making you wait for so long. From here on out, I want to stay by your side and keep you safe...as the person you hold closer than anyone else.”

Going down on one knee, Rohtas took Amaryllis’s hands in his and proposed to her.

Dang... That actually sounded super cool. And I cannot believe *he went for a public proposal right in front of all of us! Eeee!*

The pure sincerity in his eyes as he gazed into Amaryllis’s own was enough to make *everyone’s* heart skip a beat. And for the record, that included Father Fisalis!

For her part, Amaryllis went red in the face, nodding her head over and over and over. “Yes... Yes...”

“Oh, I’m so happy! I think I’m tearing up a bit!”

“Goodness, me too.”

Mother Fisalis and I took each other’s hands, sharing in our joy.

“Now that the touching proposal is out of the way, it’s time to start hashing out the details of the ceremony!”

“You’re so right, Mother!”

The two of us were all ready to jump straight into wedding planning, only for Rohtas to step in and intervene. “We aren’t thinking quite that far ahead just yet.”

What are you saying, Rohtas?! A wedding is a once-in-a-lifetime event, you know; it’d be a waste not to have a ceremony! Well, okay... There may be a

certain someone here who got to have hers twice, but I think we can all agree that the first one didn't count.

"You *have* to have a ceremony! Don't you agree, Amaryllis? C'mon, Rohtas, I bet you want to see her all dressed up as a bride too!"

"Well..."

"Perhaps so, but..."

Amaryllis and Rohtas exchanged glances, looking not altogether too displeased with this turn of events. *Going by* that *reaction, I'd say I'm good to give them a little extra push!*

"I like the idea of an informal ceremony in the garden, personally."

"That sounds wonderful! I love it!"

"I knew you'd agree, Mother!"

"That settles it—we're not heading back to our territory until the wedding is over! You're welcome to use as much budget as you need, so let's make it a ceremony to remember."

"You're the best, Father!"

"We need to get Madame Fleur over here ASAP!"

"We'll leave that to you, Stellaria!"

"I'll go let the rest of the servants know!"

"And I'll inform Bellis that we'll be using his garden!"

"Please do!"

My parents-in-law, their maids, and I all jumped into action, brimming with excitement. Rohtas and Amaryllis simply stood back and watched the scene unfold, awkward smiles on their faces.

4. A Sudden Postnuptial Development

“Their long, long, loooong courtship is finally coming to an end.”

“...So it is.”

I was in my bedroom at the moment, in the midst of a little talk with my husband.

Though I was looking down at him with only the sweetest of smiles, Mr. Fisalis’s face kept twitching nervously. *My, how very curious*. He seemed to be *so* intimidated that at some point during the conversation, he had even gotten down on his knees.

But hey, whatever! That wasn’t about to stop me from getting on with my lecture.

“But if you ask me, they really ought to have been given the chance to tie the knot sooner rather than being forced to go their separate ways for such a long, long, loooong time.”

Once again, I took great care to emphasize the word “long.”

“Yes, dear.”

“The only reason they *couldn’t* is that Rohtas always had his hands full with work. Are you with me so far?”

“Of course. I understand *precisely* what you’re getting at, my love.”

When I flashed him yet another smile, Mr. Fisalis gave a vigorous, contrite nod of his head. *Good, looks like we’re still on the same page.*

“Glad to hear it. Now then... Rohtas has worked *quite* diligently to cover for your prolonged absences, wouldn’t you say?”

“Ugh... It’s tough to hear it spelled out for me like this. Even worse when you say it with such a beautiful smile on your face!”

“What was that?”

“Nothing!”

I shot him a look that said, *Cercis? Did I just hear you mutter something you shouldn’t have?* Thankfully, he was quick to duck his head under my piercing glare.

Hmph. I see he has yet to learn his lesson. Well, in that case...

“Rohtas had to settle for a long-distance relationship because a certain *someone* blew off all his duties to go cozy up to another certain *someone* in that cottage! He buried his sadness over being unable to see the woman he loved deep in his heart, slaving away to pick up *somebody’s* slack...!”

“Waaah! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Look, I’ll admit that I was in the wrong there! I get it! I promise it won’t happen again!”

I expressed Rohtas’s and Amaryllis’s heartache on the couple’s behalf, to which Mr. Fisalis responded by freaking out and prostrating himself on the spot.

Hee hee, I’m starting to have some fun with this. I think I’ve done enough messing with him for now, though. All this emotional distress is clearly wearing the poor guy down!

“But now they’re finally getting the chance to marry. And not only that: Rohtas even pulled off a dashing proposal right in front of the whole family! Man, that was so cool! He made everyone’s hearts skip a beat, believe you me.”

“Curse you, Rohtas...”

A gleeful smile spread across my face as I recounted the incident in the cottage earlier that day, which caused Mr. Fisalis to look distinctly unamused. *There’s no point in making it a competition, dear. You don’t stand a chance against him in that department.*

“It’s an indisputable fact that Rohtas knocked it out of the park. Better to just accept it.”

“Ugh...”

“So you see, we decided we might as well take the opportunity to hold a proper ceremony. The couple said they’d prefer a modest affair with only their closest friends, so we figured the garden would be the perfect spot for it.”

“Oh, that sounds nice.”

I perked up the moment it was clear that Mr. Fisalis approved of the idea. “I’ve got a whole lot of preparations to make. First we need to make Rohtas’s and Amaryllis’s wedding attire, and then there’s remodeling Rohtas’s chambers into a two-person room...”

There were a lot of things to take care of in advance of the ceremony.

Instead of stating what I wanted outright, however, I just glanced down at my husband with the best puppy eyes I could muster.

“Feel free to spend as much as you’d like. I’ll cover all of it. Why, it’s no skin off *my* back!” It seemed Mr. Fisalis had picked up on the meaning behind that look, seeing as he was quick to give me the go-ahead.

Father Fisalis had given me free reign with the budget too, but I figured it ought to be Mr. Fisalis doing the heavy lifting here.

“Thank you!”

I beamed. Unlike all those other smiles I’d been giving him, *this* one came from the heart!

After that, the entire mansion went to work on the preparations, and the wedding ceremony went off without a hitch.

*

When the wedding was over, my parents-in-law went home to their territory, and it was back to the usual routine for us—with one new addition to our ranks. As the months flew by, Amaryllis steadily grew into her new life at the Rohze manor.

Then, on one of Mr. Fisalis’s days off...

Once my husband was done plugging away at the work Rohtas had left for him after taking some vacation time of his own, the two of us decided to go for an afternoon stroll. The destination we had in mind was Lognes Forest. This was a lush park that sprawled across the outskirts of Rohze, and it was a go-to relaxation spot for the residents of the royal capital.

“What flowers would be blooming around this time of year, I wonder?”

“It’s been a while since we last visited, so I’ll bet there’s all new varieties of flora now.”

“I can’t wait to see it! I’m only afraid that I’ll want to take some of the flowers back with me if I spend too much time looking at them...”

“Then why don’t we stop at a florist on our way home? Or should I ask Bellis instead?”

“Ooh, I want to go to the florist!”

Mr. Fisalis and I were ambling down the forest’s walking trail, a refreshing breeze blowing past us.

The path stretched on for a while yet, and following it to the end would bring you out into an open field. The meadow boasted a huge pond, and flowers bloomed there in abundance. With that spot in mind as our final destination, we continued along on our lazy stroll.

But when we made it to the end of the forest path and emerged into the field, we were greeted by a shocking sight.

“Huh?” my husband and I muttered dumbly. Having spotted a familiar face dead ahead of us, we both stopped in our tracks.

“...Say, Cercis, am I so tired that my eyes are playing tricks on me?”

“...No, I think *I* might have gone too hard on all that paperwork.” He was staring in the same exact direction I was, frozen to the spot.

You guessed it. Right before us stood none other than Rohtas—along with a little kid.

Though we were still hanging a good distance back, we were close enough to be certain that it really was Rohtas we were looking at. And he was walking around holding the child by the hand, to boot!

The kid looked to be about the same age as my little sister, Freesia. If the outfit was anything to go by, he was a boy...probably.

“Does Rohtas have a son?” I asked in a whisper.

“Not that I’ve heard.”

The way Rohtas caught the boy when he stumbled over his feet sure made them *look* like a father and child, though.

“But Rohtas only *just* got married!”

“My god, you’re right!”

Now that we’d put *that* out there, we found ourselves gripped by a full-scale panic!

“C-C-C-Cercis!” I grabbed my husband by the arm and started shaking him furiously.

“C-Calm down a second, Vi!”

“No can do! How am I supposed to stay calm at a time like this?! What’s going on here?!”

“I couldn’t tell you! Are we sure that’s Rohtas’s son? Are we sure that’s even *Rohtas*?!”

“Rohtas is a newlywed! There’s no way he could have a child that age!”

“For now, we’d better hide. If we kick up a fuss in plain sight, he’s bound to notice us here.”

“Roger!”

With that, the two of us took cover behind a nearby bush.

“Could he be *Amaryllis’s* child, you think?” Mr. Fisalis mused. “I’m pretty sure we don’t have any children around the house...though I couldn’t claim to be certain of that.”

“Huh? No way. There’s never been a single trace of any kids around the manor, and I can state that for a fact!”

Trust me—I’m saying this as someone familiar with every little nook and cranny of the mansion! I even have official permission to use the servants’ dining room now; there’s not a single place that escapes my watchful eye!

“Given how much time you spend in the manor, I don’t doubt you’re right. Hmm... Then what possibilities are left?”

“Maybe he had a secret lover in the town all along? Could he have been

cheating on Amaryllis while the two of them were apart...? No, Rohtas is the last person I'd expect that from!"

We racked our brains as we watched over the pair, but we failed to come up with a satisfying answer.

"Then who on earth could—oh, they're on the move! Vi, hide! They're heading this way!"

"Got it!"

Rohtas and the mystery child had begun walking in our direction. Mr. Fisalis and I rushed to duck our heads.

As the boy strode right past us, I saw that he was quite an adorable child, sporting caramel-brown hair and blue eyes. No doubt he'd eventually grow up into a total heartbreaker—not that any of that mattered particularly at the moment.

Rohtas had gray hair and black eyes, while Amaryllis was a brown-eyed platinum blonde...which meant the genetics here didn't add up. The chance that he was actually their child seemed pretty slim.

"If he *is* Rohtas's son, he must have gotten the brown hair from his mom's side," Mr. Fisalis speculated.

"You think? But his *face* doesn't have a trace of Rohtas in it either."

"Maybe he just *really* takes after his mother."

While the two of us debated in hushed tones, Rohtas and the boy disappeared into the distance—in the direction of downtown Rohze.

"Oh, there they go," I observed.

"Let's follow them!"

"Good plan!"

I was just thinking the same thing! Nodding enthusiastically, I flashed my husband a big thumbs-up.

*

We tailed Rohtas into the downtown area of the capital, keeping just enough

of a distance that he wouldn't spot us. Failing to notice us there, he strolled leisurely down the streets, happily laughing and chatting away with the little guy.

"Just look at the way they're walking hand-in-hand! They *have* to be father and son."

"I think you're right."

"Where do you imagine they're going? Aha! Don't tell me..."

They're on the way to go see the boy's mother! I thought, jumping straight to picturing the worst-case scenario.

"No, let's not assume the worst just yet," Mr. Fisalis asserted. He'd totally read my mind.

Putting that aside, what even is *there in this direction? There's no residential areas, no shopping streets... Oh!*

"If I remember right, wasn't there an academy somewhere out here? You know, that same vocational school all the servants went to."

The place Rohtas was headed certainly wasn't a residential area—it was a district lined with all manner of schools. There was an elite finishing school attended by a bunch of girls from wealthy families, the commoner school I went to, and a training academy for knights-in-the-making—just to name a few. The area also boasted a handful of vocational schools, such as the one I'd just alluded to.

We soon watched the pair pass through the gates of the aforementioned school for servants.

"So they *were* heading to the vocational school."

After some time had passed, Rohtas came back out alone. That had to mean...the boy lived in the dormitories, I guess? The school required every student to live on campus, after all.

"So he lives in the school dorms, hm? No wonder we've never seen him around the mansion."

"Yeah, it all makes sense now! But wait, who cares about *that* part?! What

exactly *is* he to Rohtas, do you think?"

"I haven't the slightest clue myself."

As we watched Rohtas wander off into the distance, Mr. Fisalis and I stewed over the mystery thrust upon us.

What should we do? I think we just witnessed a real scandal!

*

Discovering Rohtas had an illegitimate child *right* after he'd gotten married? What was Amaryllis going to think if she found out?

It was hard to get my spirits up after that whole fiasco.

I ever-so-casually cast a glance Rohtas and Amaryllis's way every now and then, but they weren't acting any differently from usual. If anything, the two seemed closer than ever.

"The boy's name is Quince; he's currently eight years old. He appears to be a distant relative of Rohtas, but he doesn't have any parents. He's living in the vocational school's dormitories for the moment. From the sound of it, he's such an exceptionally bright child that he managed to get his tuition fees waived."

It was two days after the incident. Unable to bear the sight of me so down in the dumps, Mr. Fisalis had pulled some strings (I was pretty sure this was a blatant abuse of authority) to run a background check on the little boy.

"Whoa... I never would have guessed you could dig up *that* much on him with only that one glimpse of him to go on. I'm impressed!"

"I asked whichever of my subordinates had a moment to spare to look into it. Reconnaissance of *this* level is a walk in the park for them."

Yep, that was *definitely* an abuse of authority. Still, I couldn't help but marvel at the skill of the Royal Guard.

"Okay, I get that he's a distant relative, but I still have to wonder about the whole 'no parents' thing."

"It *is* curious."

"You know what, I just don't think that's enough to prove he isn't Rohtas's

secret love child! Maybe he really *is* his son, and Rohtas just lied about him being a relative when he enrolled him in the school!"

"What, seriously? You're being oddly suspicious today, Vi."

"I have to be—for Amaryllis's sake!"

At least we'd learned more about the mystery kid—Quince—but this was going to keep eating at me until we knew all the facts for certain.

Fast-forward to a few days later, after I'd had plenty of time to stew in my suspicions. We ended up getting the truth about Quince straight from the horse's mouth.

To my great surprise, Rohtas came to *us* and said, "I wish to adopt him."

Quince had lost both his parents to illness in quick succession quite a while back, leaving the poor thing orphaned. Since the boy didn't have any close family, the school headmaster had instead reached out to Rohtas, who was a more distant relation. Fortunately, the little boy's grades were good enough that he didn't have to pay his own way through school, but a child his age still needed some kind of emotional anchor in his life.

For Rohtas's part, he hoped to adopt the brilliant young Quince and raise him as his successor (a.k.a. the next head butler of the mansion).

"If that's what the both of you want, I don't mind," replied Mr. Fisalis, giving the okay the moment he heard the particulars of the situation.

"Still, bringing a child his age into your family when you've only just gotten married? Are *you* okay with that, Amaryllis?" That was my biggest concern here, so I made sure to check in with the woman herself.

"Of course. I'm entirely in favor of it, actually," she responded, a delighted smile on her face.

"No objections from me, then! Whew, thank goodness Rohtas didn't actually have a love child!" I blurted out, so relieved that my word-to-mouth filter momentarily stopped functioning.

"What?"

"Huh?"

“Ah...”

Rohtas and Amaryllis both looked taken aback by my slip of the tongue, while my husband just held his head in his hands.

*

Even after being adopted by Rohtas, Quince still had to live in the school dorms, so it didn’t feel like our family at the mansion had grown any larger. The biggest change was just Rohtas and Amaryllis keeping some of their son’s things in their shared room.

It wasn’t too long before Quince came home to the mansion during one of his school breaks.

“You should come stay with us every time you have a day off!” I said to him. “I hope you’ll adapt to life here quickly.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Feel free to ask Viola and Rohtas any questions you have about the manor. If there’s anything you’d like to know about the royal palace in particular, I’d be happy to tell you. Why, I’ll even bring you in for a tour whenever you want.”

“I appreciate it, Master Fisalis,” Quince said, offering me and my husband a polite bow. No wonder Rohtas had sung his praises—he’d even inclined his body at just the perfect angle! I was looking forward to seeing how this kid turned out.

On that note, it sounded like Mr. Fisalis actually planned on paying him some attention. I had to admit, I hadn’t seen that one coming.

Now that I was looking at the boy up close, those blue eyes of his really accentuated his striking features. I’d thought as much before, but now I knew he was *definitely* going to grow up to be a hunk! Oh, but he’d still be no match for our Mr. Fisalis, of course.

“I can’t believe Rohtas is a dad now.”

Rohtas was in the midst of showing Quince around the mansion. Was it just my imagination, or did they already look like the perfect picture of a father and son?

While I was watching over the two of them and mumbling my thoughts to myself, Dahlia smiled and came at me with an unexpected counterattack. “Hopefully *you’ll* be a mother soon too.”

*

“Dahlia’s nagging me for an heir now...”

“Hopefully you’ll be a mother soon”? Way to crank up the pressure, Miss Dahlia!

“There’s no need to rush into things, but I agree with her,” Mr. Fisalis responded, having overheard my tormented mumblings. “Watching Rohtas has me thinking about how much fun it would be to have a child of my own.”

Mr. Fisalis actually wants *to play with kids? I have to say, that still comes as a shock to me.*

“I always assumed you hated kids, Cercis.”

“What? No, not at all.”

“Huh, I see. That’s a little surprising, to be honest.”

“I don’t have much experience with them, but I don’t dislike them. Well...with one exception.”

“Hm?”

5. A Joyous Day

It was one of Mr. Fisalis's days off. He was *supposed* to spend the day knocking out his backlog of work around the manor.

But instead, he came to me and said, "I'd like to try training with *you* for once," thus roping me into joining him for his sword practice. *Way to run from your problems, dearest husband of mine!*

He dragged me to the banquet hall, where Rohtas and the maids were to watch our training session.

The day was devoted to practicing my close combat techniques with my very own husband. I kept going at him with everything I had, yet he would just smoothly sidestep me with a smile on his face! It drove me crazy that he wasn't even breaking a sweat!

It was as I was dueling Mr. Fisalis with a metal practice sword that we got the news.

"Pardon me, Madam Fisalis! Mimosa has gone into labor!"

One of the maids had burst into the banquet hall to deliver that urgent message. I shoved my practice sword into Mr. Fisalis's hands and rushed over to the servant girl.

"Mimosa, you said?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

It's about time!

"Really?" said Rohtas. "In that case, we'd best call for a doctor. Send our messenger out at once."

"Right away!"

"Is there anyone with Mimosa right now?"

"Yes. Dahlia is there."

“Good—that’s a relief. Well then, let’s do what we must in preparation for the doctor’s arrival.”

In full Business Mode, the butler went about briskly handing out orders to the rest of the maids in the room.

“Wow, it’s finally happening! What should I do?!”

“There’s no need for *you* to get so anxious, Vi. All that’s left for us to do is wait for word of her birth and—”

“What are you saying?! I’m going to stay by Mimosa’s side and support her with everything I’ve got!”

“Seriously...?”

Mimosa had stuck by my side ever since I first married into the Fisalis family. What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t cheer her on in her time of need?! As much as it seemed to surprise my husband, I had every intention of being part of this moment.

Just as Rohtas started hurrying off to Mimosa’s room, I raised my hand and asserted, “I’m going too!”

*

Rohtas heaved a deep sigh. “As it turns out, *everyone* ended up coming along for the ride...”

“Ha ha☆”

This was the third floor of the Fisalis manor—the floor with all the servants’ rooms—and we were standing just outside Mimosa’s and Bellis’s chambers. And by “we,” I mean me, Mr. Fisalis, Rohtas, Stellaria, and a few other maids.

Ultimately, every single person who had been watching my match with Mr. Fisalis had tagged along after Rohtas. But no *duh* that was going to happen—we were all so worried about Mimosa!

The corridor was far from narrow, but having a crowd of grown adults standing around sure made it feel a lot smaller. Oh, what’s that? Shouldn’t I have had bigger concerns at the moment, you ask?

“Bellis and Dahlia are all already inside, and the doctor will be joining them shortly. Any more than that is too many people.”

“Okay, I get the picture!”

The doctor showed up before too long, and soon the preparations for the birth were underway. Our usual doctor’s wife—Doctor Granny, as I called her—was handling this particular house visit.

Most doctors who handled childbirth in Flür were female—perhaps because it was easier to call upon a fellow woman in a situation like this. What’s more, Doctor Granny here had a child of her own (and grandchildren too), so we could relax knowing Mimosa was in particularly good hands.

Rohtas checked me at the door, at which I puffed out my cheeks and glared at him.

“Vi, what do you say we go out somewhere to take your mind off all this?” Mr. Fisalis cut in. “We’ll just get in the way if we stick around.”

He just wanted to help distract me from my worries, but unfortunately, I wasn’t about to take him up on that offer today!

“No thanks! Even if we did go out, I know I’d get so worried about Mimosa that I’d end up running straight back home. I’d rather stay here and watch over her!”

“All right, all right.” When he saw that I wasn’t going to budge on this, Mr. Fisalis gave up with a rueful, exasperated smile. “If you insist. I won’t do anyone much good by hanging around, so I’m going to go get some work done in my study. No doubt there’s a stack of papers waiting for me in there—right, Rohtas?”

“Naturally.” His butler gave him the answer we’d all expected.

“Figures.”

A huge pile of papers on Mr. Fisalis’s desk... It wasn’t too hard to imagine.

“It’s my day off, for crying out loud. Have a little mercy on me, will you?” Finally ready to look reality in the eye, Mr. Fisalis trudged down the stairs, grumbling to himself all the while.

Since Rohtas had ordered me not to go inside, I paced back and forth outside Mimosa's chambers, occasionally pressing my ear to the door to hear what was going on in there.

I was a restless bundle of nerves.

The only sounds that ever seemed to come from the room were Mimosa's pained moans. Was the baby not quite coming along yet? Every now and then, I would hear Dahlia or the doctor say something too. Bellis likewise spoke up at one point, but his voice was too gruff for me to make out exactly what he was saying.

Eventually, the suspense became too much for me to bear. I asked Rohtas, "C-Can I take a quick peek inside?" Surely it would be okay to say a *little* something to her.

"As long as you truly do make it quick," he replied, giving me permission.

I cracked the door open juuust a smidge, poked my head in, and offered a few words of encouragement. "Helloooo, Mimosa? Hang in there! I'm rooting for you!" That still counted as staying out of the way, right?

"Thank...you..." Mimosa smiled back at me, though her face remained contorted with pain.

Wow, that looks painful! That's rough—but hang in there! Sorry I can't do much but cheer you on from afar! As much as I wish I could stick around and hold your hand, I'm afraid that's Bellis's job!

I pumped my fist encouragingly, then ducked back out of the doorway. After I'd softly shut the door behind me, it was back to waiting in the corridor.

"Becoming a mom sure seems like quite the ordeal."

Just listening to Mimosa's groans from beyond the door was enough to make my own belly hurt—though that was one hundred percent my own imagination acting up, of course.

I know I was around when Thistle and Freesia were born; did Mother go through all of this pain too? It happened so long ago that my memories are pretty fuzzy.

“I’m sure it is. Not that I would know from personal experience, of course...” Rohtas flashed me an ironic little smile. *Yeah, no kidding.*

Stellaria and the rest of the maids in the corridor all gave a meek nod of their heads in response to his comment. Upon taking stock of everyone around, I realized that not a single one of us had experience giving birth before.

Though that goes without saying for Rohtas, of course☆

“You can do it, Mimosa! I believe in you!”

I did my very best to project those well wishes straight through to the other side of the door!

*

After waiting around for a while without much of anything happening, the Corridor Standby Team was temporarily disbanded. Before we took our leave, though, we made a point of insisting: *When the hour is nigh...swing by and let us know!*

By the time the hour *was* nigh, the sky outside was pitch dark.

We hurried to Mimosa’s room as soon as we were summoned. From the other side of the door came several voices and the sounds of people pacing back and forth, which gave us a rough picture of just how hectic things had gotten in there.

I could hear both Dahlia and Doctor Granny cheering Mimosa on. Sometimes it was advice like, “Remember to breathe!” Or one second they’d say, “Relax!” and then the next it’d be, “Okay, push!”

So which is it?! Didn’t you just totally contradict yourself there? Jeez, childbirth must be a complicated process.

Of course, now was hardly the time to be making wisecracks in my head.

“You think they’re doing okay in there? I hope it won’t be too much longer.”

“I’m afraid there’s little we can do but wait and see.” Rohtas seemed just as concerned as I was.

For a while, everyone just waited with bated breath, practically staring holes

through the door.

“Waaah!”

And then, eventually, we were met with the sound of a powerful wail.

“That’s a baby’s cry! All right! She did it!”

“So it would seem.”

Just as we were all breathing a sigh of relief or jumping for joy in the corridor, the door to the room opened and Dahlia popped her head out into the hall.

“Dah—”

“Ria! Go fetch us more hot water. There should be some ready in the kitchen.”

“Right away!”

“Also, tell some of the other servants to bring us as much fresh linen as they can carry!”

“Yes, Mother!”

Dahlia wasted no time directing her daughter. She was so on the ball that I didn’t have the chance to ask her any questions.

Then, as I was watching Stellaria rush down the stairs, the head maid at last turned to me with a smile and said, “The baby is here. It’s a darling little girl.”

“A girl?! Yay! I’m so happy! How’s Mimosa doing? And what about the baby?” I inquired without missing a beat. Up until now, I’d just had to *assume* what was happening based on what I could hear through the door.

“They’re both doing just fine.”

“Thank goodness! That’s a huge relief. I wish I could go see them, but I bet Mimosa’s all tuckered out.”

“Good call, Madam. We have quite a bit of cleaning up to do in here as well, so later would indeed be better, I’m afraid.”

“Oh well.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as things have settled down.”

“Yes, please do!”

“Hee hee hee. Very well, Madam.”

Considering what a harrowing ordeal Mimosa had just been through, I had to be patient here.

I headed back to the parlor for the time being.

*

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen a newborn! I remember how cute Freesia and Thistle were when they were born; I bet Mimosa’s baby will be just as adorable. Wow, a baby girl...”

Relaxing on the parlor sofa, I couldn’t stop myself from grinning like an idiot. *Man, I hope Dahlia comes to get me soon!*

“This will be my first time seeing one. I don’t have much experience with children, after all.”

Now that he was finally finished with his work, Mr. Fisalis was sipping his tea next to me.

“Oh, true—you are an only child, after all. Well, believe me, newborns are as cute as a button! It’s a bit scary how squishy they are, but just looking at one is enough to put a smile on your face. Their little cheeks are so chubby—why, I could just eat them right up!”

“I’m sure. You know, Vi, if you’re *that* charmed by your siblings or someone else’s kids, I bet when you have a baby of your own—”

“I’ll love them to bits and pieces!” *Duh!*

“Ha ha ha! No surprise there. I’m sure our kid would be quite the little cutie indeed.”

“I’ve heard that boys take after their mothers, while girls take after their fathers. If our daughter inherited *your* looks, I bet you anything she’d grow up to be a real beauty. Oh, that would make her the spitting image of Mother Fisalis, wouldn’t it? Gosh, what a bombshell she’d be!”

“If we had a son, he’d take after you, right? Then I’m sure he’d be a

handsome—”

“Oh no! If we have a boy, he’ll be a total dud—and it’ll be all my fault! Noooo!”

“Vi? Earth to Vi!”

Just imagine how homely that poor boy could be... We need an heir to our family line, of course, but any son I have is gonna be lacking in the looks department... If we’re lucky, he’ll take after Mr. Fisalis more... But now I’m afraid to give birth to a boy!

...Wait, how did I even get onto this subject?

That was where I snapped back onto my senses. Like, hello? I wasn’t even pregnant yet! What’s worse, Rohtas, Stellaria, and all the other servants in the parlor were watching our interaction play out with patronizing looks on their faces!

“*Ahem*. Let’s put that aside for now. Mimosa’s baby is a girl, right? Does that mean she’ll look like Bellis?”

She’s gonna have strong features for sure. Uh...shoot, this is so hard to imagine. All that’s coming to mind is Bellis in a dress...

“...I’m having trouble picturing it.”

“...Same.”

The servants, my husband, and I all lapsed into silence. No doubt we were all struggling to envision a girl who took after our gardener.

A girl with Bellis’s looks... I bet you anything she’ll be a striking beauty. I mean, just look at what a hunk her father is. It took some effort to get there, but now I’m finally seeing it!

Amid all that mindless chatter, Dahlia finally came by to get me. “Madam! Mimosa has had enough time to collect herself; would you like to go see her?”

“It’s about time! I’m on my way! C’mon, Cercis, let’s go!”

“What? You want *me* to come too?”

“Of course!”

“Wha... Oh, fine.”

Dragging my husband along by the arm, I hurried up to Mimosa’s room.

*

When I cracked open the door quietly so as not to disturb anyone, I saw Mimosa and her baby lying on the bed. Naturally, Bellis was sitting right at their side.

“Congratulations! I heard it’s a girl. Let me have a look at her!”

I approached the family, hyped to get an up-close look at a baby for the first time in ages. I could only hope that the way I was practically panting with excitement didn’t make me look like a creep.

“Oh, Madam Fisalis! And the master too! Thank you so much for coming.”

At first Mimosa looked surprised to see that I’d brought my husband along, but after a moment, she broke into a smile and attempted to get to her feet.

“No, please, stay in bed! It’s too soon for you to be up and about. I’ll *order* you to sleep if I have to!”

“Viola’s right. You really ought to be resting.”

Mr. Fisalis and I were both quick to stop her. We went over to her bedside instead.

The baby was fast asleep, snug and cozy next to her mother.

“Eee, she is *so* cute!” I squealed.

“This is my first time seeing a newborn, and I must say, an infant *that* tiny really makes the paternal instincts kick in,” Cercis commented.

“I know, right?”

“Yeah. I want nothing more than to keep her safe.”

I got on my knees beside the bed and leaned in as close as I possibly could. Now I was *really* seeing the little girl up close and personal.

Of course, it wouldn’t do to wake a sleeping baby. No matter *how* badly I wanted to squish those teensy cheeks of hers, the situation called for self-

restraint.

“You can see a bit of Bellis in her eyes,” Mimosa told us, beaming with delight.

Mr. Fisalis and I both glanced over at the man in question. “Ooh...”

“...That’s what *she* thinks, anyway,” Bellis mumbled, turning red to the very tips of his ears. *Oh my gosh, he’s embarrassed!*

“She’ll be cute no matter which of you she takes after! Oh man, I just want to stay here and stare at her forever!”

She’s so cute! “Cute” might as well be the only word left in my vocabulary! Gosh, I wanna rub my cheeks against hers. But no, I mustn’t!

Oh no, I think I’m drooling. I must be making the silliest face imaginable right now. Don’t worry—I’m well aware!

While I went into a state of ecstasy gazing down at her baby, Mimosa smiled at me and said, “Hee hee. If you’re that infatuated with someone else’s little girl, I can only imagine what you’ll be like when you have your own child.”

“I’ll love them to bits and pieces!”

Weird, I’m getting déjà vu. Did I already say that?

*

In any event, the baby came into the world without any complications.

Our family at the Fisalis manor had grown once again!

6. Kids Sure Are Cute

We had gained a new addition to our family at the Fisalis manor: Mimosa and Bellis's baby.

This little girl who took after Bellis so strongly was given the name "Daisy," and everyone in the mansion adored her. Myself included, of course! Whenever I had a moment to spare, you better believe I spent it hanging out in Mimosa's chambers☆

But man, I never imagined I'd see that tight-lipped, scary-looking Demon King—ahem, Bellis—*running around changing diapers and cradling a baby in his arms.*

Who could blame me? On a first impression, he seems like the sort of guy to think "a woman should shut up and follow her man's lead." Yet in reality, he was a caring husband who loved his wife dearly.

While I was watching Bellis rock Daisy to sleep, he flicked his gaze my way as his cheeks suddenly flushed red. Not a moment later—and without any prompting on my part—he rushed to explain himself (or make an excuse, maybe). "I used to take care of Mimosa when she was little."

Oh, that makes sense! Despite the age gap, these two were childhood friends.

Meanwhile, that comment of his sent Mimosa into a tizzy. "Eek! *Belliiis*! I can't believe you still remember that!"

Oh, get a room, you two!

Still, I guess that means Bellis and I have something in common! I've got experience looking after my siblings, so bring on the parenting—I'm ready! Why, if you'd like, I'd be happy to start babysitting Daisy this second!

*

"How cute! I could just eat her up! Why, she's so adorable, I hardly know what to do with myself!"

You have no idea how badly I wanted to gobble up Daisy's teensy hand when she gripped my finger. Or how badly I wanted to gobble up her little legs when she wriggled about as I tickled her. Or how badly I wanted to kiss her on that itsy-bitsy mouth when it puckered up as I squished her soft baby cheeks.

Oh, crud. I'm drooling again.

While I was wiping my mouth, Mimosa gave an amused laugh and said, "Please don't eat Daisy, Madam. Hee hee!"

Whoops. Caught red-handed!

"I can't help myself! Just look at her—she's teeny-tiny and pudgy and sooo cute!"

"I swear, every other word out of your mouth is 'cute.' If you're this crazy about someone else's child, I'm sure when you have one of your own—"

"What'll happen?! I can hardly even imagine!"

Really, though—it *was* hard for me to imagine having an actual baby of my own in the first place.

I must have been making a pretty serious face, because Mimosa started giggling at me. "It can't be too far off in the future. Didn't Master Fisalis say he wanted a baby too?"

"Yeah, he did."

"Then it won't be long now! No matter which of you the child takes after, I'm sure they'll turn out absolutely gorgeous."

Excuse me, what*?*

If the kid took after Mr. Fisalis, I didn't doubt they would grow up to be a real looker, boy or girl. But if they got *my* genes? Good luck.

My husband is so darn good-looking that I'm almost tired of saying it. Mother Fisalis is a dazzling beauty on par with her son, and Father Fisalis is a sophisticated hottie. Within this brilliantly gorgeous family, I alone am average, unremarkable—no, even plain*! That in itself is painful enough; now just imagine if our eagerly anticipated baby inherited* my *looks. There's no bouncing back from that!*

“I sure hope Mr. Fisalis’s genes win out...”

“Oh, what a silly thing to say! If the child takes after you, they’ll make for either a cute boy or a lovely, refined girl. You possess a different kind of beauty from Master Fisalis’s family, that’s all. You really can’t see it, can you?” Mimosa heaved an exasperated sigh.

I was pretty sure she was overselling my appearance. *She* was the one who couldn’t see the reality.

I know what I look like better than anyone, thank you very much!

*

With everything going on, a whole month had flown by before we knew it.

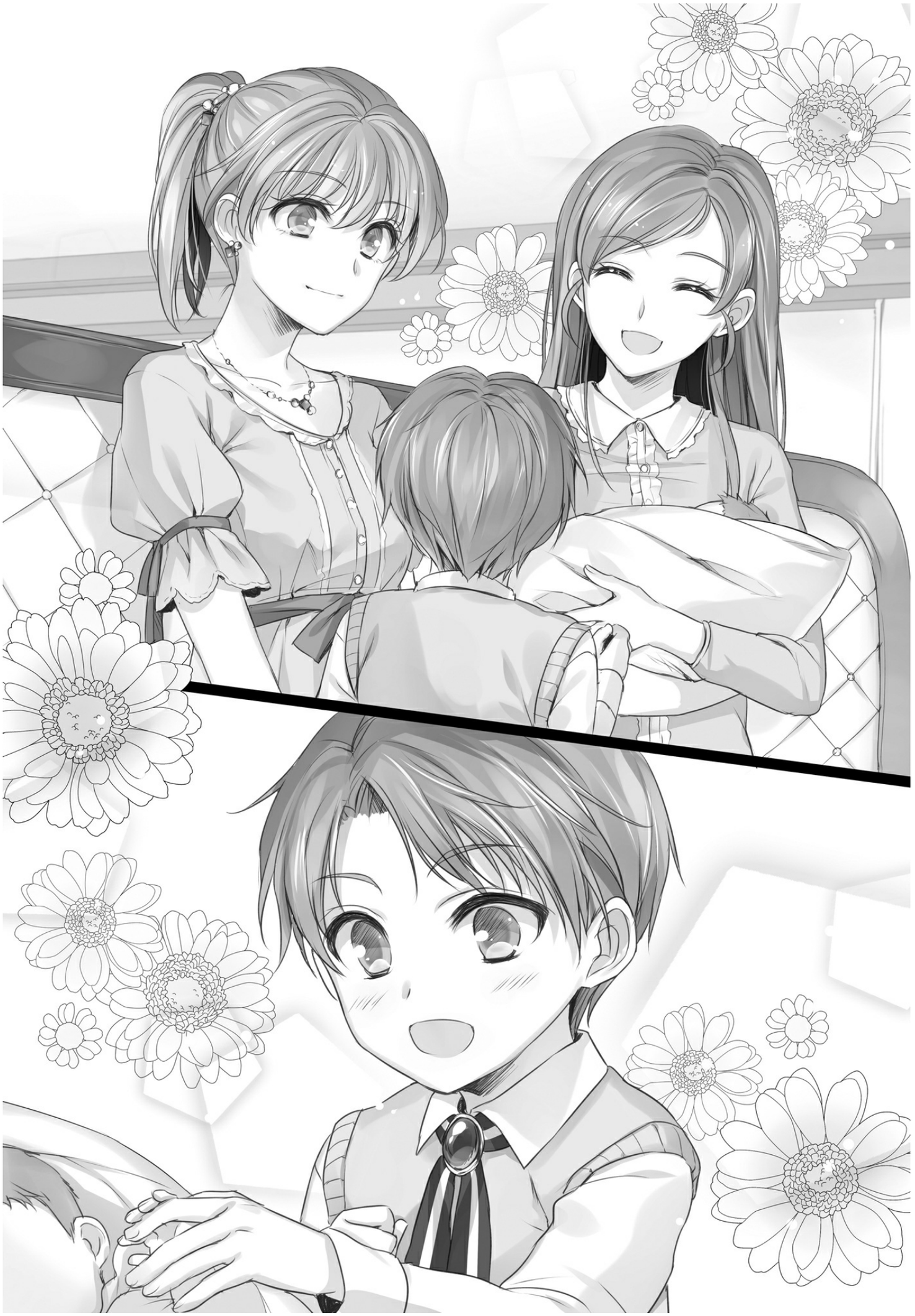
Mimosa had recovered from the birth without issue, so she and Daisy were allowed to go out and about the manor now. Daisy was obviously too young to start working as a maid, so she and her mom teamed up to provide me with some companionship instead.

One day, we were all hanging out in the parlor together. Quince had joined our ranks, since he had the day off school.

“Whoa...” the boy marveled. “I’m almost afraid she’ll break if I touch her.”

“Don’t worry—she’ll be just fine.”

With Mimosa’s supervision, Quince oh-so-gingerly reached out to touch Daisy’s hand. It was simply adorable.



“She’s so tiny and soft and cute.”

“Isn’t she? You know, I’d love it if you could come to cherish Daisy like your own little sister.”

“My little sister?!” Quince’s face instantly lit up at Mimosa’s suggestion.

“You heard me.”

“I’m so happy... It feels like my family’s grown a little bit bigger.”

“Aww... Oh, Quince...!” I was nearly moved to tears by the darling smile on his face!

He was right. She practically *was* a new member of his family.

You’re more than welcome to think of me *as your auntie too—just saying!*

“The manor’s grown a good bit more lively these days, what with all the children around,” Stellaria reflected as she was watching Quince and Daisy play.

“True. The kids have truly breathed new life into the place. I’d even say it’s made the manor young again!”

“I’m not sure about that one.”

“Oh? Well, either way, it’s certainly lifted the mood around here. It’s good to see the servants smiling a little more often.”

“Yes, I agree.”

Seeing Daisy’s smile made all the adults around her smile back, and whenever Quince came home to the manor, he’d talk and eat snacks with everyone. Ever since the two of them had entered the picture, the mansion had become a much brighter place.

“Children are such little angels, aren’t they?”

“Indeed, Madam. I do hope you’ll be visited by a little angel of your own soon.”

“Ugh... Dahlia’s been saying the same thing. Like mother, like daughter.”

“My, do you think so? Oh ho ho ho!”

It was always strange to think about, considering they didn’t look a bit alike at

a first glance. But in the end, the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree.

"You know, there's always the chance that *you* could become a mother before I do."

Stellaria smiled back at me sweetly. "Hardly. I'm still just engaged, not married; I doubt I'll be the first of us to have a child."

Here I'd been hoping I could strike back against her, but she had effortlessly sidestepped my attempt.

"Still, having all these little kids around really hits a girl with Baby Fever, whether I like it or not..."

"That's a good thing, if you ask me. It's not just Master Fisalis, you know—the former duke and duchess, your own parents, and we manor servants are all excited to see you become a mother."

"Whoa there! That's way too much pressure!"

"Forgive me. I didn't mean it that way," said Stellaria, hurrying to apologize.

"Yeah, I know. It's fine."

It's okay—I know you just meant that everyone's looking forward to it! Still, even if I were *ready for one, it's not like I can pump out a baby on command. Oh, if only it were as easy as having someone come drop one at my doorstep!*

"There's nothing I can do but leave it to chance."

"Don't worry! It won't be long now—I'm sure of it!"

What makes you *so confident about that, Miss Stellaria?*

*

"Now that you've had enough time to recover, why don't you go stay with your parents for a bit?"

Right after Daisy was born, both Mimosa's and Bellis's parents had stopped by for a visit (or to be more precise, I had invited them over), but they hadn't come by since then. I could only assume they were hesitant to do so—and for good reason. Both sets of parents were commoners, so I couldn't imagine they felt too comfortable dropping in at a duke's manor.

If it were me, I wouldn't set foot in here until someone forced my hand.

All the same, they were probably dying to see Daisy; hence why I had suggested that Mimosa go back to her parents' place instead.

"I told your parents they're free to come by whenever they like, but I don't think they were ready to take me up on the offer; I haven't seen them even once. So how about you go home for a couple days? Oh, though you're free to stay longer, if you'd like."

Mimosa came from a family of tailors, so her parents were probably too busy to entertain guests for very long. That's why I had recommended a short stay.

While they're at it, they ought to pay Bellis's parents a visit too. I bet they could stick around for a little bit longer there.

"Are you sure, Madam? I really appreciate the thought! Then would you mind if I take you up on that offer and spend three or so days at my parents' house?"

"Of course not!"

"Thank you so much!"

The look of surprise on Mimosa's face soon turned into a broad, delighted grin. *Ooh, great job, Viola!*

It wouldn't have been a good idea to let Mimosa and Daisy travel unaccompanied, so I let Bellis in on the deal and sent the whole family unit off on vacation.

*

"I'm suffering from a Daisy Deficiency. I miss her. I miss her so, so, *so* much."

It was the night after Mimosa and company had left to visit her parents. I was already withering away for lack of my little buddy.

When he saw the way I was picking at my dinner and moping, Mr. Fisalis gave a dry laugh. "Come now, Vi, they only just left the manor earlier today. Besides, they'll be back in two or three—"

"I don't care!" I argued, cutting my husband off mid-sentence. "I still miss her!"

“That Daisy has certainly done a number on you.”

“She sure has! Every little thing about her is just too precious!”

Cuteness is justice!

All this thinking about Daisy sent me right back to sulking...

“Why don’t you attend an evening party to take your mind off the matter, Madam?”

And *that* was when Rohtas took the opportunity to spring a social event on me.

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve received an invitation for an evening party to be held a week from now,” he replied, producing a familiar-looking envelope from his breast pocket. *Oh, that’s from the royal palace! I’ve seen their invitations enough times by now to remember what they look like!*

But how’s that supposed to help? I’m missing her now, *not* a week from now*!*

“Yeah, no. Daisy should be home by then, so I’ll pass on the party.”

Undeterred by my polite refusal, Rohtas went on. “Now, now, Madam. With all the coordinating to be done, the time will fly by before you know it. You won’t have a moment to spare thinking about Daisy, I assure you.”

“Yeah right! There’s no way there could be *that* much to do!”

Don’t say something that terrifying with a smile on your face, Rohtas!

While I was staring the butler down, Mr. Fisalis took a quick look at the invitation before stepping in to back him up. “Now, now, Vi. It’s hosted by the royal palace, so you might have to resign yourself to this one.”

I’d attend any social events I couldn’t afford to decline. That had been the agreement since the very beginning of our marriage. *Guh...*

Just as I was getting ready to surrender myself to my fate, Rohtas dealt the final blow. “Moreover, going to the royal palace will give you the chance to see the crown prince.”

“Oh! That’s a good point!”

He's right! Prince Dianthus lives in the royal palace!

The crown prince—who was certain to grow up into quite the looker—was a six-year-old angel in the flesh. Given his age, he'd only just begun making appearances at the royal soirées. I had yet to ever see him up close, but even observed from a distance, his angelic demeanor was a balm for the soul.

If you lined him up next to his gorgeous sisters (though the first princess wouldn't be there, seeing as she had recently gotten married), he was bound to look simply sublime!

I was confident the prince would be more than able to fill the gaping hole in my heart (read: my Daisy Deficiency).

All right, time to go get me some spiritual healing!

I, for one, was totally on board now. However...

"I suddenly don't want to go anymore..."

My husband was staring off into the middle distance. *Oh? Whatever could have gotten into* him*?*

7. The Adorable Little Prince

Once I'd decided that I was going to the evening party, there were so many preparations to take care of that I hardly even had the time to whine about my Daisy Deficiency. From the traditional dress-choosing (or dress-*making*, technically) ritual to picking out shoes and accessories, every part of my outfit had to be purchased anew.

For the jewelry, we made use of a Viola Eye that had been shipped over from the mines in Le Pied just the other day, freshly excavated and hot out of the oven.

The biggest, brightest, and highest-quality of the Viola Sapphires had been dubbed "Viola Eyes" by my husband. Among the several top-of-the-line sapphires we'd unearthed thus far, this one went above and beyond the rest in terms of size and color.

Why, it had even inspired our usual jeweler to say, "My word... Its sheer beauty is enough to make my hands tremble."

The plan was to showcase it as the world's first Viola Eye at the soonest opportunity.

What marks the difference between a Viola Sapphire and a Viola Eye, you might ask?

There was a subtle distinction in the imprint.

All gems imported from the duchy were engraved with a certain seal both as a mark of quality and an anti-counterfeiting measure. To signify their special status, the Viola Eyes were inscribed with a different mark from the rest.

Going around wearing a gem like *that*, one valuable enough to make a *jeweler's* hands shake? This was going to take a few years off my life.

When he saw the way I had frozen up in fear, Mr. Fisalis remarked, "Enthralled by its beauty, Vi?"

No, Mr. Fisalis. It's definitely *not that.*

As usual, Madame Fleur poured her heart and soul into whipping up a dress at top speed. By this point, I was starting to feel a little bad about always getting first priority among her clients.

This time around, she designed me a smoky blue dress with a gorgeous drape. Its more muted color was a nice touch, in my opinion.

Mr. Fisalis went with a dark gray ensemble so as not to overshadow me. Our outfits were coordinated, with his tie and pocket square matching the color of my gown.

The accessories were all finished on time too. The design—a motif of slender, intertwined laurel leaves—was so elegant and intricate that all I could do was give an admiring sigh.

"Why did you go with a laurel?"

I posed this question to the jeweler without thinking much of it, only to get the reply: "Because the laurel was once a symbol of the god of victory, a sacred plant revered for its immortality. I envisioned Duke Fisalis as said deity, while the concept of eternal beauty brought *you* to mind, Madam."

I can't believe he rattled off such an embarrassing explanation without batting an eye... I wish I hadn't asked.

Next up came my dance lessons.

I witnessed the return of Drill Sergeant Rohtas.

*

I was all accessorized, and my dress and special effects makeup were both perfectly on point. Social Mode Viola was ready to roll.

My transformation was always quite the sight to behold, if I do say so myself. It really spoke to the incredible skill of our maids.

Once my makeover was complete, Mr. Fisalis started murmuring the usual sweet talk. "Oh, how I hate to show you off before the rest of those undeserving men..."

At this point, it was pretty much tradition for him to say that before we went out anywhere.

“Then how about we skip tonight’s party?!”

You better believe I jumped on the opportunity to weasel my way out of this! I *was* looking forward to seeing the prince, but Daisy was already back at the manor anyway. No reason not to stay home, if you asked me!

“Sure! Let’s do it!”

Mr. Fisalis was fully on board, to no one’s surprise. For a split second there, I almost thought we were going to get away with our soirée boycott...but alas, God is cruel.

“This nonsense again? I’m surprised you two never grow tired of this routine. I recommend you knock it off before I lose my patience,” I heard Rohtas warn us ever-so-darkly.

Yes, sir! You’re so right! This party isn’t optional!

Here I was scared out of my wits, yet Mr. Fisalis refused to back down, even daring to argue back. “Can you blame me? Just look at how beautiful she is. It would be a shame to flaunt her at an evening party.”

Rohtas, meanwhile, only smiled at him in response. “I beg your pardon?”

Oh no, I can practically see a vein popping out on his forehead! We’re in trouble, Mr. Fisalis!

Cowed by the frosty aura emanating from Rohtas, our voices rang out in perfect harmony. “We’re sorry!”

*

After arriving at the grand hall of the royal palace, the very first thing we did was greet His Majesty. Standing by my husband’s side, I was in the middle of thanking the king for his invitation when the little prince himself stepped forward to say hello. “Good evening, Duchesh Fisalis.”

“Why, good evening to you, Your Highness. Thank you for the invitation.”

“You’re welcome!” he replied, a giant smile plastered across his face. It was

too cute.

The way his glistening blond hair reflects the light is as gorgeous as ever! That smile stretching across his rosy cheeks, the halo of golden locks floating around his head—he really is *an angel in the flesh!*

Uh-oh. I'm gonna die from cuteness overload!

While I was still reeling from my chance to talk with the prince, Mr. Fisalis said, "It's a pleasure to see you, Prince Dianthus."

"Oh, Duke Fisalis. Hi."

The little prince answered Mr. Fisalis's polite greeting without an ounce of feeling. It was honestly kind of funny.

Immediately going back to ignoring my husband's existence, Dianthus began pulling me away by the hand. "Hey, let's talk over there!"

"Who, me? Are you sure?"

"Yeah! You!"

Oh, if he's going to be that cute *about it, there's no way I could turn him down! Even if he* is *leading me over to where the royal family is seated...*

"Oh my, it's rare to see Dianthus take a liking to someone so quickly."

"No kidding. He's a sucker for a pretty face, that boy."

The king and queen smiled brightly as they observed our dynamic.

Heck, even Princess Elettaria went ahead and said, "Go on, Dianthus—sit down over there and behave yourself."

It was getting more and more impossible to tell him no.

"Okay! C'mon, Duchesh Fisalis!"

"Certainly, Your Highness; I'm flattered. Shall we, Cercis?" I called out to my husband, keeping pace with the prince as he tugged me along by the hand.

"...Sure," came his mysteriously aggrieved reply.

"You don't have to come, Duke Fisalis!" the prince interjected, casting a glance Mr. Fisalis's way.

“Nonsense! Of course I’m coming along. See this? My wife and I are already walking hand-in-hand!” Mr. Fisalis raised the hand of his that was holding onto mine—the one I wasn’t hanging onto the prince with, that is.

What are you getting so competitive for? Goodness.

*

“Say, Duchesh Fisalis? What’s your name?”

“It’s Viola, Your Highness.”

“Okay. Can I call you Viola?”

“Certainly!”

“Hey, that’s a really pretty jewel!”

“The one on my necklace, you mean? Why, thank you!”

“Was it a present from the duke?”

“That it was. It’s a rare, precious sapphire—christened a ‘Viola Eye’ in honor of my wife’s bewitching gaze.”

“Ohh... Yeah, it’s almost as pretty as Viola!”

While the prince gazed at my sapphire with stars in his eyes, Mr. Fisalis explained the gem’s origins. I really wished he’d give that embarrassing analogy a rest, though.

Dianthus stared entranced at the Viola Eye, which stood apart from your run-of-the-mill sapphire in terms of size and beauty. *Would a boy this young even be able to tell the difference between a good-and bad-quality jewel? Maybe that just goes to show that even a kid can recognize this gem’s worth. That’s a top-of-the-line gem for you—nothing to shake a stick at! Now I’m really starting to think we should consider a name change...*

“Wow, so the duke gave you this... You’re pretty good at gifts, Duke Fisalis.”

“I’m flattered to hear that, Your Highness. If you ever have the chance to give someone a jewel yourself, do feel free to order one of our sapphires.”

Mr. Fisalis transitioned straight into promoting his product. Impressive.

Just as I was admiring my husband's salesmanship, the little prince went and said something crazy. "You're really handsome, so I bet you're real popular with the girls."

I already knew how hard it could be to follow a little kid's rambling tangents, but this one sure was a leap. How had we gone from talking about jewels to *this*?

"Huh?" Mr. Fisalis was equally perplexed. I was willing to bet we were making the exact same face.

"The girls love you, so you have lots of girl friends. That's why you can come up with such awesome gifts," the prince went on, unfazed by our reaction.

Oh, I see...so that's the connection. He's trying to say that Mr. Fisalis must be used to giving gifts to girls, I guess? The funniest part is that he's not that far off the mark.

"Pfft..."

"What?"

I did my best to stifle a laugh, while my husband's gorgeous face twitched ever so slightly.

"Aw man, I don't know how to do that. Sorry, Viola." The prince just kept on talking, oblivious to our response. "When I get bigger, I promise I'll get you an even *better* present! I dunno if I can make friends with lots and lots of girls, though. I sure *hope* I can."

And that was where Mr. Fisalis and I both interjected in unison. "Uhh..."

*No, Your Highness, don't grow up to be a playboy! Uh...*ahem. *Not to say that Mr. Fisalis is a playboy, of course. Ladies just love him, that's all! Pardon that slip of the tongue!*

"I don't doubt you'll grow up to be a wonderful gentleman, so you ought to make plenty of friends—boys and girls alike! But I don't think gifts have anything to do with the number of friends you have..." I rushed to say, doing my level best to clear up the confusion here.

Though the smile on Mr. Fisalis's face was a forced one, he was still kind

enough to give a word of advice: “Gift-giving comes down to a matter of taste, Your Highness.”

“Oh, really?”

“It has nothing to do with the number of female friends you have.”

“Hmm...” The prince made a dubious face, apparently unconvinced, but it didn’t take long for his eyes to light up in a sudden stroke of inspiration. “Still, I bet you can teach me how to make lots of girl friends!”

What’s gotten into you, Your Highness?!

And for that matter...I wouldn’t be too sure about that one.

*

Once we’d chatted with the prince for a good while, my husband and I hit the dance floor. Today was all about advertising the Viola Sapphires!

The first step toward that was sharing a dance with Mr. Fisalis. With all that hellish training Coach Rohtas had put us through, even the toughest of steps were a walk in the park!

After that came the usual endless stream of noblemen looking to dance with me, and I indulged each of them in turn.

“That’s a beautiful necklace and earrings you’re wearing tonight.”

“Why, thank you very much! We recently collected a whole new batch of the finest gems from our territory.”

“And what a truly gorgeous jewel it is. By the same token, I must commend the designer for doing such justice to the gem’s beauty.”

“It’s our go-to jeweler’s work. No doubt he would be overjoyed to hear your praise.”

“Perhaps I’ll have him make another one for my wife.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea!”

“Well then, do be sure to let me know when more of those exquisite gems come in.”

“Of course—it would be my pleasure.”

All right, I closed a deal middance! Look at what a good job I did, Mr. Fisalis!

*

“So there you have it! I got quite a number of orders for those sapphires tonight.”

“Wow, I’m impressed.”

When I met back up with Mr. Fisalis, I reported back to him on my solid sales performance.

“One for Count Peregrina’s wife, another for Marquis Dicentra’s daughter...”

I rattled off their names without a hitch. Thanks to the Noble’s Almanac and its helpful portraits, I had the names and faces of the nobility down pat.

“I found it to be equally popular among the female attendees. I suppose it’s no surprise that a gem of this caliber would garner so much attention.”

“It didn’t hurt that the jewelry itself has such a lovely design either! Boy, it’s a good thing you happen to have all those ‘girl friends.’ Experience sure can go a long way...”

“Not you too, Vi!”

*

Between one thing and another, my socializing for the evening soon drew to a close. With my heart healed by the prince and the Viola Eye having debuted to rave reviews, I was in a pretty good mood on the carriage ride home.

“Man, the prince was as adorable as ever!” I reflected, a grin plastered across my face as I thought back on Prince Dianthus’s angelic antics.

My husband, meanwhile, looked like he could hardly believe what he was hearing. “What?! *That* was your impression of him?! Try naming even *one* thing that’s cute about him!”

“I mean, c’mon, he was the very picture of innocence!”

“I’m fairly certain he has a more nefarious bent...”

“Really? I thought his enthusiasm for getting me a present was adorable. Admittedly, I’m not quite as approving of his desire to make female friends—though it’d be another matter if they really *were* just ‘friends.’ *You* haven’t been putting those thoughts in his head, have you, Cercis?”

“Absolutely not!”

He was acting unusually contentious. And here *I* thought kids were pretty cute.

“Are you *sure* you don’t have anything against children?”

“Like I told you before, I don’t dislike them—*with* the one exception. That little brat is the only one I can’t stand! I swear it’s not a problem with kids as a whole!”

“Oh right, you *did* mention that.”

“I did! Why, if anything, I’d like to have one of my own as soon as possible!”

“Uh-huh. Gotcha.”

8. An Invitation to the Villa

“Oh, the Argenteia family built themselves a new villa?”

“Apparently so.”

The topic came up one day during a chat with my husband. Evidently, Miss Verbena’s father (the prime minister of the Flür Kingdom, Duke Argenteia) had built his family a brand new villa.

“To be more precise, their previous villa had fallen into disrepair, so he chose to reconstruct it elsewhere within his domain. His territory is a key location within Flür, so he has an obligation to keep it well-maintained.”

“Huh, I see.”

His villa had been getting up there in age, so he had constructed a new one altogether. *And here* my *parents never got to rebuild their manor, no matter* how *downright dilapidated it got... I’m so jeal— Oh wait, I almost forgot! Mr. Fisalis had the place renovated, so now it looks good as new!*

Miss Verbena’s family was just about as rich as Mr. Fisalis’s, so I was willing to bet they had villas all over the place.

As the former frontrunner to become Mr. Fisalis’s bride, Miss Verbena—the daughter of the Argenteia family—had initially hated me, but for reasons I still didn’t quite understand, I had found myself promoted to friend status somewhere down the line. Her brother Celosia was likewise a childhood friend of my husband’s. Between all those connections, I’d long since fallen into a sort of “family friend” relationship with the Argenteias.

“It shouldn’t be long before the construction is complete, so they’ve invited us to their upcoming housewarming party.”

“Nice! Isn’t it a pretty long trek to their villa, though?”

“Hmm... I’d say it’s a good way out, yes. The plan would be to stay there for a few days.”

“Ooh! It would be my first time ever spending the night in someone else’s territory—let alone in their very own villa!”

Then again, I suppose my pilgrimage (honeymoon?) to the Fisalis territory at least felt *like “someone else’s territory”!*

Normally, this was the part where I’d start whining about how I “hate socializing” or “didn’t want to go,” but considering this was supposed to be a housewarming party to show off their newly constructed vacation home, I figured it was going to be a cozy little shindig for only their closest friends. Since it would be Miss Verbena’s family doing the hosting, I wasn’t dreading it as much as I ordinarily might.

“They’ll be sending us a formal invitation once the construction is complete, but I figured I’d give you a heads-up.”

“Got it!”

Considering how long it had been since my last overnight trip, I was feeling pretty pumped.

*

Shortly thereafter, we received our formal invitation from the Argenteia family.

The new villa was located about a half-day’s journey by carriage from Rohze. It also happened to be built on a bank of the Wahl River—the same river that ran through the Argenteia family’s main residence back in the capital—meaning it was possible to make the trip by boat! Mind you, that route was reserved for the family and special guests only. Why, you might ask? Because the entire Wahl River was under Argenteia jurisdiction. It *did* flow right through their manor, after all.

Just as I was thinking about what a wonderful, ingeniously designed villa they’d made for themselves, we received a very special invitation from Miss Verbena: “Would you care to join us for the boat ride?”

Her parents—Duke Argenteia and his wife—and eldest brother had gone to the villa ahead of time to prepare for company. Seeing as she and Celosia would be the only ones taking the boat, she’d reached out to offer us a ride if we so

desired.

“Say, Cercis! Since they went out of their way to invite us, what do you say to joining the Argenteias for the boat ride?”

“I like the sound of that. It ought to cut down on our travel time too.”

“Good point! Oh boy, I haven’t been on a boat since we went to see the caverns of Le Cœur!”

Images of that stunning blue cave we’d seen in the Fisalis territory of Le Cœur de la Mer flitted through my mind. Mr. Fisalis had insisted he had somewhere he wanted to show me, only to bring me out to that gorgeous, mystical spot where the seawater shone azure.

“I’d be happy to take you out to Le Cœur whenever you’d like, you know.”

“We can save that for another time. For now, we’d better get our reply to Miss Verbena ASAP!”

The thought of riding a boat for the first time in ages had me *extra* pumped.

*

As the plan was to spend seven whole days at the villa, I couldn’t cut any corners on the packing. From the sound of it, there was going to be a party nearly every evening, so I packed myself six gowns. Since the afternoons were likely to be filled with tea parties and the like, I made sure to bring along plenty of dresses for those occasions too.

Now wait just a second here. I’m hardly going to have a moment of downtime, am I?

I’d had a brand new dress made for the main housewarming event—you know, the usual tradition. Everything else was just a touched up version of something I’d already worn before. Recycling outfits was way less stressful.

Beyond that, I needed shoes, accessories, et cetera...

“This is so much stuff...”

Ughhhh.

When she caught me grumbling as I struggled to cram everything into my

trunk, Stellaria only laughed. “Seeing as you’re about to head off on an overnight socializing marathon, there’s no getting around it.”

A socializing marathon, huh? Wow, how strange—any desire I had to go on this trip suddenly went up in smoke.

While I was still reeling from the crushing blow to my morale, my maids darted around the room packing my things for me. Leave it to the pros to get the job done quickly!

“For the evening parties, I recommend you wear those Viola Eye accessories you had made not too long ago,” Stellaria suggested as she rifled through my various necklaces and earrings, polished them one by one, and loaded them into my suitcase.

“Sure, will do.”

Not a single gem had yet surpassed the sapphire we’d used for my last necklace—the one made for the party at the royal palace—so we’d held off on ordering any new jewelry for this particular occasion. To be honest, that one sapphire might have been a little *too* breathtaking. It was going to be a good long while before we found a jewel a cut above *that*.

*

Then the night before our departure arrived.

“According to the forecast, it’s supposed to rain just as hard tomorrow,” reported Rohtas.

As an aside, there were certain people in the royal capital well-versed in the art of predicting the weather—“sky-reading,” as we called it. Their primary duty was to divine the weather patterns for the year and figure out how best to mitigate their effects on the harvest, but if you made a point of asking them, they could also tell you what the weather was going to be like the next day. Whatever method they were using to predict the weather was strictly confidential, but rumor had it that it went something like: “Throw a shoe—if it lands right side up, it’s going to be sunny; if it lands on its side, it’s going to be cloudy; and if it’s sticking straight up, there’s going to be a storm.”

Digressions aside, there’s rain in the cards for tomorrow, huh? And a

downpour, at that.

Even now, a glance out the window revealed a driving rain, accompanied by the occasional flash of lightning.

“I suppose that rules out tomorrow’s boat trip. Even if it *does* stop before our departure, the water levels will be too high for safe sailing,” said Mr. Fisalis as he gazed outside.

Setting out on our voyage amid a raging storm... Just the very thought was terrifying.

“Should we send a messenger to let the Argenteias know we won’t be making it tomorrow?”

“Yes, making the trip by land ought to be the safer—”

Just as Mr. Fisalis was getting to his feet, however, a maid showed up to relay an incredibly well-timed message. “Master Fisalis! A messenger from the Argenteia family has arrived.”

Wow, Miss Verbena, were you listening in on our conversation?! Nah, couldn’t be.

“Perfect timing. Rohtas, go hear what he has to say.”

“Yes, Master.” At Mr. Fisalis’s command, the butler gave a quick bow and stepped out of the parlor.

“No doubt they’re reaching out to inform us that tomorrow’s boat trip has been canceled. Even Celosia and Verbena won’t have much choice but to make the journey on land.”

“Yeah. Besides, it’s not like this is their only chance to take their ship out for a spin.”

“Exactly. And the same goes for you, Vi; if you ever want to go for a boat ride, just say the word.”

“I just might! I’d really like to see that blue cavern and orange sunset again.”

Whenever I closed my eyes, I could see flashes of that vibrantly blue cave and the sun shining an almost-gold hue. *Le Cœur was such a beautiful place. The*

town of Le Pied was lovely in its own right too. My husband's territory is just full of sights to see. Now my parents' *territory, on the other hand... Well, uh, I guess it has its good points. It's just a little bit lacking in sunshine and greenery, that's all!*

While we were caught up in our idle conversation, Rohtas returned to the parlor.

"Pardon me, Master Fisalis. The messenger did indeed come bearing news that tomorrow's trip has been canceled. Quite convenient timing, seeing as we were just about to decline the offer from our end."

"I thought as much. Very well then—though I know driving through this rain won't be an easy task, make sure the carriage will be ready for us tomorrow."

"Certainly."

It was too bad, but there was nothing anyone could do about the forces of nature.

Given the circumstances, our river cruise was a bust. The new plan was to head to the villa over land.

*

Just as the forecast had predicted, it was pouring rain on the day of our departure.

"It sure is coming down hard," Mr. Fisalis said, frowning up at the sky. "So much for making it there in half a day."

The rain was well past the *pitter-patter* stage and all the way to *rat-a-tat-tat*. This was a bona fide downpour.

Going out in such miserable weather was a real drag, but canceling our plans on the day-of would have been a big no-no. Even I understood that much.

"It's not safe to go too fast in this rain," I warned. "Let's take it slow."

"And here I'd been hoping we could stop at a village along the way. I'm sorry, Vi."

"Oh no—how unfortunate! Let's make sure to stop there on the way home,

okay?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Since the boat trip had been called off, we’d instead chosen to make the trip with three carriages. One was for us, one was for our attendants, and the last one was for our cargo.

“We *were* scheduled to get there just past noon...but given the weather, we might have to stop for lunch along the way instead.”

“Perhaps. Have the knight-guards leading the way to find you a good place to eat. We’ll inform the Argenteia family that you’ll be running slightly behind schedule.”

One of the servants slipped away upon hearing Rohtas and Mr. Fisalis’s exchange. No doubt he was going to take a horse out into the pouring rain to deliver our message. *We truly appreciate it!*

While the servants loaded our luggage into one of the cars, we got into our own personal carriage.

“Take care of the place while we’re away, Rohtas.”

“Of course, Master. Have a safe trip.”

“Off we go! We’ll be sure to bring you back a souvenir!”

“Take care!” came the servants’ answering chorus.

Our team of house-sitters—Rohtas, Dahlia, Mimosa, and the rest of the servants—saw us off as our carriage quietly rolled away into the distance.

*

Given how hard the rain was coming down, the carriage ride was going much slower than it normally would.

“Jeez, look at how gray it is out there,” I remarked.

“Did it really have to pick *today* of all days to rain this hard?”

“You said it. The scenery is part of what makes traveling fun!”

“It’ll be sunny on the way back, at least.”

“And what makes you so sure of that?”

“You want to see nicer scenery, so the weather *has* to clear up.”

“How does that make any sense?”

The rain slamming against the roof of the carriage was loud enough to drown out the noise of the wheels rolling over the ground. And to make matters worse, I was even seeing lightning streak across the sky every now and then!

“Yeesh, that one spooked me!” I yelped when one flash took me by surprise, only to overhear my husband mumbling, “Now if only she’d act a little cuter when she’s startled...” Everybody knows I’m not that kind of girl, though, so I didn’t dignify that remark with a response.

Along the way, we stopped for lunch somewhere near the heart of the Argenteia family’s territory. From the sound of it, we didn’t have much farther to go before we reached the villa, but the rain was coming down just as hard here as it had been in Rohze. Despite all the distance we’d covered, it hadn’t been enough to escape the deluge.

Our stopover was a modest provincial town much like Le Pied. If only the weather had been nicer, I imagine it would have been a lovely place to visit—no doubt the streets would have been bustling with people. What a shame it was that the rain had drowned absolutely everything in gray.

“Our original plan was to arrive at the villa just past noon, so we were *supposed* to have lunch there. Mother and Father would have joined us at the table too.”

“Oh! I didn’t realize your parents were invited.”

Come to think of it, I never *had* heard the list of attendees. Father Fisalis was close to Duke Argenteia, so I supposed it only made sense that he would get an invitation.

“Oh, really? I’m sorry for neglecting to mention it.”

“Don’t be—it’s fine. Who else is coming?”

I’d jumped to the conclusion that it was going to be “a cozy little shindig for only their closest friends,” so I’d never bothered to ask who else was invited.

Better late than never.

“You and me, my parents...and there’s Duke Argenteia’s subordinates too...”

That was my husband for you—it seemed he knew the entire guest list, and he started listing off the names without missing a beat.

Apparently, *all* the big-name nobles of Flür had been invited: all the rest of the dukes, along with every single marquis. *Uh-oh. This is turning out to be no different from the usual social affair.*

Due to capacity concerns, those with the rank of earl or lower had to be dropped from the list. Thus, the only non-dukes and non-marquises to be invited were Duke Argenteia’s work colleagues. What surprised me, however, was that some of the names toward the end of Mr. Fisalis’s list were actually fairly low-ranking nobles—barons and the like, that is.

“About the last few people you mentioned... Are they work friends of the duke?”

“Not exactly. They were invited as the lords of the adjacent territories.”

“So they’re the neighbors. Gotcha.”

The Argenteia family’s territory was so vast that it shared a border with five other territories. Talk about impressive.

Forget that whole “private party” thing—this really was just going to be your typical soirée. And an overnight one, at that. A socializing *marathon*.

All of a sudden, I found myself dreading the days ahead.

9. Finally Made It

Once we were done with lunch, we set out into the pouring rain once more. With how far behind schedule we were—the original plan was to be there for lunch—it wasn't even clear whether we were going to make it in time for afternoon tea.

"We did tell them we were going to be late. There's no need to rush," asserted Mr. Fisalis, the very picture of composure. All the same, I couldn't help feeling a little bad about it. No doubt they'd had lunch prepared for us just in case. Just thinking about all the food we'd wasted was a real blow to my "waste not, want not" sensibilities.

In spite of all the setbacks, we *eventually* made it to Duke Argenteia's brand new villa.

One would think a sophisticated-looking estate built on the bank of the swift-flowing Wahl River couldn't be all *that* lavish, but between the white walls, ultramarine roof, and the detailed craftsmanship of the spire, it looked like it must have taken a boatload of manpower and money to put together. What a shame it was that the pouring rain and streams of mud had cut its architectural beauty in half! Or maybe more than that—it was hard to make *anything* out through the haze of the storm.

As we passed through the gate and pulled up to the carriage porch, we could see tons of people bustling about. There was a back-up of carriages too.

"Who would have guessed there would be a traffic jam at the front door?" I marveled.

"Good lord... From the looks of it, we all must have arrived around the same time."

"Huh. Looks like we're stuck waiting, then."

I looked out the window to get a sense of what was going on. Thanks to the family crest emblazoned on our carriage, it probably wouldn't take them long to

figure out that we were here, but there was nothing for us to do but wait for them to come to us. Given how busy things looked, I was in no mood to rush them along.

"How long do you think it'll be?"

"Hmm... At a glance, there seem to be about five groups ahead of us..."

Just as I had started making small talk to kill the time, our carriage lurched into motion.

"What? We're moving up already?"

"I assume they're putting the luggage aside for later in order to admit the guests more quickly."

"Oh, I see!"

The massive carriage porch had a roof that served as a shield from the rain. That was definitely a nice feature to have on a day like this.

After my husband helped me down from the carriage, we were greeted by Duke and Duchess Argenteia, Celosia, and Miss Verbena.

"We appreciate you coming all this way despite the weather, Cercis," said Duke Argenteia, giving Mr. Fisalis a firm handshake.

"Of course. We appreciate the invitation!"

"It's not much compared to *your* family's villa, but we hope you'll make yourself at home here."

"Thank you."

"Celosia and Verbena will show you around the place. I'll leave it to you, kids."

"Yes, Father!" the two siblings replied.

Once we were done saying our hellos, the duke and duchess excused themselves to greet the rest of the arrivals. It couldn't have been easy to deal with such a huge influx of guests!

Judging from a quick glance around, there were indeed around five other groups besides us. Every one of their carriages—which were likewise adorned with their respective family crests—was stuck at a standstill. The cars with their

attendants and luggage hadn't even made it to the carriage porch yet.

"The weather threw off everyone's schedules, so too many people ended up arriving at the same time."

"We're sorry this is such a mess."

Perhaps because they'd noticed me looking around, Celosia and Verbena made a point of apologizing.

"No need to apologize," Mr. Fisalis responded. "Given the weather, it was bound to happen."

"We'll bring your things inside once we've let all the guests in."

"Got it."

If they'd attempted to carry the luggage in along with its owners, it would've made things even more chaotic. Waiting for the commotion to die down before bringing everything inside was bound to prevent mix-ups too.

"Really, I simply can't *believe* how terrible the weather turned out to be! It's supposed to clear up tomorrow, if nothing else. Nevertheless, I'm glad you managed to make it, Miss Viola."

"Of course! Thanks for inviting me."

"Rest assured—if only the sun were out, the view here would be gorgeous."

"I don't doubt it. This is a lovely villa, and I'm sure the scenery is just as beautiful."

"I'll show you around as soon as the rain finally stops."

"Wow, thank you!"

"Well then, that's quite enough stuffy formalities! Allow me to show you to your room!" said Miss Verbena as she pulled me along by the hand, determined to personally escort me to my quarters.

*

Upon stepping into the entryway, I saw a large door toward the front of the hall that had been left wide open for the day.

“This is the banquet hall,” Miss Verbena noted. “It’s where we’ll be holding tomorrow’s party.”

The walls overlooking the river and garden were all made of glass, affording an absolutely gorgeous view. If the sun were out, I could only imagine how bright the room would be.

After one brief glance inside the banquet hall, we took the stairs off to the side of the foyer. All of the guest rooms were up on the second floor.

The corridor was all decked out in a snazzy white and ultramarine checker pattern.

“We prepared a corner suite for the two of you—the biggest and most scenic room in the house,” said Celosia. “Enjoy the garden view from your window for all its worth; once the sun comes out, the sight of the Wahl River just past the grounds will be simply breathtaking.”

“Oh?” replied Mr. Fisalis. “I’ll look forward to seeing that.”

According to Celosia, every single one of the rooms—for guest use and otherwise—had a garden view. The corridor, meanwhile, looked out over the gate and entryway. As there was a small fountain and well-manicured shrubs adorning the front entrance, it ended up looking like a second, miniature garden rather than a bleak wasteland.

We continued to trail along after Celosia and Miss Verbena. Thanks to the gigantic skylights placed at even intervals along the hall, it was very well-lit for a corridor. Though to account for today’s especially gloomy weather, a few lamps had been lit here and there as well.

A flower in a glass vase sat on each and every windowsill. This fuzzy breed of flora was a bit reminiscent of a candle’s flame and was—unusually enough—blue in color.

Wow, it’s my first time ever seeing a blue flower.

When she caught me marveling at the rare specimen, Miss Verbena explained, “We had to go out of our way to breed this flower. But don’t you just adore the sight of a blue blossom?”

Oh, that explains it! No wonder I'd never seen anything like it before.

"Yeah. It's like nothing I've ever seen."

As much as I wanted to get a closer look at it, the vase it was growing in looked scary expensive, so I forced myself to give it a wide berth. Breaking *that* would have spelled disaster for me. Why, yes, I *was* feeling extra nervous because I already had a black mark on my record—problem?

While the Argenteia siblings were guiding us to our room, more and more visitors kept trickling in. The atmosphere was pretty hectic, what with the visitors making their way into the corridor and guest rooms and having their luggage carried in. There was no end to the servants scurrying about with suitcases in hand.

The attendants from the invited houses had mixed with the servants who worked for the Argenteia family, but every single one of them was a pro. Everyone went about their work efficiently, no fuss or muss.

As I idly watched the people come and go, we continued along toward our own chambers.

"Are my parents here yet?"

"The weather has them running late. A shame, since according to their message it was nice and sunny over in Le Pied."

"I see."

"They said they ought to be here by dinnertime. We assigned them the room next to yours, by the way."

Going by Mr. Fisalis and Celosia's conversation, my parents-in-law were likewise running behind schedule. No surprise, considering the weather.

"Why, this dreadful storm has thrown off all our plans! And here I'd been looking forward to my lunch and teatime with Miss Viola."

When I saw Miss Verbena was sighing and staring balefully up at the sky, I found myself apologizing reflexively. "I'm sorry we were so late!"

"Oh, it's no fault of *yours*! Don't you worry your pretty little head over it."

“Uh, right.”

“We can still get our afternoon tea in...or so I’d *hoped*, but if we have it too late in the day, we won’t have room for dinner. I suppose we’ve no choice but to write today off. We still have tomorrow, at least.”

“We sure do...”

I mean, this *was* a socializing marathon and all. No need to hit the ground running on the first day!

After passing by an endless number of guest rooms, we finally arrived at our own. Just as Celosia had said, it was a lovely and spacious accommodation. It had one large, comfortable bed along with a finely crafted sofa and table. There was a writing desk and wardrobe of the same design too. Everything sure looked like it must have cost a fortune... No less than what I’d expect from the Argenteia family.

Best of all, though, were the huge, sprawling windows! We had a clear view of the garden, despite all the rain beating down upon it.

“We’ll ask the servants to bring you your tea, but please make yourselves at home in the meantime. Then if you’ll excuse us, Your Grace.”

“Of course.”

With one last, grandiose farewell, Celosia took his leave alongside Miss Verbena.

Once we’d made sure they had closed the door behind them, we settled down on the sofa.

“Whew... I’m bushed. I could swear the world is still spinning around me.”

All I’d actually done was sit on my butt all day, but hey.

“Well, you *did* spend quite a long time getting jostled about in that carriage. You may as well take a nap until our tea arrives.”

“Maybe I will. But first, I’d better change—oh wait, we don’t have our luggage.”

My eyes darted around the room. Forget our *things*—not even our maids had

arrived here yet.

“Good observation. I wonder why? I wouldn’t expect it to take them *this* long.”

If our suitcases weren’t here, that meant I couldn’t change out of my outfit. What was keeping Stellaria and the girls? Were they still caught in the traffic jam at the entrance?

“Oh well. I wouldn’t mind sleeping like this,” I said, followed by a huge yawn.

“Already that tired?”

“This sofa is so soft and cozy that I don’t even *want* to get up...”

“I can see that!”

The couch was no less comfortable than the one we had back in our Rohze manor. Just as I was snuggling down, ready to fall asleep then and there...

“I’m sorry we’re late.”

...there came a knock on the door, and at long last, Stellaria, her fellow maids, and the servants of the Argenteia family arrived with our luggage in hand.

Our manor maids were one thing, but I couldn’t let someone *else’s* servants see me acting so slovenly. I sat back up in a hurry and switched into Lady Mode.

Incidentally, our tea was ready too.

“You guys were gone for a while! Was it that crowded?” I asked Stellaria, who had begun expeditiously unpacking our belongings into the wardrobe and dresser drawers.

“It was. To begin with, we weren’t exactly the *only* guests there, and even more visitors arrived not long after you left. Everyone was in a mild state of panic.”

“I’m sure it didn’t help that everyone had so much baggage.”

“Indeed. The ground was slippery from all the rain, so one person even tripped and fell.”

“Oh no, that’s awful!”

“And she brought the rest of us down with her too.”

“Huh?! How?!”

“The girl who tripped knocked over someone else, and before we knew it, there was luggage flying everywhere. My apologies—I’m afraid your belongings were caught up in all the chaos, Madam.” Stellaria hung her head apologetically.

From the sound of it, one servant had lost her footing and fell, and when she reflexively grabbed hold of someone nearby, she took that person down with her. The second victim stumbled into a third person, who grabbed hold of someone else—and well, you get the picture. It was an unfortunate chain reaction. Some of the luggage got mixed up amid the mayhem, and it took a while to sort everything out and wipe down whatever got dirty.

“Forget the luggage—are *you* okay? Did anyone get hurt?”

“I’m afraid Drosera did, but it was only a couple bruises. Fortunately, no one suffered anything worse than a scratch.”

“Whew, that’s a relief. You sure you’re okay, Drosera?” I asked the girl in question, who was busy putting away my dresses. She’d earned the right to come along as Mr. Fisalis’s personal maid in the traditional pre-excursion “Who-Gets-to-Go-on-the-Trip Tournament;” considering she’d fought her way through rock-paper-scissors matches just to be here, I was sorry to hear she’d gotten caught up in such a mess.

“I’m fine! I’m quite sturdy, I’ll have you know!” she replied, giving a pump of her slightly red and swollen arm. *Oh, so she hit her arm. I’ll have to get her some ice later.*

There may have been a bit of an incident along the way, but we’d still managed to make it to the villa safely and settle down in our room.

All right, bring on the socializing marathon!

10. The Banquet

With our room tidied and our tea set out before us, the frenzy of our arrival had finally died down.

I felt a little guilty about sitting there sipping at my tea while the maids slaved away. As much as I wished I could have helped them, however, I wasn't about to jump in with Mr. Fisalis there. I may have gotten his blessing to do the chores, but it still didn't seem like a great idea to do them right in front of him.

Though I'd just been talking about taking a nap, between the hustle-bustle of the luggage's delayed arrival and the maids explaining the whole incident, the time had gotten away from me. I wanted nothing more in that moment than a chance to lie down—I still felt dizzy from spending half a day getting knocked around in a carriage, no matter how slow we'd taken the journey—but it was already time to start getting ready for dinner.

I had to change clothes, put on my special effects makeup... Yep, this was going to take a while.

"It'd be wishful thinking to figure we can retire after dinner, huh?"

"Probably. I'd expect there to be some sort of tea party afterwards."

"Looks like we're in for a long night."

"Oh, I don't know. Everyone's already had a long day, after all, so I wouldn't be surprised if we wrap up early."

"Then I'll be the first to call it a night! Oh, but far be it from me to keep *you* from sticking around."

"No, I'd rather head back with you. Don't you dare leave me behind!"

"If you insist."

Mr. Fisalis isn't the biggest fan of socializing himself, so the two of us might as well make a quick exit!

*

Though they got there even later than we did, Mother and Father Fisalis eventually made it to the villa safe and sound. We invited them to come with us to the dinner venue—the banquet hall, to be more specific.

“And the weather had been so nice in Le Pied too! The closer we got to the villa, the stormier it got. It certainly took us by surprise.”

“Oh no! That must have been rough.”

According to Mother Fisalis, there hadn’t been a cloud in the sky over Le Pied. It just went to show just how much the weather could change depending on where you were.

Mr. Fisalis and his father were walking a few steps ahead of us, discussing recent events over at the manor.

“It’s been storming in Rohze since yesterday.”

“I see. I suppose that makes sense—this villa *is* closer to you than to us. Speaking of which, how have things been over there lately?”

“Fine. I already informed you that Bellis and Mimosa finally had their child, and that Rohtas adopted a son...”

By the time we arrived at the banquet hall, nearly all of the guests were in their seats. *Shoot, are we the last ones to get here?! Then again, nobody in the entire Flür Kingdom outranks the Fisalis family, so I guess it doesn’t matter if we are.*

After greeting all those who had arrived ahead of us, we were escorted to our seats—at the head of the table, even!

Now that everyone was here, the food was promptly carried out to the table. It was like they’d been hanging back just waiting for us to take a seat.

The soup laid out before me smelled amazing. *I bet it’s going to be delici—Hold on!*

Oh no, that’s right! Everything on the menu is going to be premium cuisine! I almost forgot.

Now don’t get me wrong—I’d stopped getting fancy food poisoning the way I used to. With all the wonderful food I’d been eating day in and day out, both

my tongue and my stomach had learned to adjust. The problem was that it was still too *much*. If I had to eat all this, I was going to burst. Even back at the mansion, I was still asking for half-sized portions.

Oh man, I forgot my stomach medicine. What's a girl to do? And to make matters worse, I was already *feeling carriage-sick.*

Tonight was a sit-down dinner, so I couldn't portion control the way I did during buffets. And this was going to be a full-course meal, to boot! No *way* I could eat all that!

When he noticed the way I was staring down at my soup with dread, Mr. Fisalis leaned over and whispered into my ear: "Don't worry. Just eat whatever you can manage."

Despite feeling like a jerk for leaving chunks of food untouched, I managed to make it through dessert in one piece. Not today, gastrointestinal terrorism!

If my mother could see me now, she'd be absolutely livid. Am I going to get a visit from the jolly green giant tonight? Gulp.

*

After the banquet, we moved elsewhere and dove straight into a tea party. Everyone was doing their own thing—some were enjoying an after-dinner cup of tea, some were indulging in a stiff drink, and still others were engaging in friendly conversation or playing a game of cards.

For my part, I was having tea with Miss Verbena; Miss Iris; Miss Amaranth, the daughter of Marquis Nastersham; Miss Peony, the daughter of Earl Columbine; and Miss Sati, the daughter of Earl Krokusse. Indeed—the entire Soirée Quartet was present and accounted for.

Miss Iris and Miss Amaranth were both the daughters of a marquis, while Miss Peony and Miss Sati had been invited thanks to their fathers' work connections.

Their party attendance rate sure was as high as ever.

I'd been on a first name basis with the group ever since they'd urged me, "We want to call you 'Vi'! And *you* should call us by our first names too!" It was only

just recently, however, that it had started to feel natural. Using first names certainly goes a long way toward bridging the gap between people! It seemed that Miss Verbena wanted to call me “Vi” herself, but for whatever reason, she chose to watch the others enviously instead of just going for it. And here I would’ve loved to hear her say it.

Mr. Fisalis was having a friendly chat over drinks with Celosia and a few other gentlemen. The circle of young men seemed to be having the time of their lives.

My husband shot me a wink when he noticed me glancing his way, and I returned it with a small wave of my hand.

“The invitees were permitted to bring their unmarried sons or daughters,” Miss Verbena commented with a sigh when she saw what I was looking at.

“That’s a rather specific stipulation,” I replied, a blank look on my face. I wasn’t quite registering what the point of that would be.

Since we received a separate invitation from my husband’s parents, I suppose we count as a special case? Does that mean that if Father and Mother Fisalis had *been the only ones to get the invite, we (or rather, Mr. Fisalis) wouldn’t have been allowed to come?*

I did my best to puzzle out the purpose of that restriction, only to have my questions answered when Miss Verbena whined, “That father of mine is back on my case about finding myself a good man! He’s setting me up, I tell you!”

“Ohh...”

Huh, so this was a matchmaking party disguised as a housewarming all along. Duke Argenteia sure doesn’t know when to quit.

“Now, now. If your father insists on throwing parties for you, the rest of us are more than happy to take advantage!” said Miss Iris, giving a bright, elegant laugh in the face of Miss Verbena’s fuming.

Fair enough. Leave it to the Husband Hunters to pounce on any opportunity they see.

“All I want is to meet a man as wonderful as Vi’s some day.”

“There, there, Miss Sati.”

“If only. Men like that don’t exactly grow on trees.”

“Don’t put it like that, Miss Peony! You never know where you might find the perfect match!”

I did my best to reassure my crestfallen friends.

I was the only married woman at the table. What made matters worse was that I hadn’t set out to find my soul mate or anything—I’d stumbled into happiness by sheer luck. The guilt was eating away at me.

“I’m done fussing over ‘the perfect man’ or ‘a guy who ticks all the boxes.’ As long as he’s decently good-looking, decently well-off, and has decently high standing, you won’t hear a complaint out of me!” declared Miss Iris, balling her hands into fists. Was it just me, or was that still a pretty tall order?

“If only the right guy would just fall into my lap,” said Miss Verbena beside her, the picture of someone who had already given up.

I don’t think you want anyone falling into your lap—that sounds highly inappropriate! Oh, what do I do? The mood just keeps getting worse and worse!

Yikes, this calls for a subject change.

“B-By the way, Miss Verbena! We struck out with the weather today, but I heard it’s supposed to be sunny tomorrow. I’d love it if you could show me around your beautiful villa.” I brought up the tour, clapping my hands together as though the thought had just occurred to me.

“Oh, that’s right! Of course—it would be my pleasure! We’re planning to hold a tea party in the garden too,” she replied, her face lighting up instantly. Operation Subject Change was a success.

“That sounds like fun!”

“I can’t wait to get a look at your lovely garden!”

“I’m looking forward to the tea party part too.”

“Will anyone else be joining us?”

“Yes, we’ve invited the rest of the girls as well. How many were there, again?”

Miss Verbena gave a quick look around the dance floor and started counting

up people. There seemed to be around ten young (meaning *marriageable*) ladies in total. The fact that there were a lot more single men here than women spoke to Duke Argenteia's consideration for his daughter. ("I didn't ask for any of this!" —Verbena)

When I followed Miss Verbena's gaze around the venue, I spotted a handful of young noblewomen looking over at us and whispering to each other. Were we being too loud?

Just as I was thinking that I ought to bring my volume down a few notches, Miss Iris broke into a mischievous grin. "The other girls keep glancing our way hoping for a chance to get closer to *you*, Vi."

Huh?! They want to be friends with a plain Jane like me? No way.

But hey, new friends are always welcome in my book! No need to keep such a distance, girls—I don't bite! Should I *go up to them and ask them to join us? Eh, nope—that's not happening! I'm not extroverted enough for that!*

"What a shame for them that we're keeping you surrounded like this," remarked Miss Verbena, smirking. "At this rate, tomorrow's tea party is going to be a fight for the seat next to Miss Viola!"

"For sure!" the rest of the girls chimed in.

"Uh, I don't know about that one..."

I responded to their obvious flattery with a shake of my head, only for Miss Amaranth to shoot down my protests. "Well, *I* do!"

"Okay. Sure."

If you say so. I mean, c'mon...they've got *to be more concerned about spending their time with a nice young man than with* me*.*

I was still having a hard time buying this whole scenario, and my lips twisted into a pout. That was when Miss Iris leaned over and whispered in a voice only I could hear: "Those girls ordered themselves imitations of your jewelry, you know."

"Huh?"

"Take a look."

When I followed Miss Iris's gaze, I saw that the ladies facing our way had an oddly familiar accessory draped around their necks.

Oh, it's exactly the same as the necklace I *have.*

I forgot what party I'd worn it to, but I remembered that design. It'd be hard not to—these days, I was promoting our Viola Sapphires every chance I got. Business was booming, in case you were wondering☆

Every accessory I wore was an original work from our jeweler, so it was impossible to get your hands on the exact same product unless you commissioned a copy for yourself. Interesting. So their necklaces had more than just a sapphire in common with mine—they'd replicated every detail, right down to the design.

"Your go-to jeweler claimed that he's been getting a flood of orders for necklaces just like yours," Miss Verbena jumped in.

"Oh, wow... Thanks for your purchase?"

"From the sound of it, it's especially popular with the younger set."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"The value of the gem certainly doesn't hurt, but I hear some girls have been praying that wearing it might bless them with a catch as good as the one *you* landed."

"Huh?!"

How long have they been praying like that?! If you go looking for a "catch" like mine, you're going to wind up in a contract marriage... Oh, whoopsie! That's supposed to be a secret.

"I suppose I can't blame them. It's easy to see why they'd want a perfect imitation of everything you have."

"Still, fashion is all about expressing yourself by putting your own spin on things!"

The critique of the other girls' necklaces seemed to be turning into a debate on advanced fashion techniques. Huh? What did *I* think, you ask? I always leave it up to my maids to dress me, *duh*.

“I fought down my desire to match Vi and changed up the design. I plan to wear mine to tomorrow’s dinner party,” said Miss Iris with a smile.

“Oh, me too.”

“Same here.”

What a surprise—the rest of the girls chimed in one after the other.

“Seriously?! Every single one of you?!”

It seemed Miss Verbena, Miss Iris, and the entire Soirée Quartet had all bought their own version of my necklace who-knows-when. Heavens be praised...or something!



11. The Tea Party

With the reasoning that “everyone must be tired after coming such a long way,” the nighttime tea party came to an end unexpectedly quickly. Given that I’d been planning to duck out early from the start, that was a godsend for me.

“It sounds like quite a few girls bought your sapphires and had them made into necklaces of their own,” said Mr. Fisalis. He claimed the topic had come up during his conversation with the other gentlemen.

“So it would seem. I even saw a few girls wearing a necklace with the same design as mine.”

“Apparently they’ve been going to the jeweler and ordering one ‘just like Duchess Fisalis’s.’”

“Yeah, that’s what Miss Verbena said.”

The popularity of the jewel itself was a no-brainer, and considering the kind of serious thought Mimosa and Stellaria always put into the designs, it was only natural that my accessories would garner so much attention.

“Come to think of it, Mother was going crazy trying to pitch her ‘Angulata Drops’ today...”

“Oh? Is that a new product?”

“Evidently so. From the sound of it, she threw a fit at Father—something to the tune of: ‘People tell me *my* eyes are like sapphires too, I’ll have you know!’ He caved and rechristened the star sapphire ‘Angulata Drops’ as an allusion to her eyes. She can get competitive over the pettiest of things, that mother of mine,” said Mr. Fisalis, chuckling.

“What, really...?”

Please, Mother Fisalis, don’t work yourself up over a plain Jane like me! Anyone could see that you blow me right out of the water!

*

Just as the forecast had predicted, the rain stopped the next day. The sky was clear and blue enough to make yesterday's downpour seem like little more than a dream.

The way the plants in the garden were shining lush with dew was absolutely beautiful! The only downside was that the waters of the Wahl River were looking rough and muddy.

Breakfast was brought up to our room, so there was no need to worry about seeing other people first thing in the morning. And thank goodness for that—if I'd been required to put on my social persona from the moment I woke up, I wouldn't have made it through the day. Three cheers for private time!

"Now that the weather has cleared up, Lady Verbena would like to give you a tour of the villa."

When our breakfast arrived, one of Miss Verbena's maids gave us a brief rundown of today's schedule. Lunch would come after the tour, and following that, the girls would have their tea party. The boys were *supposed* to go hunting, but seeing as the ground was still slippery after yesterday, the plan had been changed to a leisurely horseback ride. Hunting... Now *that* was a rich man's sport. What about *my* father, you ask? He did go hunting, sure, but not for sport; he was out there trying to put food on our table, so he couldn't afford to have fun with it!

Oh, but I don't think I've ever seen Mr. Fisalis hunt before.

"I never see you do much hunting, Cercis. Not a fan?"

"Oh... Uh, I already spend a lot of time riding horses or training on the job, so I'm not interested in doing even more of it on my time off. Besides, a more practical kind of hunt suits—"

"Please don't finish that sentence."

I'd only asked him out of idle curiosity, and there he was ready to give me a disturbing answer. A kind of hunt Mr. Fisalis (in other words, a knight) would consider "practical"? No thank you!

Moving right along.

I guess that makes sense. Hunting is a sport, so unless he really enjoyed it, someone who already spends each and every day working out like Mr. Fisalis wouldn't have any reason to bother.

What does *he do on his days off, anyway? He either gets nagged by Rohtas to take care of his mountains of paperwork, or he gives his butler the slip and kicks back with me...and that's about it? Huh? Does my husband not have any hobbies whatsoever?!*

I shot Mr. Fisalis a pitying look, which he returned with a blank stare.

"So you girls are having a tea party, hm? I bet you'll have yourselves a grand old time."

"It's like they say: a woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tail."

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Whoopsie, I let an insult slip there☆ Let's just forget that ever happened, shall we?

*

Not long after breakfast, Miss Verbena and Celosia showed up in person to pick us up.

"It would be beyond obnoxious to show everyone around at once—this is hardly some kind of a tour group—so I've decided to split everyone up into smaller groups and show them around one by one."

She had a point. If we explored the mansion in one big mob...

"Okay, everyone! Next up, take a look at the room to our right!" Everyone shuffled along after their guide. "One, two, three, four... Oh dear, did we lose somebody?"

Just imagining it was enough to wear me out. She'd definitely made the right call in dividing us up.

"This is the banquet hall. We had dinner here last night, but we mainly use it for parties. Over here we have the parlor, and that's the main dining room."

After we'd seen all the public areas, we were shown the rooms largely reserved for guests. Personally speaking, I would have been way more interested in seeing the kitchen or laundry room.

It might not have been on the scale of their main residence back in Rohze, but each and every room was elegant and spacious nonetheless—no less than you'd expect from a family of moneybags. Not to mention that everything was decked to the nines with expensive-looking furniture.

Once we'd gotten a cursory tour of the villa, next up was the garden. The Wahl River ran just beyond the grounds, which only served to make the space look even more vast.

"If only the river were a little gentler today, I would've liked to take you out on the water."

"That would have been lovely! It's too bad the waters are so turbulent."

The rain had muddied the water and flooded the river too much for safe sailing, so it wouldn't have been much fun to do it now.

But just as Miss Verbena and I were wallowing in our disappointment, Celosia suggested, "Perhaps it will have calmed down by tomorrow. If so, let's take the boat out for a spin."

Lunch was laid out for us in the banquet hall, and we were free to help ourselves. Hooray for buffet style! There were seats available not only in the room itself, but out in the garden just through the glass door, so the four of us opted to eat out there. Anyone who had finished their walk around the villa started eating at their leisure, giving the noontime meal a nice, laid-back vibe.

*

When lunch was over, it was time to start socializing. The men mounted their horses, while we—Team House-Sitters—saw them off at the front entrance.

Every single one of the guys looked great on horseback, but no matter how generous you were to the others, Mr. Fisalis was clearly a cut above the rest. He was so dashing that it shot right past eyecandy and straight into nosebleed territory.

He was wearing a black shirt and white pants, with close-fitting riding boots to complete the look. The simplicity of the outfit only served to highlight his gorgeous proportions.

As a matter of fact, all the girls' eyes were on him. *Excuse me, ladies? Didn't you come here to find a husband? Stop ogling a taken man! Get your butts into gear, bachelors—don't let a married man beat you out!*

"Have fun. And do be careful."

I knew I was being a nag, but I made a point of warning him regardless. Carelessness invites disaster, after all.

"Not to worry—if I got injured on a mere jaunt, I'd be the laughingstock of the Royal Guard. Enjoy your tea party, Vi."

"I will."

After watching the men leave, we went our separate ways for the time being. All of us would meet back up in the parlor once we had primped ourselves for the tea party.

The grounds were quite extensive for a vacation home, and I was tuckered out after that walk around the premises. We still had some time before the tea party, so I figured I might as well take it easy until the servants came for me. Unfortunately, just as I'd gotten settled in my room...

"Let's start getting you ready for the tea party, Madam Fisalis," said Stellaria, she and her fellow maids gleefully getting down to business.

"Huh? But don't we have a break between now and then?"

"No, Madam. This block of time is set aside for changing clothes and having your hair and makeup done."

"Can I take that break *after* you do my hair and makeup?"

"Absolutely not. You'll mess up all our hard work."

"Figures."

It's only a tea party, sure, but it's still socializing. Are you really going to deny me a chance to mentally prepare myself? Oh well—I guess that's what I'll have

to use the prep time for.

"How many times am I going to have to change in one day?" I lamented, heaving a sigh.

"There's the tea party, the luncheon, and dinner—so that makes three."

"Oh, right... That's why I packed so many dresses and stuff. I remember now."

"The tea party won't be quite as formal as the dinner, but that only makes a touch of panache that much more critical. It's an all-female event, so you're sure to get a tongue-lashing if your appearance isn't up to par," my maid insisted, getting right up in my face.

She's got a point! Girls always notice the little things when it comes to fashion. And they're not shy about dragging you for it!

Come to think of it, they'd even had some pretty particular opinions about the necklaces from yesterday.

Stellaria was getting more and more worked up. "And that goes double when you're the center of everyone's attention! Even a moment's carelessness could cost us dearly!"

"She's right!" the rest of the maids chimed in.

Gotcha. Just because it's a friendly tea party doesn't mean I can slack off. I hear you loud and clear!

Still, it was safe to say that this was more a test of *Stellaria's* fashion sense than my own. I didn't have a scrap of "panache" to my name, so I just had to keep my mouth shut and play the part of her dress-up doll.

"All right! I hereby swear I'll do whatever it takes not to disgrace the Fisalis name!"

But that was limited to whatever I *could* do, of course. Dahlia had drilled me on the proper way to drink tea. As for the conversation...well, I'd just have to wing it.

Will I really be okay? Now that Stellaria's put the fear of God into me, I'm suddenly feeling way more nervous!

When she noticed I'd gone quiet all of a sudden, Stellaria gripped me by the hand and did her best to calm me down. "Just do what you always do, Madam."

"*You're* the one who got me all worked up!"

"Dear me! Do pardon my indiscretion."

"That apology doesn't sound too sincere when you say it with a smile!"

"Oho ho ho! Forgive me, Madam."

"Hey, you're still laughing!"

Fortunately, our banter did the trick of chasing my jitters away.

And then, before I knew it, the time had come to begin the tea party.

There were so many of us that we had to be seated across several different tables. We were roughly divided up by age, with the mother generation—the women closer to Duchess Argenteia's or Mother Fisalis's age—and the younger girls sitting amongst ourselves. I'd been worried they were going to split us into groups of married women and bachelorettes, so boy was I ever grateful they'd gone with a generational split instead. I wouldn't have had any idea what to talk about with the moms.

Hanging out with the youths meant I got to sit with Miss Verbena and Miss Iris too, which came as a big relief. It was moments like this that made me feel how small my circle of friends really was.

"You're welcome to change seats whenever you please, so relax and enjoy the appetizing tea and snacks. Feel free to get up and take a walk around the garden while you're at it," announced Duchess Argenteia—and with that, the tea party was officially underway.

There was a variety of baked goods, fresh sweets, and sandwiches laid out. Each and every treat was made with care by the Argenteia family's chef and just as scrumptious as you'd expect.

At first I just sipped my tea and nibbled away at my cakes while quietly listening in on everyone else's conversations, but given my love for gardening, I was eventually overcome with the urge to see what sorts of flowers were blooming.

When I found that I had less of an appetite than I'd thought and got tired of snacking, I figured I'd kill some time looking at the flowers.

"Miss Verbena, would you mind if I go take a look at the garden?"

I hadn't really had the chance to get a closer look at it during our morning tour, after all.

"Why, of course not! I'll come show you around," she replied, getting up from her chair.

"Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt—"

"The conversation can carry on just fine without me. I'll leave you to it, girls."

"Wait, I'll join you!"

"Me too!"

I *tried* to turn down the offer so that she wouldn't have to stop what she was doing, but instead, it seemed I'd triggered a wave of ladies getting to their feet.

And thus Team Youngsters was off for a walk in the garden. How had it come to this?

That blue blossom I had spotted in the corridor was far from the only rare flower blooming in the garden of the Argenteia villa.

"Wow, there are so many flowers I've never seen before!"

When she saw the way I was glancing around at the unfamiliar flowers, Miss Verbena explained, "We mainly grow flowers unique to the region."

This was neither Fisalis territory nor my parents' domain, so naturally the native flora would be different. Since this was my first time visiting the territory of a non-family member, it only made sense for it to be full of flowers I'd never seen before.

Hmm... Do you think Bellis could have them imported if I asked? First I'd need to find out the names of the flowers, though.

That train of thought was interrupted when one of the lady guests said, "I see you're a big fan of flowers, Miss Viola."

She had plump, rosy cheeks and twinkling blue eyes. With half of her beautiful

blonde hair pulled back behind her, she looked like a lovely young lady...but unfortunately, I had absolutely no idea who she was.

I went with as innocuous an answer as I could manage. “Yes, I love them! I’ve made sure we have plenty growing in our own mansion.”

“I knew it! I’ve heard the duke often goes out and buys you flowers as a gift.”

“How did you know that?!”

“My brother works for the chivalric order, you see...”

According to this young lady—who introduced herself as the daughter of Viscount Pastoris—she’d heard about Mr. Fisalis’s shopping exploits from her older brother in the chivalric order. For the record, he was *not* one of my husband’s direct subordinates, but rather part of the clerical staff.

“I’ve always looked up to you, Miss Viola! I’m delighted to have the chance to make your acquaintance.”

I *knew* those stars in her eyes hadn’t been my imagination. Well, that explained *that*.

What was she doing looking up to an ugly duckling like me? Or so I would have *liked* to say, but whenever I was on the clock, I was transformed into a prim and proper duchess through the power of makeup. Little did she realize I was just pulling the wool over her eyes.

“Goodness, you flatter me!” I responded—and not out of modesty, but because I was genuinely taken aback.

“I’m glad for the opportunity myself.”

“As am I!”

More and more young ladies were flocking to me and chiming in now. *You girls sure do love to move in packs, huh?*

“You’re beautiful, charming, and an inspiration for young girls everywhere!”

Like I was saying, that’s all the work of my special effects makeup.

“You’ve got great taste in everything, and you’re a master of dance and conversation!”

And that's *all the work of my top-notch servants.*

"And to top it all off, you have the perfect husband who's absolutely head over heels for you!"

I don't get that one either. As a matter of fact, I wish someone could please explain what's going on there.

"Oh, I'm so jealous!"

"Where can *I* find that kind of happiness?"

No need to build me up, girls! Where's all this praise even coming from?! Flattery won't get you anywhere, I'll have you know!

I'd worn myself out just poking holes in everything they were saying. Okay, maybe that was my own fault for bothering with the running commentary in the first place. Still, I had *heard* about girls hero-worshipping me, but dealing with it face-to-face was draining me emotionally!

That's enough already, thanks!

"I'm such a big fan of yours that I even bought a Viola Sapphire!" said Miss Pastoris, puffing out her chest just enough for me to catch the glint of a sapphire in the light. But to be perfectly frank, I had no way to know if that was actually one of *our* sapphires.

She must have realized we weren't quite ready to believe her, seeing as she went out of her way to flip her necklace over to prove its authenticity. "Look, it has the seal and everything!"

Sure enough, the mark of a Viola Sapphire was engraved on the platinum part of the necklace right next to the gem.

"I wanted the whole necklace to look exactly like yours, but my father thought that would be a bit much. I just went with a similar design instead."

"Oh, I *do* have a necklace that looks a lot like that one, yes."

"Ever since I caught sight of it at an evening party, I've been dying to have one of my own!"

"Thanks." The "for your purchase" part was implied.

She can buy whatever she wants as soon as she wants it, huh? Classic rich girl stuff!

Of course, she was far from the only one with a sapphire of her own. The other girls chimed in with similar comments. I seemed to remember getting caught in a conversation a lot like this one the other day... So we were back to this nonsense, huh?

To top it all off, everyone declared in unison: “I’ll be wearing mine to tonight’s party!”

Tonight was shaping up to be one big Viola Sapphire showcase.

12. It All Started with a Soirée

Once the mentally taxing tea party was over and done with, I went back to my room to catch some Zs. It was during my nap that Mr. Fisalis returned from his outing.

“Vi! Are you all right?! Are you feeling ill?!”

Shocked to find me sprawled limp over the sofa, he rushed over to my side and gathered me into his arms—but I was fine, of course. Just feeling a little fatigued.

“Welcome back. It’s no big deal... I’m just tired. I’ll be okay after a little nap.”

“Are you sure?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, good. We have an evening party to attend, so we’ve got a long night ahead of us.”

“That’s exactly why I need to charge my batteries while I can.”

“Fair point. Sorry to disturb you.”

“You’re good—don’t worry about it.”

Just do me a favor and leave me alone for a while.

I was indeed feeling better after a short doze, so I went straight to getting myself ready for the banquet. Just as Mr. Fisalis had said, there was going to be a party right after the dinner. That called for decking myself out in the finest of gowns.

My maids weren’t the type to take half-measures just because we were in an unfamiliar villa.

“Come now, Madam, let’s get you a quick, hot bath!”

“We’ve got all our usual treatments on hand!”

“You’re going to walk out of here looking like a million bucks!”

“Pardon me, Master Fisalis, but it would be quite uncouth of you to stand around and watch a lady get dressed. I must ask that you pass the time with Lord Fisalis or wherever else you care to go!”

“...Fine. I’ll be in the next room over.”

The delightful Spa Squad (Excursion Edition) wasted no time getting to work—and they kicked Mr. Fisalis out while they were at it. *He* also *needs to get ready...but that shouldn’t take him too long, so I guess it’s no biggie. Oh, but Mother Fisalis is going to be dressing for the party next door (in Father Fisalis’s room), so won’t he just get thrown out a second time?*

With my whole body polished from tip to toe, my hair pulled into a half updo, and my special effects makeup done, my transformation into Social Mode Viola was complete.

“I’ll be wearing the same jewelry as the last evening party, right?”

“That’s correct.”

Just as we’d discussed back in the Rohze manor, I was going to be reprising the necklace and earrings I’d worn to the party at the royal palace not too long ago. I had yet to get my hands on an accessory more valuable than those.

I wasn’t about to ask exactly how much they had cost. The minute I learned *that*, I’d be too terrified to walk out of the room wearing them.

My gown was designed to complement the hue of the sapphires. The abundance of frills gave it a lot of volume and its high waistline was embellished with gems, which made my legs look a lot longer than they really were! The decorative gems were arranged in the same design as my necklace, of course. These were just regular old Viola Sapphires, though. This was the first time I’d ever worn a dress with jewels sewn *onto* it...and I couldn’t help wondering how the heck this was supposed to go in the wash.

Now that my look was mostly complete, Mr. Fisalis came back to the room.

“You look as ravishing as ever, Vi!”

Here’s a tip: when your reaction is that *over-the-top, it just seems like you’re lying!*

“Our maids are just too good at what they do.”

“No, no, the fault lies with your own natural charm. Now look at what’ve you gone and done—I’m raring to boycott yet another party!”

“Ooh, shall we?!”

There we went with our good old routine.

The only thing different from usual is that Rohtas isn’t here to be our straight man. And without him *around... Oho? Are we about to get away with playing hooky?*

...Or so I had foolishly believed, but nothing in life is ever quite so easy.

“My goodness, you two never learn. I’m informing Rohtas when we get home.”

Stellaria had stepped up to fill in his shoes.

“Noo, don’t tattle on us! We’ll go be social, I promise!”

“Good. Come, Madam—we still need to put your jewelry on. Both my hands are otherwise occupied, so you’ll have to have Drosera assist you.”

“Okay, Madam Fisalis, turn around!”

Since Stellaria was busy putting the makeup away, Drosera helped put on my necklace and earrings.

My husband was getting himself changed beside us. Tonight he was looking sharp in a dark ensemble.

Makeup? Check. Hair? Check. Dress? Check. Jewelry? You betcha! And that’s everything on the checklist. I’m ready to roll.

Let’s do this thing!

*

With all the blood, sweat, and tears the Argenteia’s chef had poured into making our dinner, it was just as tasty as the previous night—but unfortunately, the portion size was just as overkill. This meal was going to call for pacing myself.

Tonight's dinner was some sort of spin on the traditional local cuisine, and the grilled chicken entrée was mouthwateringly juicy. I was going to have to ask Cartham to try his hand at making it when I got home.

Just about everything was delicious except for the herb salad, which I left untouched because I couldn't stomach the smell of it. But seriously, all it took was a *whiff* of it to make me nauseous? Some foods just don't agree with you, I guess. Rest assured, I felt suitably guilty about it.

When the banquet was over, it was time for the ball. The band—which had stuck to playing soft, slow songs throughout our meal—transitioned into a fun, upbeat little bop.

Everyone spent the time however they pleased, whether that meant indulging in conversation or enjoying a dance.

Listen up, all you bachelors and bachelorettes! Don't miss out on your chance to meet lots of new people! I wish you all the best of luck in finding that special someone!

"Well then, Duchess Fisalis," said my husband. "Would you care to join me for a dance?"

"Hee hee—I most certainly would!"

If I was going to share my first dance with anyone, it had to be Mr. Fisalis!

I was charmed that he had followed all the proper etiquette in asking me out to the floor. With those brown eyes and sweet smile turned on her, there wasn't a girl in the world who could tell him no. It drove me crazy how a hottie like him could make *anything* look good.

I took Mr. Fisalis's hand, and the two of us began dancing in time to the slow-tempo song.

"I'd say we can back off on promoting our sapphires, wouldn't you?" I brought up during our waltz. "Everyone has one already."

Mr. Fisalis glanced around, really exercising his skill at looking closely without looking *too* closely. "That's true. All the girls seem to be wearing a necklace similar to yours tonight."

When he gave a nod of agreement, I added, “Though it’s more or less the same design, it’s more fashionable for them to put their own spin on it.”

“Huh, I see.”

I flaunted the knowledge I’d picked up from the tea party earlier that day.

Once the first song was over, Celosia came to ask me for a waltz.

“May I have the next dance, Duchess Fisalis?”

“Of course.”

“Make sure you lead her well, Celosia.”

“I was planning on it.”

We put some distance between ourselves and Mr. Fisalis for the moment.

From there on out, it was the usual evening party routine. Like always, the men looking to dance with me just kept coming and coming.

I spent the entire time I was away from my husband on the dance floor. This really *was* shaping up to be like every other soirée I’d been to.

After a while spent indulging in waltz after waltz, a certain Viscount Trifolium flashed me a smile mid-dance. “This would be my first time joining you on the dance floor.”

He was a friendly-looking fellow with his long, ash-blond hair tied back in a ponytail.

“I believe so, yes.”

“I suppose that’s no surprise, given how few soirées I attend.”

“I could say the same of myself.”

“That *is* how you earned the nickname of ‘The Illusory Belle.’ But no matter—the infrequency of your appearances only increases their value. Besides, even if I *were* to see you at an evening party, someone as lowly as myself could never hope to approach a lady so far above my station.”

“Oh, don’t say that!”

Though he looked lanky and sort of spineless at first glance, he sure knew

how to sweet-talk a girl. But man, it had been a while since I'd last heard someone call me "The Illusory Belle"...

Between his deep, serene voice and suave demeanor, I had to wonder how this guy was still single. Considering he had yet to miss a beat despite the difficult tempo of the song currently playing, I could only assume he was a pretty good dancer too.

"But there aren't quite as many people here today, so I took the plunge and came to say hello."

"Oh, come now! No need to be shy back in Rohze either."

And as we were dancing and partaking in mindless conversation...there suddenly came a loud *CRASH* from near my feet.



“What’s this?”

That was a pretty loud noise... Did something fall?

I glanced down out of curiosity—only to find that my necklace had fallen to the floor!

Whew, that’s a big load off my neck...NOT! Eeeek! That necklace cost an arm and a leg, and I dropped *it! Ahhhh! It didn’t break, did it?!* Please *tell me the jewel didn’t get scratched!*

I could practically hear the sound of the blood draining from my face.

“Oh dear. It seems my necklace fell.”

Though I was freaking the heck out on the inside, I made sure to school my voice and face when I paused our dance to pick it up.

No panicking. I was the picture of elegance.

“Oh no! Is it damaged?” the viscount asked, peering down at me as I scooped up the necklace.

“No—as far as I can tell, it looks fine.”

I was pretty sure it was okay, but I’d have to double-check when I was back in my room.

For now, I just had to put it back on...but alas, the clasp was too difficult for me to manage on my own.

The viscount must have guessed what the problem was when he saw me dithering with the jewelry in my hands. “Allow me to assist you,” he said, then took the handkerchief out of his breast pocket, wiped off the necklace both quickly and carefully, and came around behind me to fasten it back around my neck.

“I’m sorry for the trouble.”

“Don’t be. If anything, it was a privilege! Hmmm... Was the clasp not secured properly, I wonder?”

“Yeah, that must have been it. Thank you again.”

With that, we went back to dancing in time to the music.

The necklace slipped off one more time after that.

I'm so sick of this happening!

I was on the verge of tears. But of course, I wasn't about to break down crying in front of a crowd of nobles.

Mr. Fisalis got concerned enough to come over to me. "What's wrong?"

"The clasp on my necklace won't stay closed, and the whole thing keeps falling to the floor. Now I'm beside myself worrying if the jewel's going to crack the next time it happens."

"I see—hm?"

Mr. Fisalis stared down at the necklace in my hands, arching his brows.

"What's up?"

"...Nothing. Say, why don't we call it a night? It's getting late."

"Sure. Sounds good to me."

I was already feeling exhausted, considering my nerves had been shot since morning (mainly because of all that socializing). If I'd had to carry on mingling while I sat on pins and needles, I would've been done for!

*

After explaining the situation to the Argenteia family, we left the party early.

"Vi. Let me see your necklace."

"Sure."

As soon as we were back in our room, Mr. Fisalis began inspecting the accessory.

"...I knew it," he muttered, his brow furrowing.

Knew what? Knew that it got damaged?!

"Did you find a scratch?"

I hadn't dropped it on purpose, but it still pained me to think that I'd ruined a

perfectly good gem.

Just as I was getting down on myself, certain that I'd damaged the goods, Mr. Fisalis muttered, "No, that's not it. This is a fake."

That comment hit me like a bolt from the blue.

A FAKE?!

"D-Did you just say it's a *fake*?!"

"See here? The seal is all wrong, and if you take a closer look, you can tell that the gem itself is different too."

When I looked at where Mr. Fisalis was pointing, I saw that there was indeed a mark engraved there—but it was the stamp of a Viola Sapphire, not a Viola Eye!

Considering the necklace had been made with a Viola Eye, if the seal didn't indicate as much, that just didn't add up. And though it was impossible to tell unless you held it up to the light, Mr. Fisalis was right that there was something off about the gem's luster too. It was a subtle enough difference that I hadn't noticed when I was wearing it.

"We checked it when it was first delivered to us from the jeweler; the seal was definitely there," affirmed Stellaria, thinking back to when that had happened.

Mr. Fisalis nodded in response to the maid's testimony. "Right. I even made sure to inspect it myself. In that case, when on earth could it have been switched out for this counterfeit?" he mused aloud, his expression taking a turn for the grim.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think to pay any attention to the seal."

If only I'd checked when I put it on this morning...

I was well past "the verge" of tears. My eyes were seriously watering.

"It's not your fault, Vi. What about your earrings, by the way?"

"I don't know. They never fell off, at least..."

"Let me take a look."

“Go ahead.”

I took off one of my earrings and handed it over to my husband.

“Oh... This one is fine.”

Mr. Fisalis pressed a fist to his lips and fell deep into thought.

From the sound of it, my necklace was the only thing that had been swapped out for a fake. Now where on earth had the real one gone?!

13. Find That Culprit! But First Let's Do Some Thinking

Without my knowledge, my Viola Eye necklace had been switched out for a fake. When on earth did *that* have the chance to happen?!

"Why don't we all calm down and focus on getting the facts straight? Stellaria, make us some tea."

"Yes, Master."

I see—the idea is to drink some tea and approach this calmly! I'm definitely the one freaking out the most here, so this is him doing his best to calm me down. I appreciate the thought.

Drinking the tea Stellaria had brewed both calmed me down a bit and filled me with renewed morale.

All right—it's time to get the real thing back!

"For a start...there's the question of whether this was the genuine article to begin with," Mr. Fisalis murmured.

"What if I already had a fake back in the Rohze manor, you mean?"

"Exactly. There's always the possibility that it had been swapped out for the counterfeit before we even got here."

Ah, so we're tracing things back to the very beginning!

Hmm, I wonder... I never did go out of my way to check if it was the real deal.

I groaned and racked my brains, trying to think back to when I'd packed my stuff back in the mansion...but I couldn't remember at all!

That was where Stellaria replied, "I remember seeing the seal."

"Elaborate."

"Yes, sir. I polished the necklace before putting it away in its box and bringing

it here with us. I can confirm that it had the mark of a Viola Eye at that time."

Come to think of it, Stellaria had put my jewelry away only after meticulously polishing each and every accessory. That must have been when she noticed the seal.

That's our Stellaria! Way more reliable than a certain good-for-nothing duchess I could name.

"I see. Then that means we still had the real item when we got here."

"Correct."

That ruled out theory number one.

*

"Next up...let's think about what happened today. Who got the sapphires out for you?" Mr. Fisalis asked, taking a pen and notepad from the desk and scribbling something down as he did.

"I did." Stellaria was yet again the one to answer. "I removed the jewelry box from the coffer in the wardrobe when I was getting out the madam's dress."

Though nobody was *officially* in charge of getting my dresses or jewelry ready, typically either Stellaria or Mimosa took on the task of picking out my gown and coordinating my accessories to match.

"So Stellaria brought out the jewelry, then. Did you notice anything off at the time?"

"Nothing of note, no. The box was the same one we received from the jeweler." She pointed to the case in which we had stored the fake for the time being.

The box—the same one the necklace had originally arrived in—was padded with sleek crimson velvet on the outside, while the inside had a soft, silky lining; it wouldn't be a stretch to call it a luxury item even while empty. The jeweler's seal was stamped on the inside of the lid, and his creations always came in a case just like this one.

"Did you check what was inside?"

“I didn’t, no. I’d already polished the jewelry before we left the mansion, after all.”

“I see.”

Turning that over in his mind, Mr. Fisalis made yet another note.

“Did anyone touch the jewel after that?”

“The next to handle it would be me, I’m fairly certain,” Drosera volunteered. “I took it out of the box to put it on Madam Fisalis. I believe you were watching at the time.”

“Oh, that’s true,” my husband replied, thinking back to earlier that evening.

Stellaria had had her hands full, so Drosera had been the one to help put on my jewelry today.

“Did you inspect the necklace beforehand, Drosera?”

“I’m afraid I did not. I got a good look at the clasp when I was closing it...but I didn’t check for the seal,” she answered somewhat cautiously—perhaps because she was doing her best to recall the circumstances.

“Few would, I suppose. Why go out of your way to scrutinize the seal each and every time you take it out?”

“Exactly,” I agreed with a nod. We’d never dreamed that my necklace might get swapped out for a counterfeit one day. It wasn’t anyone’s fault that they didn’t think to check.

Mr. Fisalis put his pen down with a huge sigh. “In short, nobody can confirm whether we had the real or the fake back in this room.”

“That’s what it comes down to, yeah. But I *know* our maids didn’t switch it out for a fake! Somebody else has to be responsible for this!” I emphatically declared.

Our servants would never do something like that! Considering how much time I’ve spent with them, I can state that for a fact!

I was getting preemptively worked up, but Mr. Fisalis only chuckled when he saw how ruffled my feathers were. “I know. We’d never hire anyone of such

disreputable character in the first place. I was only trying to get the facts straight."

"Well, good."

"As of now, all we know for sure is that the necklace *wasn't* swapped out in the afternoon."

Everyone seemed to be in agreement with Mr. Fisalis's presupposition.

With that, we'd sorted out at least one part of the story.

*

"Next, we need to consider whether the culprit could have broken into our room and replaced the necklace," Mr. Fisalis mused aloud, tapping his fist against his mouth once more.

Our second hypothesis was the Room Break-In Theory.

"There's always been at least one person inside this room, so I don't think that would have been possible." Here I'd been convinced this one was our most likely option, but it only took Stellaria's testimony to write it off in an instant. "Whenever the two of you were out, Drosera and others stayed here. Though of course, I was always with the madam, so I can't attest to that personally."

"Indeed. We never set foot outside the room, and nobody ever tried to come inside," Drosera chimed in, backing up Stellaria's claim.

Good point. Our maids would never be so careless as to leave the room unattended.

And after the party, *I* was in the room the whole time.

"Which means...we can rule out the culprit having switched the necklaces in our room," Mr. Fisalis concluded.

I nodded. "Apparently so."

That meant there were only two possible windows of time in which it could have been replaced: between our arrival at the villa and us settling down in our room, or from the dinner to the moment we discovered it was a fake.

*

“Come to think of it, I believe I mentioned that some of our belongings ended up strewn about in the chaos of our arrival,” Stellaria started, deep in thought.

“Yeah, you told us about that,” said Mr. Fisalis.

“Several of the servants toppled over and brought the suitcases they were carrying down with them, ultimately resulting in a bit of a luggage mix-up.”

The rain had made the ground all wet, and one of the attendants had slipped and fallen as a result. She’d then taken down the rest of the servants one after the other like a string of dominoes.

“I remember that. Didn’t Drosera get hurt in all that mess?”

“Boy, did I ever! I still have the bruise to show for it!” the maid in question fumed, showing off her fair-skinned arm. The place where she must have hit it was sporting a conspicuous blue bruise. The poor thing!

“Do you think, maybe...?” I ventured.

“*That’s* when someone could have swapped it out,” Mr. Fisalis finished.

Stellaria nodded. “Exactly.”

“Interesting... Do you remember whose servant was the first one to fall?”

“If I approach it with a clear head, I *might* be able to remember...but I was fairly flustered at the time, so I can’t answer with any real confidence.”

Stellaria erred on the side of caution here. It wouldn’t do to work off a fuzzy recollection and end up implicating an innocent person, after all.

“Fair enough. I’ll look into it later. Now we have one lead, at least.”

“Right!”

That was my husband for you—while I sat there panicking uselessly, he kept calmly moving the discussion along and had even managed to zero in on something suspicious! Once again, I was getting to see for myself how he’d earned a reputation for being so good at his job.

*

That just left the window of time between the dinner and the soirée.

“I know for a fact who was most suspicious then.”

Hm? Mr. Fisalis’s eyes glazed over all of a sudden. What’s the matter with him*?*

“You do?”

“I do. Think about it—wasn’t there someone who laid a hand on your necklace?”

“Oh!”

“And who went out of his way to put it back on for you?”

“Ohh...”

It was the “put it back on for me” part that didn’t sit well with you, huh? But he’s right—a certain someone plucked the jewelry right out of my hands, went around behind me, and clasped it back around my neck!

“Viscount Trifolium!” my husband and I cried out in perfect unison.



“There was no need for *him* to put it on you! He could have just called me over!”

“Uh-huh. Something told me *that* was the part you had a problem with.”

“That ought to go without saying! I don’t want anybody else laying so much as a finger on you!”

How about you rein in the possessiveness a little there, bud?

“Still, you’re right—Viscount Trifolium had the perfect chance to make the switch. How did he get my necklace off in the first place, though?”

“Who knows? I bet he unhooked while you were dancing. The scoundrel *was* getting too close for comfort.”

His logic has been so sound up to this point, but now *he’s resorting to wild guesses?! I see his personal grudge is starting to cloud his judgment. Where did all that composure of his go?!*

“Really...? He’d have to be pretty nimble-fingered for that. Besides, I didn’t think he was *that* close! What, were you watching us the whole time?”

“Of course I was!”

“Uh-huh...”

Who am I kidding? That’s exactly what my husband would do.

“Erm... Master Fisalis?” Stellaria cut in, hoping to break up our argument—or maybe not? She was holding the necklace in her hands.

“What’s up?”

“It’s about this necklace. If you examine it more closely, you’ll notice there’s a bit of a trick to the clasp,” she replied, handing the necklace over to her master.

Not long after he’d taken the accessory off her hands and started looking it over, both of his eyebrows shot up. “You’re right. It’s designed to *look* like it’s fastened properly, when in reality it can be undone with hardly any effort.”

He tested that observation by simply touching the clasp. Despite appearing tightly secured, it came unhooked almost instantly.

“Oh! No wonder it only took some dancing to make it fall off!”

Everything suddenly made a whole lot more sense.

“Then doesn’t that mean the necklace must have been swapped out for the fake *before* the dance—before the dinner, even?”

Here I thought we’d narrowed the culprit down to someone who had been there for our arrival, and yet...

“No... It’s still too early to rule out the possibility that it was replaced during the dance. Maybe the real clasp was just a faulty product to begin with.”

“Seriously...?”

It seemed that Mr. Fisalis *really* didn’t want to cross Viscount Trifolium off the list of suspects. Even if the guy *didn’t* have anything to do with this, I was willing to bet my husband would be keeping one eye on him during any future visits to the royal palace. *Sorry about that...*

“Either way, we clearly have a robbery on our hands. Let’s see... Why don’t we inform Rohtas and have him look into all the visitors currently staying in this villa? Perhaps we’ll figure something out from there.”

“Good idea.”

If we asked Rohtas, he’d pull up whatever information we wanted lickety-split.

“That said, we *are* here as guests for the villa’s housewarming, so we should strive to handle this matter behind the scenes. No need to disrupt the festivities.”

“I’m with you there!”

“Well then, Vi and I can be in charge of investigating the villa—”

“Huh?! Really?! Gosh, this is so exciting!”

“Excuse me? This is serious business!”

“Aye-aye! Roger that!”

I did my best to imitate the formal bow of a knight.

“Good grief. What am I going to do with you?” He laughed dryly at my antics, then went back to handing out orders. “Stellaria, get in touch with Rohtas and the secret service.”

“Yes, Master.”

Uh, hold it right there! Secret service?!

“Huh? Wait just a second, Cercis! What secret service?!”

“Hm? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

And now he’s just playing dumb!

14. Enter Rohtas

We sent word of the Viola Eye Necklace Counterfeit Caper back to the Fisalis manor that same night. Discreetly. Under the cover of darkness.

Given the circumstances, we were keeping our investigation a secret from the Argenteias, my in-laws, and my friends alike. Right now retrieving that necklace was our number one priority. Our plan was to go public about the incident only once we had the full picture.

*

"If only I'd checked to make sure it was the right necklace..."

If I had, we would have caught on to the switcheroo sooner. Or maybe I never should have taken it off in the first place! On the other hand, wearing it 24/7 would have been murder on my nerves—that thing is crazy expensive!

When he saw how I was deflating like a balloon, Mr. Fisalis rushed to reassure me. "Don't worry—it's not *your* fault, Vi! Hell, it isn't anybody's fault!"

"But..."

"No doubt the perpetrator planned out their crime carefully, so it's only natural that we didn't catch on. I mean, the possibility of it hadn't even crossed our minds before now."

"You think so?"

"I do. So don't let it bother you."

"All right."

He looked relieved that he had managed to get through to me. He knew full well that once I fell into a negative spiral, there was no pulling me out of the depths of despair (see also: The Broken Vase Incident).

"I believe the only thing on the schedule for tomorrow is the afternoon tea party."

“Yeah. The guys will be joining us this time around, right?”

One of the whole points of this event was to find a good match for Miss Verbena, after all. Tomorrow’s tea party would make the perfect showcase for all those high-class (in multiple senses!) bachelors.

“Correct. Perhaps we can use the opportunity to ask some questions.”

“Good thinking.”

*

The next day rolled around.

It was a good thing our morning schedule was open, because I ended up oversleeping. We’d stayed up late into the night discussing the missing necklace—and that was to say nothing of all the built-up fatigue that had snuck up on me. When I woke up to the sight of Mr. Fisalis already sipping away at his tea, I was practically beside myself.

After a late breakfast, we held a room-wide strategy meeting in advance of the afternoon tea party.

“We’ve done our best to recall the circumstances of the accident,” Stellaria started us off. By the “accident,” she must have been referring to the multi-servant pile-up shortly following our arrival.

“Oh, have you remembered the particulars?”

“Yes. Though I can’t say for certain, I believe Marquis and Marquise Erectum, Viscount and Viscountess Pastoris, and Viscount Trifolium were all present. My recollection of the family crest on the other two carriages is fuzzier, but if I’m not mistaken, they belonged to Earl Lizardtail and Baron Radiata respectively. A few more families trickled in after that, however, so it’s entirely possible my memory is playing tricks on me,” she replied, thinking the events over carefully.

I could have sworn I saw Mr. Fisalis’s eyes light up the moment Viscount Trifolium’s name was mentioned, but let’s pray that was just my imagination. *Oh, for crying out loud! Don’t pin this all on him out of pure self-interest!*

“Earl Lizardtail and Baron Radiata rule over the territories adjacent to the Argenteia’s land. The earl is one thing, but the baron rarely shows his face in

Rohze; I very much doubt you'd recognize him."

Mr. Fisalis was right—I knew his name and face from the Noble's Almanac, but I almost never saw him around at the royal capital or any major parties. Who would have guessed there was an even more obscure character than yours truly?!

"For now, we should keep those five people in mind and watch what they do during the tea party—right?"

"Precisely."

"Will do!"

I was so hyped for our undercover investigation that all my earlier negativity had vanished without a trace.

Mr. Fisalis regarded my enthusiasm with a wry smile. "Try not to get so carried away that you blow our cover, Vi."

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going to check that nothing is amiss with the rest of our jewelry, then look into the other families' servants. I'll try to find out whose servant was the first to fall and who else went down with them."

"Do your best to be discreet about it; we don't want the culprit knowing that we've cottoned on to the theft. I realize that's no easy task, though, considering how many potential suspects there still are."

The maids all bobbed their heads in response. "Of course, Master Fisalis."

Oh man, the time has come once more for our top-class servants to show their stuff! Something tells me they're going to go above and beyond our expectations.

*

After lunch, everyone got changed for the tea party before meeting back up in the garden.

"Let's get this investigation underway!"

"Tone it down a few notches, Vi! I need you to act *natural*, okay?"

"Okay, sorry. I'll be good."

My bad. I'd better take the pro's advice on this one.

This time around, we were divided into one group of married couples and another group of single people.

"The matchmaking agenda isn't even subtle anymore!" Miss Verbena seethed.

Miss Iris, meanwhile, was the picture of complacency. "Now, now! Since they've already gone to the trouble of grouping us up, we might as well take the opportunity to bag ourselves a nice catch!"

Looks like she's back on the prowl!

Since we'd been split up into spouses and singles, that meant I was on my own today. That said, there was no dancing on the itinerary, so at least I'd have Mr. Fisalis with me the whole time.

Even among the married guests, not everyone seemed to be from our parents' generation. The aforementioned Erectum couple looked close to our age. They were definitely on the younger side, at least.

I held hands with Mr. Fisalis and took a stroll around the garden while we were waiting for the tea party to start. Mostly in the interest of monitoring our targets, mind you.

"I see Viscount Trifolium and Baron Radiata are both bachelors."

The two men my husband had pointed out were talking to each other over where Team Singles had gathered.

"And Marquis Erectum, Earl Lizardtail, and Viscount Pastoris are all married," I observed.

"Viscount Pastoris is the only one with a daughter. The marquis and the earl don't have children yet."

"I wonder why. Maybe because they're still pretty young? Unfortunately, I don't remember their exact ages. All I can do is match names to faces."

"That's still a sign of progress."

"Exactly!"

Once we got back to the manor, I was hitting the Noble's Almanac again.

"Let's keep in mind that every bachelor invited here is someone who was deemed worthy of Lady Verbena."

Leave it to the people of our kingdom to think, *Who cares if a duke's daughter hooks up with a baron?* One of the best things about Flür was that nobody got fussed over love between classes! Of course, that only applied to marriages that *were* for love. It wouldn't fly in a marriage of convenience—that is, unless the lower-ranked half of the pair was pretty darn loaded.

Hm? Hold on a second... If I didn't know better, I'd say we have an exception to the rule standing right here...

We spotted Celosia among Team Singles too.

While the eldest son of the Argenteia family had found himself a fiancée and was soon to be married, Celosia was in a more flexible position than his brother; with any luck, he might even find the right person here at this party. He didn't seem to be under as much pressure as Miss Verbena, however.

"Should we try asking Celosia?" Mr. Fisalis whispered, keeping his voice low enough that only I could hear him.

"About who was standing around the entrance that day, you mean?"

"Yeah, exactly."

"How are we supposed to bring that up, though?"

"Watch and learn."

After shooting me a subtle wink, Mr. Fisalis tugged me along by the hand and walked up to Celosia.

The epitome of casual, he opened with: "Gorgeous weather, isn't it?"

"You said it. It's *so* nice that I'm a little worried the ladies might get sunburned," Celosia replied, flashing a smile my way.

"It's almost hard to believe it was pouring rain when we first arrived."

"I'll say. I wasn't sure what we were going to do if the storm carried on like that, so I'm glad the sun finally decided to come out."

“Just getting here was a struggle, and I can’t say things got much easier after we’d arrived. The traffic jam out front was so bad that for a moment I wondered if we’d wound up at some incredibly fancy inn.” Mr. Fisalis chuckled.

“Ha ha ha! What can you do? The rain had everyone running behind schedule. We had a real circus on our hands, let me tell you.”

“There were already a few other families waiting when we got here, weren’t there? I almost feel bad for cutting to the front of the line.”

“Don’t be silly! There were...what, five people ahead of you, if I’m remembering correctly? Earl Lizardtail, Viscount Trifolium, Marquis Erectum, Viscount Pastoris, and Baron Radiata. Not a one among them is entitled to better treatment than the Fisalis family,” said Celosia—for all he knew, just casually moving the conversation along.

Whoaaa! Celosia just rattled off all five of our suspects’ names! Leave it to Mr. Fisalis—just look at how smoothly he steered the conversation to the subject of our arrival! Should I chalk it up to a trick of his trade? Regardless, I have to take my hat off to him! And if you ask me, Celosia is just as impressive for coming up with all the guests’ names on command...but I’ll spare everyone the rest of my ramblings.

While the two men were chatting, I shot my husband a discreet but admiring glance. He was so awesome. What a natural!

I had to hand it to Stellaria and Drosera for their impressive memories too. I could hardly believe they’d remembered everyone there correctly.

Uh-oh. Is it just me, or is everyone else making me look like an idiot?

*

The tea party was over before evening fell, and we all returned to our rooms for the time being. There was still some time before dinner, so we had to take this chance to compare notes.

“Hey, guys, it’s us!”

“Welcome back.”

“Rohtas?!” Mr. Fisalis and I shouted in reply.

What a surprise we'd come back to! There to greet us with a smile was none other than Rohtas himself.

"Huh? What? Rohtas? You came all this way just to report back to us in person? Who's taking care of the mansion?"

"Considering the scale of the problem, I thought it best to put in a personal appearance. Not to worry—Cartham and Bellis have everything under control at the manor."

"Oh, fair point! What did you tell security to get inside the villa, though?"

No doubt the Argenteias would suspect something was up if the Fisalis butler was showing up *this* late to the party.

"I claimed that some urgent work had come up for my master."

"But why would the *butler* be personally delivering that message?"

"Fear not—I talked my way around that."

He flashed us yet another smile. Well, if Rohtas said it was fine, I figured there wasn't anything to worry about.

"You work fast, Rohtas," remarked Mr. Fisalis. "By the way, did you look into everything we asked about?"

"Yes, sir. And a few points of interest did come to light in the process," the butler responded, holding out a stack of documents.

Mr. Fisalis took the offered papers and began scanning them over. "Hmm... Funny how this is a perfect match for the list of names *we* came up with."

"Got your eyes on a few suspects already, have you?"

"In a sense. They happened to be at the scene of the crime, but we have yet to conduct a proper investigation."

"I see."

"A perfect match"? What, do you mean with those five noblemen we already talked about?

"First, there's Marquis Erectum. Despite his extravagant lifestyle, he's always claiming to be broke—and as a matter of fact, he *is* quite deep in debt."

“That checks out. The Erectums *were* a pretty flashy couple.”

They were perfectly matched as a handsome man and a beautiful lady.

“Then there’s Earl Lizardtail. He was once a wealthy lord, but his territory’s poor harvest has put a significant strain on his wallet these days.”

“Now *that’s* a familiar dilemma!”

Oh man, this is breaking my heart. But there’s one big difference between him and my family: this *guy is so vain that he cuts all sorts of corners looking out for his* own *livelihood! Take better care of your subjects, you jerk! Also, I’d assumed he was already married, but it looks like his plus one to this event is actually his fiancée.*

“Next, Viscount Trifolium. He’s a subordinate of Duke Argenteia with a reputation for being a hard worker. Unfortunately, his parents passed away very recently, saddling him with a great deal of debt that has left him hurting for money.”

“But he must make a lot at his job, right?”

“More than enough to support himself—but enough to pay back what he owes? That’s another matter entirely.”

“That makes sense, I guess.”

“All right, it’s *got* to be him! He’s the culprit!”

“Don’t bring your personal feelings into this, Cercis!”

The viscount had seemed like such a kind, mild-mannered fellow. I could buy that he was a hard worker, but he didn’t strike me as the type to turn to crime.

“Moving on... Viscount Pastoris. He’s another one of Duke Argenteia’s subordinates, also lauded for his diligence. His daughter is a diehard fan of yours, and it seems she’s been pestering him for a copy of anything and everything she sees you wear—which has been a burden on their financial situation as of late.”

“Yikes... I feel kind of bad.”

“It’s hardly *your* fault.”

Either way, I was pretty sure it was bad parenting to buy your daughter every little thing she wanted!

“Finally, Baron Radiata. He’s the very picture of a rustic lord. He’s not particularly hard-pressed for money, nor does he have a bad reputation. He was more likely invited out of courtesy to a neighbor than as a potential partner for Lady Verbena.”

“Then it doesn’t sound like there’s anything too suspicious about him, does it?”

“True... I think we can safely remove him from our list of suspects.”

With that, we’d narrowed the possibilities down to four people.

“While the two of you were busy with the tea party, we did some investigating of our own.” This time, Stellaria was the one to speak up. “With the exception of the Viola Eye, all the jewelry we brought with us is safe and accounted for.”

Mr. Fisalis mulled that bit of information over. “Hmm... I wonder what we should make of that. If the culprit knew about the seals, what’s to stop them from counterfeiting even more Viola Sapphire accessories?”

Rohtas frowned. “Perhaps they *couldn’t*...because we have too *many* Viola Sapphires?”

“What do you mean?”

“Ahem. We’ve had a great many accessories made with the Viola Sapphire, and there was no way to know which of them we would be bringing with us. However, the Viola Eye—which we showcased for the first time just the other day—was leagues above anything else we’d produced thus far. Given that there had been no word of us getting our hands on a more valuable gem since then, it was easy to assume that the madam would wear the same necklace to her next social event...and thus the culprit focused only on counterfeiting the Viola Eye.”

Oho... I get it! You’re a genius, Rohtas!

“Then this had to be a fairly premeditated crime, right?” I suggested.

“That’s more or less in line with what we were already thinking. It wasn’t an

accident that the necklaces got swapped—this heist was planned out well in advance.”

“I’m inclined to agree with that, Master Fisalis.”

All right! Someone’s going to pay for their crimes!

15. Find That Culprit! Let the Investigation Begin!

We were free to spend the majority of the next day doing whatever we pleased—but then, that was owed to the fact that the party after dinner was the main event on the schedule. Mr. Fisalis and I opted to go for an aimless stroll down the villa corridors and the garden outside, keeping an eye on all the invited guests as we toured the place.

Along the way, we happened to see Miss Verbena in the midst of a tea party with several young men.

“Something tells me someone else set up the perfect husband-hunting opportunity for her...and that she wasn’t given much say in the matter,” I remarked.

“I’ll bet.”

“Just look at the face she’s making... Hee hee!”

“If *that’s* her attitude, she’s never going to find a good match.”

We peeked in on her from the shadows. If her expression was any indication, this latest matchmaking exercise was going to be yet another bust.

In complete contrast to Miss Verbena, Miss Iris and company were amicably chatting away.

“There’s the usual quartet...plus two extra girls. Jeez, I can practically hear the advertising slogan: ‘Hot singles in your area! Don’t miss out!’”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if a few of *these* girls have better luck than Verbena.”

“I mean, the vibes can make or break a relationship. Miss Verbena could stand to make more of an effort, sure, but I don’t think Duke Argenteia is helping matters by pressuring his daughter to find a partner...you know what I mean?”

Of course, that was easy for *me* to say when it was partly my fault that she had missed out on her ideal marriage window. Mr. Fisalis had been her first

love, after all, and she'd been dead set on becoming *his* wife for the longest time.

When I stole a glance at my husband beside me, he gave a questioning tilt of his head and mumbled, "Hm?"

I'm really sorry, Miss Verbena. I wish I could introduce you to a nice bachelor to make up for it, but I'm afraid I don't exactly have a list.

"Viscount Trifolium and Baron Radiata are part of the group, I see." Mr. Fisalis spotted two of the men who had come up in yesterday's discussion.

"Oh, you're right."

From the look of it, they were hitting it off with all the single ladies.

We ran into Celosia as we resumed our stroll, and Mr. Fisalis took the opportunity to casually inquire, "Did anyone come in or out of the villa yesterday?" He'd slipped it in there naturally enough that his friend didn't even stop to wonder why he would be asking such a question, and we got an answer out of him easily. "Just your butler. As far as I've heard, nobody else has gone anywhere."

This whole incident was really driving home just how good Mr. Fisalis was at his job. It was moments like this that highlighted the difference between him and the kind of men who relied on nothing but their lineage to move up in the world; he had social standing in spades, sure, but he also had the skills to back it up. His success in life definitely hadn't been an accident.

"If no one's left the villa, that means the culprit still has the Viola Eye in their possession."

"Oh, now I get it!"

So that's *why he bothered asking about it!*

*

I had to psych myself up for the party that night, so we kept our walk relatively short and went back to our room to relax afterwards. In my current state of mind, our chill pace was just what the doctor had ordered. I mean, look at me—I'd been making an ass of myself non-stop since we'd got here! There

was no taking the edge off your exhaustion in someone else's home, it seemed.

"Since no one has come in or out of the building, chances are high that the Viola Eye is still somewhere inside the villa—in the culprit's possession, to be exact."

"So long as nobody smuggled it out, you mean?" Rohtas tested Mr. Fisalis's hypothesis.

It wasn't like their only option was to lug the stolen goods right out the front door, after all. In fact, it seemed like a much better idea to discreetly pass the necklace along to someone on the outside.

Or so I thought, but Mr. Fisalis countered, "Vacation home or not, this villa is property of the Argenteia family. The perimeter is too tightly guarded for anyone to get away with such shifty dealings. They'd be more likely to attract suspicion by sneaking around than they would just carrying the 'goods' right out the front door. Hence why I asked who had come and gone."

"That's a good point."

"Now if only we could conduct a large-scale search of the building. Blast it!" Mr. Fisalis ran a hand through his hair, visibly annoyed.

Calm down, Mr. Fisalis! I know this is frustrating, but if we want to keep this under wraps, we can't do a large-scale anything*! Besides, it'd be wrong to go snooping in people's rooms without a warrant.*

And yet Rohtas oh-so-nonchalantly replied, "I'll scour as much of the place as I can manage."

"Appreciated."

Et tu, Mr. Fisalis?! And is it really that easy to go poking around?! I guess if anyone can pull it off, it'd be our servants...

"In the meantime, we'll establish contact with the suspects at tonight's soirée. I'll get a read on the girls; Vi, I'll leave the men to you."

"Aye-aye, captain!"

"Do your best to naturally, *casually* bring the conversation around to your jewelry."

“I’ll, uh...see what I can do.”

I would’ve given anything to trade places with the Bombshell Trio right about now. Those girls could carry out a mission like this with their eyes closed.

*

Dinner was set to start a little earlier than usual tonight. The time had finally come, so we got dressed up and readied ourselves to head to the banquet hall.

“My word—just look at how cute you are, Vi! How am I supposed to let you out into public?!”

“We could always have them bring our dinner to our room! Here, I’ll pretend to be sick! Oh nooo, I’m getting wooooozy...”

“I think you’re onto something!”

Rohtas interrupted our time-honored banter. “A*hem*. Don’t you two ever tire of this routine? Cut the nonsense and get going. Did you forget about your investigation already?”

“We know, we know!” Mr. Fisalis and I reassured him.

Today we had the OG straight man around to shoot us down.

Oh c’mon, you don’t have to look so fed up with us! This is practically our pre-party ritual! We’re just honoring tradition—no need to take it so seriously!

*

The dinner ended without incident, and it was finally time for the party.

I had an important job to do tonight: evidence-gathering. Something told me this was going to be a different kettle of fish from the usual mindless chatting and dancing.

For starters, I couldn’t just go around waltzing with whomever I pleased. Man, I should have had my lady friends teach me how to encourage a specific guy to ask you to the floor!

“But seriously, how do I get them to invite me to dance?”

Obviously I couldn’t walk up and ask them myself, but if I did things my usual way and just mentally checked out, the prospective dance partners would keep

coming and coming until I missed my chance for any one-on-one time with the targets.

Mr. Fisalis sure has it easy. He's free to just pick his dance partner from the list of suspects!

Tonight, I had to fraternize with the male suspects and hear what they had to say. My mission was of the utmost importance. Meanwhile, Mr. Fisalis had to cozy up to their wives (or fiancée, in one instance).

Before I could manage any of that, however, I had to figure out how to get the targets to approach me *and* dodge invitations from other people in the meantime.

I feel like I'm getting caught in a loop here... Hmmm. Guess I'll start by hanging around near the suspects. That's about the only idea I can come up with.

Upon surveying the room in an attempt to figure out who was standing where, I spotted Viscount Pastoris close at hand.

Target acquired! You're it, Viscount Pastoris!

I oh-so-very-casually sidled up to him, accidentally-on-purpose made eye contact, and offered him a sweet smile. *I'm counting on you to read between the lines, mister!*

I must have gotten my message across (or maybe I'd just been staring too hard for comfort), because the viscount soon came over to ask me to the floor. "Well, well—if it isn't Lady Viola! Would you care to join me for a dance?"

Hooray! I got through to him!

"I'd be honored," I replied, offering him a hand.

"Why, when my daughter hears I had the chance to dance with *you,* I'm sure she'll be green with envy! Ha ha ha!"

Say, Mr. Viscount of the Plump and Jiggling Belly, might you have a habit of spoiling your daughter? (Source: Rohtas)

"Oh, surely you're exaggerating! Oho ho ho!"

“Hardly! She looks up to you so much that she always just *has* to have all the same dresses and necklaces as you. Speaking of which, that’s some very fine jewelry you’re wearing tonight. I’m sure it won’t be long before she’s begging me for a copy.”

Mm-hmm. I see Rohtas was right on the money!

“And you buy her everything she asks for?”

“I’m afraid so. I simply can’t help myself.”

“Wow, that’s so sweet of you!”

What a difference from my dad! Well, no, he’s plenty sweet... He just doesn’t blindly shower me with gifts.

“I’m a bit too soft on her, I know...”

“I can’t imagine that much shopping is easy on your wallet.”

I wasn’t sure spoiling her was such a good idea either.

“I’ll say. As embarrassing as it is to admit, it’s becoming difficult to make ends meet... Oh, good heavens! What am I doing telling *you* all this?”

He made an effort to sheepishly laugh it off, but little did he know that this was exactly what I wanted to hear! It was time to start digging for the deets.

“Difficult to make ends meet? Goodness, are you really in *that* much trouble?”

“Oh no, we’re not *that* hard up! Ha ha ha—my wife and daughter might swallow up most of my salary, but fortunately for us, that dependable son of ours can make up the difference.”

“If I recall, he works for the chivalric order? Your daughter mentioned it at the tea party the other day.”

“That’s right—though he’s not a direct subordinate of the duke or anything like that. He’s an awfully dutiful son, that boy. I do my best not to worry him since he’s off living in the knights’ dormitories, but every now and then he’ll drop by our manor and...”

The more I listened to him talk, the more he sounded like a doting father who

had a soft spot not only for his daughter, but for his entire family. It seemed his son was helping keep his head above water too.

By the end of our lengthy conversation, it was hard to see the viscount as anything but a good-natured old man.

*

While I was dancing with the viscount, I casually scoped out my next target—only to find Marquis Erectum standing not too far away. It was definitely a short enough distance for me to inch closer bit by bit.

I pretended to follow the viscount's lead while stealthily steering us in the direction I wanted to go. This sort of thing was my specialty!

By the time the song ended, we'd drifted into the vicinity of the marquis. Once I'd thanked the viscount for the dance, I crept towards my next victim in hopes of recycling my previous strategy.

I need him *to ask me for a dance before someone else does...*

Once again, I "accidentally" locked eyes with him. When he noticed me looking his way, the marquis returned my gaze with a sweet smile, strode over on those long, shapely legs of his, and took my hand in a sweeping motion. "Care to dance, Lady Viola?"

Okay, am I the only one getting "playboy" vibes from how smooth that gesture was?

What's more, I hadn't noticed it until he came over, but he positively reeked of cologne.

But it suits him, to be honest!

He had a slender, well-proportioned figure and a strong but sweet fragrance about him. With his black eyes and black hair, he was an exotic sort of looker.

The scent of his rich, floral perfume grew stronger the closer I got to him...and was one step short of giving me nausea. It was so sickly sweet that it might as well have been shooting straight up my nose to stab me in the brain. Too bad my only choice was to suck it up and breathe through my mouth.

"We've already had our fair share of dances back at the royal palace, haven't

we?”

“Y...Yes, I’d say so.”

Had we? I didn’t remember that at all. Considering I always had to work my way through a sea of men looking for a dance, there was no way each and every one of them was going to stick in my memory.

I decided to go for as vague an answer as I could manage. “I seem to recall that—erm...”

He chuckled. “Of course, I doubt you’d remember it.”

He had my number so hard that I didn’t know how to respond to that.

“It looks like the duke is dancing with my wife as we speak,” he pointed out, spinning us around so that I could see my husband.

Marquise Erectum was a modern-looking beauty with brown curls that fell to her shoulders. She had striking purple eyes, and when she stood side-by-side with the marquis, the two made for a gorgeous-looking pair.

Given how pretty she was, she looked picture perfect next to Mr. Fisalis. *Pack it up, Viola—you lose this round! A plain Jane like you never stood a chance.*

Wait, no, that’s not the point here! I got a little off track with my brooding, but it’s time to get my head back in the game!

I shifted my gaze back to Marquis Erectum, and that was when I noticed the ring on his left hand. And on his *fourth* finger, at that. That could only mean one thing.

“May I ask about this ring of yours?”

“Ha ha ha—so you noticed that, did you? She and I jumped on your bandwagon and decided to have rings of our own made. A matching set, of course,” he explained, showing off the enormous amethyst accessory that sat on his finger.

“Gosh, I see!”

“My wife is wearing one that looks just like this. It matches her eyes.”

“That’s wonderful! It’s such a lovely amethyst too. We don’t mine those gems

in our territory, so I'm assuming this isn't one of our products. Too bad."

"I must beg your pardon for that! We were dying to have a Viola Sapphire, I assure you, but we couldn't manage to get our hands on one," he said with a laugh. "Luckily for us, my grandmother kept an extensive collection of jewelry, so we had one of her old accessories reworked into a trendier design."

It's true that the gem's popularity left our stock pretty low, but if a marquis *said he wanted one, I'm pretty sure we could have accommodated him! But on the other hand...remaking old pieces? You love to see it!*

"By the way, Lady Viola, how old are you?"

"Who, me? I'm nineteen."

"Not too much younger than my wife, then."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. She's twenty-two."

"Wow, she really *isn't* that much older!"

Twenty-two, huh? Well, that would make her closer to Miss Verbena's age than anything.

"You and the duke have yet to be blessed with children, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Um, that's right."

Why is he bringing up kids all of a sudden? Great, now he's reminded me of the whole looming "heir" problem.

"The same goes for us. My wife is still young, so she'd like to live fast and loose for a little while longer yet."

"Oh, I see!"

There are a multitude of reasons we don't have any children yet, but I assure you that none of them have to do with "living fast and loose"!

After that, he kept coming out with stories about how they blew a bunch of money messing around somewhere or another, or how they bought a super expensive decoration just the other day.

Hello? If you run around spending money like it grows on trees, it's no wonder you can't keep any saved up! Looks like Rohtas was right again.

*

The next person I danced with was Earl Lizardtail.

The earl was a handsome man with an explosion of loose blond curls, blue eyes, and tender features. He struck me as the type who was fully conscious of his own good looks.

"What a truly beautiful woman you are, Lady Viola! Like a goddess in the flesh!"

That was his opener? I didn't even know where to begin with a response.

"Your display of bashfulness only speaks to your humility."

I was getting smacked with a tornado of compliments right out the gate. *PLEASE stop—I'm begging you here! You're taking it so far that it's just giving me the creeps! Besides, when you go full throttle with the praise like that, none of it rings true! What is this guy's* problem*?*

"I see you're wearing another gorgeous necklace tonight. Is this one of those Viola Sapphires I've heard so much about?"

"It is, yes."

"This is my first time seeing the gem up close, and I must say, this one is no less stunning a jewel! And the designer deserves just as much credit for bringing out its beauty so well."

"Thank you."

Now that he's done complimenting me, I see we're onto singing my jewelry's praises!

I didn't know if he just had a special fondness for jewelry or what, but I wasn't a fan of the way he was ogling my neckline. He sure could stand to learn Mr. Fisalis's skill for staring without being off-putting about it.

"There's been no shortage of jewelry passed down within *my* family for generations. Why, I'm confident our collection could put even yours to shame!"

“Yeah? Wow, imagine that...”

Whoops, that response came out a little half-assed. Sorry. But you know how it is—I was just getting a little ticked off! Don’t sell the Fisalis family short there, mkay? We’re practically rolling in money and treasure alike! Even better, we’re turning out more and more of it by the day—not that any of it is technically mine*, of course*☆

The earl sure seemed to enjoy tooting his own horn; he didn’t even notice that I was pretty much giving him the brush-off while he kept droning on and on. I was tuning him out so completely that by the end of it, I didn’t even remember what he’d talked about.

*

Last up was Viscount Trifolium. Since I’d already learned what sort of person he was during our chat the other night, I could breathe a little easier in *his* company.

“Did your necklace get scratched the other night?” he inquired out of concern, his voice as soothing and gentle as ever.

Forget scratched—*the whole darn thing went missing! But that’s top secret information, of course. I’ll just have to play it off.*

“No—it turned out it was just fine. But I must say, I almost had a heart attack when I dropped it.”

“Me too,” he replied with an airy laugh. Like always, he was the very picture of serenity.

I almost felt bad about suspecting such a nice guy.

“If *I* had to wear a jewel as expensive as that one looked, I’d be quaking in my boots.”

“Trust me—I feel the same way!”

“Come now, you’ve gotten so many of those gifts from the duke that I’m sure you’re well used to it by now. You’re always wearing them with your head held high—which only serves to make the gems look even more bewitching.”

Is that *how it looks to other people?*

He was right that I'd grown accustomed to wearing pricey jewelry, but that Viola Eye had been a whole other level of terrifying. And yet I'd taken that priceless necklace and...well, for the sake of brevity, we'll skip the recap!

"Unlike the duke, I'm afraid I don't have the means to give such wonderful gifts."

He'd muttered something under his breath, but it was too quiet for me to hear.

*

I'd successfully shared a dance with all four of our initial targets—that was a start, at least. I'd managed to get a bit of information out of each of them too.

I'd better report back to Mr. Fisalis before I forget everything!

"Cercis!"

I hurried over to where all the sparkles were coming from—*ahem*, I mean, to where Mr. Fisalis was clearly standing. As an added bonus, hanging around him would give me a chance to take a breather.

"Oh, Vi! Nice work out there. Are you done dancing?"

"Yep. I knocked out the whole list."

"I see. Want to take a break, then? Or would you rather go for one more dance?"

"I'll take that brea...hm?"

Mr. Fisalis had taken me by the hand to help me into a chair...but there was something *off* about him.

He gave a curious tilt of his head when I came to a dead stop all of a sudden. "Hm? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"It's clearly not *nothing*. Just look at that frown!"

"My face just looks like this, okay?!"

"It does not. What is it? Come on—just tell me."

“Do I have to...?”

By now, Mr. Fisalis was all up in my face demanding an explanation. At this rate, he wasn’t going to back off until I fessed up.

“...I could smell another girl’s perfume on you...and it just bothered me, that’s all.”

Even worse, it was a nausea-inducing sort of odor. No duh that was going to make me frown!

“Huh?”

“Like I said, that’s all there was to it! C’mon, it’s time for that break!”

“Vi...”

“What?”

“You’re adorable!”

“Eep!”

Refrain from hugging me in public, please and thank you!

16. A Clue

From the sound of it, the scent coming off Mr. Fisalis had permeated his clothes during his dance with Marquise Erectum.

After bringing his arm up to his nose, taking a whiff, and screwing his face into a frown, he'd said, "Hmm... I know what it is. You must be smelling the marquise's perfume."

*Come to think of it, her husband smelled weird too—*ahem*, that is, he was wearing very strong cologne! Like husband, like wife—looks like they're both big fans of perfume.*

Anyway, moving right along...

That night, we'd both done quite a bit of talking with our suspects; I'd spent most of the time dancing with the men, while Mr. Fisalis had handled their partners. Had a clue been dropped amid all that vapid chatter? One could only hope.

Our analysis would have to wait until another time, however. For now, we needed to focus on gathering as much information as we could.

*

It was getting late. Sometime around midnight, it was finally time for the party to draw to a close.

We retired to our room to go over what we'd learned. There weren't any events planned for the following morning, so I'd be able to sleep in for as long as my heart desired. And really, considering how late the soirée had gone, it was only fair to leave the morning schedule empty and give everyone a chance to unwind.

"Any success?" Mr. Fisalis asked me.

Any success? Success, huh...? Oh, I know!

"I learned how to exercise control over who comes and invites me to dance!"

When there's someone you want to dance with, you just have to casually sidle up to them and make eye contact. When there's someone you *don't* want to dance with, you just nonchalantly walk away. How had I failed to figure out something so utterly simple? If only I'd discovered that trick sooner, I wouldn't have left so many parties completely exhausted from dancing.

Here I'd been totally serious about my answer, but Mr. Fisalis retorted with: "Not *that* kind of success! I meant if you'd found out anything of interest about our suspects!"

Oh, that *kind of success.*

"Oh... My bad. Let's see... Things of note, huh...? Well, I dunno. Looking at it one way, everyone seemed a little suspicious, but if I look at it another way, nobody did."

"That *is* how it tends to work, yes."

I struggled to remember all my conversations from that evening, but everyone had just come off as both vaguely suspicious and vaguely innocent. I really wished I'd been blessed with my husband's gift for observation. But to be fair to me, this was his actual job!

"Everyone sounded like they were struggling for money, just like Rohtas said in his report. But then again, this *was* a public function, so it's hard to say whether they'd tell the full truth to a stranger like me."

"That's a fair point. I had a handful of conversations myself, but..."

The girls Mr. Fisalis had danced with that night were Viscountess Pastoris, Marquise Erectum, the younger sister of Viscount Trifolium, and Earl Lizardtail's fiancée. Viscount Trifolium had neither a wife nor a fiancée, so he'd apparently brought his sister along instead.

"Viscount Pastoris may go on spending sprees for his wife and daughter, but I didn't get the sense that he was committing crimes to fund them," said Mr. Fisalis.

"Yeah. I got the impression he was a loving father who might spoil his little girl just a *taaad* too much. Besides, his son makes enough money to keep the family afloat."

His sleepy eyes would get even softer whenever the topic of his daughter came up. But no matter how precious she was to him (and how much he cherished his wife too), he really was going to run out of money if he bought her a copy of my stuff each and every time she pestered him for it.

That was when Rohtas, who had been quietly standing by throughout this discussion, glanced over a report we'd gotten earlier that day and added, "We received an even more detailed write-up from Bellis today. Though the viscount may be in a tough spot financially, he has yet to fall into debt. Therefore, I find it hard to believe that he would be desperate enough to get his hands dirty for the necklace."

If I'm remembering right, Mr. Fisalis said something about the secret service continuing their investigation back in Rohze. Does that mean Bellis is part of the secret service?! Here, let's get the obvious joke out of the way: leave it to a serv*ant to be in the* serv*ice!*

"Even if his daughter was dying to have it?"

"Hmm... Now that we may have to consider."

Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas seemed to be seriously entertaining the possibility. I, on the other hand, couldn't imagine the viscount doing something so heinous, so I cut in to dissent. "Oh, I don't know! He didn't seem like the type to do anything *that* extreme."

"If you say so, Vi. Then for the moment, it's looking likely that Viscount Pastoris is innocent."

"I'd agree with that."

Thus, we came to the conclusion that Viscount Pastoris was in the clear.

"As for the Erectum family...now *this* is looking dire," Mr. Fisalis said, frowning. "They've spent all their income down to the last coin, and you can practically smell the loans building up."

So it's not just their perfume that stinks—it's their debt too!

"Indeed. Word has it that they've been taking out loans from some of the most disreputable money lenders in their town," Rohtas added, further

highlighting their shadiness.

"Figures. How badly are they in debt?"

"They mortgaged their estate, and it's now one step away from getting seized...so about one manor's worth, I'd say."

"Wow, that's pretty serious."

Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas both knew what the Erectum manor looked like, so it was easy for them to imagine how much debt amounted to—but since *I* didn't, I was drawing a blank here.

I must have looked like I wasn't following along, because Mr. Fisalis re-explained the situation in clearer terms. "One Viola Eye would be more than enough to cover the cost of that mansion. In fact, forget just paying off the loan—I bet they'd have some money to spare."

"Yes, sir. Enough to live off of, even."

One measly necklace would be enough to pay off their whole debt? No...if anything, that just highlights how freakishly exorbitant that jewel is! I trembled with the realization.

"So they're flat broke, and meanwhile, the marquis is off buying rings or whatever." I reported back on what I'd heard that night. "He told me that he followed our lead and had matching rings made for him and his wife! Plus, he went on and on and on about how much he loves luxury and how he just wants to live fast and loose."

"Interesting." After some thought, Mr. Fisalis asserted, "Whatever way you slice it, there's no denying that they look fishy."

Thus, we came to the conclusion that Marquis Erectum was to remain on the list of suspects.

"It seems that Viscount Trifolium inherited a large debt from his parents, and he's been living frugally while he works to pay it off." I'm going to pretend that I *didn't* hear Mr. Fisalis follow that up by muttering under his breath, "*Tch*! He's as good as guilty, as far as I'm concerned."

That's probably because you're letting your jealousy cloud your judgment!

“Does that mean his paycheck alone would be enough to square the debt?” I asked Rohtas.

“That’s correct. Even if he were to put his entire salary toward paying off the loans, he would still be able to squeeze by on the revenue from his territory,” he responded, scanning over the documents. “He doesn’t seem to lead a terribly extravagant lifestyle either.”

Huh, I see!

He *was* supposedly “a hard worker” and all. And based on my impression, he did actually seem like a composed, good-hearted sort of guy.

“According to his sister, he’s always saying things like, ‘I’m sorry I can’t buy you anything as elegant as the jewelry Lady Viola wears.’”

“He sounds like a really good big brother!”

What a beautiful display of sibling love! Aww, go on and keep an accessory or two of ours, you thieving little rascal!

...Okay, no, I wouldn’t go quite that *far.*

“Hmm... There’s no conclusive evidence either way, but so far he’s looking innocent—but not *quite* innocent enough to take off the list.”

“You *really* don’t want to clear him of suspicion, huh?”

Silence.

I saw you avert your eyes just now, Mr. Fisalis! Just how keen are you on accusing this guy?!

Putting Mr. Fisalis’s personal grudges aside, we pushed Viscount Trifolium toward the bottom of our suspect list.

Last of all, there was a certain earl.

“As for Earl Lizardtail’s fiancée... I was shocked by how little she seemed to know about her own husband-to-be.”

That was Mr. Fisalis impression of the earl’s betrothed, apparently.

“Maybe that’s because they only got engaged recently?”

If it had only been a short while since their courtship began, it made sense that they wouldn't know each other too well yet. Heck, I'd barely known anything about Mr. Fisalis for the longest time! Not that I was about to come out and brag about that, of course.

"Even for an arranged marriage, something felt off about it."

Mr. Fisalis fell deep into thought, perhaps focused on calmly psychoanalyzing the fiancée's attitude. And as for me?

"Now that you mention it...the earl never once mentioned her."

He spent the entire conversation either tooting his own horn or expressing interest in the jewelry I was wearing... Wait a second. Huh?

"...Hm?"

"What's up, Vi?"

Something about my conversation with the earl was bugging me, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

"Nothing. There's something that struck me as odd, but I can't remember exactly what..."

It was just like that gross sensation of having something stuck in your teeth—it was driving me crazy.

"There's no rush. Take your time trying to remember."

"Okay."

What was it...?

I could feel the eyes of Mr. Fisalis, Rohtas, and the maids upon me.

Think, Viola! What exactly did he say back then?

I remembered he'd started singing my praises out of the blue. He'd taken it so far that it had sounded totally forced, not to mention embarrassing...but that wasn't all.

That's right! Once the shower of compliments had passed, he had started talking about my Viola Sapphire. I was creeped out by the way he was leering at me...and that was when he'd said it.

“This is my first time seeing the gem up close, and I must say, this one is no less stunning a jewel! And the designer deserves just as much credit for bringing out its beauty so well.”

What had he meant by “this one”?

That’s it! That’s what felt off to me!

“When he saw my necklace, the earl said ‘this one is no less stunning.’ It just hit me now: if that was his first time ever seeing a Viola Sapphire up close, what was he comparing it to?”

I was pointing to the Viola Sapphire necklace still twinkling around my neck, so everyone’s gazes shifted to my chest.

“The *earl* said that?”

“Yeah.”

“Interesting.” Mr. Fisalis looked like he was mulling something over again.

“We’ve received quite a bit of additional information about this Earl Lizardtail,” Rohtas interjected. “Despite his financial struggles, he’s been attending parties at the royal palace with his usual frequency. And as far as that fiancée of his goes, no one seems to have heard a word about their engagement.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir. He cycles through lovers on a regular basis, but rumor has it that he has yet to settle down with anyone—and those rumors are true.”

“Who’s that woman he brought to the party, then?”

“Just another one of his flings, I have to assume.”

Mr. Fisalis nodded. “I see.”

“I *do* recall the earl boasting at length about how rich his family *used* to be, and how his jewelry collection could put ours to shame. He certainly has a talent for boring his conversation partner to tears.”

I was losing patience just thinking back on the conversation.

“He must like showing off,” Mr. Fisalis said, chuckling at the face I was

making.

“We have our own report to make regarding Earl Lizardtail,” announced Stellaria.

While we were busy with the soirée, the maids had gone around searching the other guests’ rooms. Now, I had no idea *how* they had gotten inside...and I wasn’t about to ask either.

She went on with her report without missing a beat. “There wasn’t much time, so we started with a quick inspection of the four suspects’ chambers. To get straight to the point, we found the Viola Eye in Earl Lizardtail’s room.”

You seem pretty nonchalant for someone who...hm? Wait, they found the Viola Eye?!

She’d delivered the news so matter-of-factly that I’d almost glossed right over it.

“What? You found the necklace?!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So what happened to it? Do you have it with you now?” Mr. Fisalis asked.

“We didn’t have time to swap it out, so for now, all we’ve done is confirm its whereabouts. But we *did* leave a maid to stand watch nearby, of course.”

“Good call. If we’d taken it back now, he would have realized what we were up to,” my husband said, praising Stellaria for her wise judgment.

That’s right. Our objective here is two-fold: “take back the necklace” and *“arrest the culprit”!*

17. Get That Necklace!

We'd figured out both the culprit behind the switcheroo and where he'd stashed the genuine article.

Who would have guessed it was Earl Lizardtail all along?!

This wasn't one of those mystery novels that are all the rage these days; we weren't about to gather all the suspects in one room and have the detective (which in this scenario would be Mr. Fisalis, I guess) spell out the answer for his audience. We had to solve the case and catch the criminal strictly behind closed doors!

"Our mission is to get back the necklace and apprehend the earl as swiftly as possible," declared Mr. Fisalis.

"That's right!"

"I *do* have to report this to His Majesty, seeing as the earl will need to be dealt with," he muttered to himself, sorting out his thoughts. "But so long as we file the damage report in confidence...I think we can pull this off."

If we didn't submit a damage report to the police force, there would be no record of this whole stolen necklace fiasco. As a result, we'd have no authority to arrest the earl. But that department was, naturally, under the jurisdiction of the chivalric order—which meant we could resolve the matter in secret.

"Rohtas. Head back to Rohze and instruct Corydalis to bring his platoon here. Let's see—we have no way of knowing *when* exactly the earl will make his next move...so tell him to head out as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Fisalis went on to give Rohtas a more detailed version of the instructions: give Corydalis a full account of the event, have him submit the damage report for us, send over a couple guards before the main force arrives, and so on and so forth.

In addition, Mr. Fisalis wrote a personal note to Corydalis and asked the butler to deliver it for him.

“Tell him to follow the standard mission protocol when he arrives: take the utmost care to ensure no one sees him.”

“Certainly, Master.”

“It’s gotten late, so let’s retire for the night. Rohtas, you should wait until tomorrow to set out.”

And thus, that night’s strategy meeting was brought to a close by motion of Mr. Fisalis.

*

And then, the next day dawned.

Rohtas had left for the city first thing in the morning and managed to relay the facts of the case to Corydalis, so it was just past noon—a little too early for afternoon tea—when our two knight-guards arrived on the scene.

“Platoon Leader Pulcherrima will be on his way as soon as he’s finished carrying out the rest of your orders. He ought to arrive sometime after sundown.”

“I see. Thanks for the heads up. Now tell me—have you already been given the rundown on the case?”

“In broad strokes, yes.”

“The original necklace is still in the earl’s possession. Our servants are currently standing watch near his room, so I’ll need you two to go take over their shift. If anything happens, come get me right away.” Mr. Fisalis shifted immediately into Work Mode as he commanded his subordinates.

“Yes, sir!” both men shouted back.

He looked so dignified as he smoothly, decisively handed out his orders, and my heart fluttered to witness this side of him I so rarely got to see. He was almost like an entirely different person. If I wasn’t careful, I might just fall for him all over again!

*

A short while after the advance team arrived—sometime after nightfall—Corydalis made his surreptitious entrance along with a hand-picked team of his subordinates.

Just when I could've sworn I heard the window make a *click*, Mr. Fisalis strode right over, pushed it open, and poked his head outside.

Did he see something out there? I wondered, casting a glance that way.

He looked back at me over his shoulder and explained, "They're here."

Uh, who?

"Huh?"

"Corydalis and his crew."

"Ohh!"

Oh, that's right—he called in the cavalry!

"They're hanging out right outside our window, right? Should we let them in?"

"Sure. It'll be easier to talk inside."

"Good point."

It was all well and good that we'd come to that decision, but that left the issue of *where* and *how* were they supposed to get in. Just as I was vaguely considering sneaking them in through the front door, however...

Tweeeet!

Mr. Fisalis blew a short whistle into the wind.

I cocked my head to one side, curious as to what *that* was all about...only for Corydalis and company to swing in through the window in the next second!

"'Scuse us!"

Sneaking in through the window?! I didn't see that one coming! Well, to be fair, the villa corridors are crawling with servants and guests, so chances are good that they would've been spotted otherwise.

Corydalis and his men looked as carefree as ever, both their laughter and their footsteps light as they slipped into the room. The Bombshell Trio was there too. All of them were wearing dark cloaks over their clothes—to help them blend into the night, I had to assume.

"Thanks for coming all the way out here," Mr. Fisalis commended his men, shutting the window behind them after giving the surroundings a cautious glance.

"I knocked out that damage report you told me to submit first thing and left all the non-urgent stuff for later. Say, have I ever told you're a real slave-driver?" Corydalis groused with a shrug of his shoulders.

Oho, but Corydaaalis? I'd wager there's a very special perk for you waiting here! Tee hee hee!

"But just think—thanks to this mission, you get to see Stellaria!" I blurted out exactly what I was thinking.

"Huh?! What are you saying, Madam Fisalis?!" He got totally flustered for a moment there. "I keep my work and my private life separate!" Of course, it wasn't long before he pulled himself together and refuted the allegation—but he wasn't fooling anyone.

"Reaaally? You say that now, but you *were* pretty impatient to wrap up your work!"

"We saw the way you were grinning like an idiot! What, did you not even notice?"

"No need to play it cool, boss!"

There came a chorus of whistles.

"Would you guys just can it already?!"

The ladies took the first crack at making fun of their boss, and soon everyone was jumping on the bandwagon.

Hah, I knew it! You were *glad about it!*

As for the maid in question? She was standing right there, blithely watching everyone tease her fiancé.

“But anyway, I’m amazed you managed to make it this far without getting caught,” I remarked. “Isn’t security pretty tight around here?”

It’s been said a few times over by now, but vacation home or not, this was still Argenteia land. To make matters worse, the number of high-ranked officials currently staying over meant the place was locked down harder than ever.

“What kind of question is that? This is our job, remember?” Corydalis got his act together long enough to give me a confident thumbs-up.

“Guess you’ve got a point.”

He’s right. This is *their area of expertise.*

Banter aside, it was time to get down to business.

Mr. Fisalis summed up the facts of the case. “I’m sure you’ve gotten the gist of things from my note and Rohtas’s explanation, but our Viola Eye necklace was stolen. The culprit is Earl Lizardtail, and the goods are still in his possession.”

“Wow, nice detective skills.”

“What, so all that’s left is to apprehend him?”

“C’mon, leave *us* something to do!”

His subordinates were moaning and groaning. I’ll pretend I didn’t hear someone mutter, “I’d rather die than make an enemy of the Fisalis family.”

“This *does* largely count as a personal affair of mine, so I saved the rest of you as much trouble as I could.”

“Thanks, boss!” the knights chorused.

“All that’s left is to figure out how to catch him red-handed,” Mr. Fisalis mused, folding his arms in thought.

“By the way, how long are you and the madam planning to stay here?”

“We’re slated to leave in the morning two days from now. The rest of the guests claimed to have similar plans...but what of Earl Lizardtail?”

“He’s scheduled to leave the day after tomorrow as well,” Stellaria answered, unfazed despite Mr. Fisalis throwing the ball into her court without warning. I

was amazed that she'd managed such extensive reconnaissance before being relieved of her lookout duty. Our servants really were something else!

"Let's see... I think the simplest strategy would be to keep an eye on the situation all day tomorrow, then arrest him on the spot if he tries anything funny," suggested Corydalis.

"Think you can manage that without getting caught by the Argenteias or party guests?"

He shot Mr. Fisalis a wink. "No problem."

The rest of the knights were likewise wearing smug grins on their faces. *Yeah, I'm sure these guys could pull it off. I'm having flashbacks to that time a band of thieves broke into the Fisalis manor.*

Once we'd settled on a rough plan of attack, the knights went back out through the window. Tonight they were going to be standing watch over the earl's room and patrolling the villa perimeter.

Here's hoping all goes well and we get the real necklace back safe and sound tomorrow...

"Vi?"

"Ack!"

Crap! I almost nodded off there. I must be getting tired.

"Has staying up late so many nights in a row taken its toll on you?"

"Maybe so. I'm pretty sleepy."

"Now that Corydalis and his team are here, we can relax. Let's leave the matter in their hands and get ourselves some rest."

"Okay."

Sorry, Corydalis! I'll do what I can tomorrow, but tonight, we're counting on you!

*

The next day, we had the final tea party, dinner, and soirée.

I may pride myself on my stamina, but by this point I was dragging around six days worth of exhaustion. It didn't help that the necklace caper had been weighing so heavily on my mind that I'd barely been getting any sleep. To put it bluntly, I was in pretty bad shape. Nevertheless, what truly defined a first-class lady was her ability to keep that from showing...in my opinion, anyway.

"Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah! I'm fine!"

I'd managed to make it through the day thanks to Mr. Fisalis sticking by my side and looking out for me, but predictably, I never did get in the mood for dancing.

The earl had yet to make any move. It was looking more and more like we wouldn't be getting our stolen property back during our stay at the villa.

And then, night fell. Corydalis and company paid another visit to our room—again through the window, of course.

"The earl has yet to act."

"I know. But to look on the bright side, at least that means we won't have to arrest him here in the villa."

"That's one way to think about it! Well then, how about this? *We* make our move instead of waiting for him. Let's see... Perhaps we should aim for tomorrow, after you and the madam have gone home and he's let his guard down. We don't want to do anything to tip him off during the journey, so instead we'll follow him back to his manor and arrest him the moment we have definitive proof of his crime. We can send out an advance team to scour the premises ahead of time; he might have left some kind of evidence behind when he made the fake." Corydalis course-corrected, putting together a rudimentary plan of attack.

Whether it be Mr. Fisalis or Corydalis, the way these guys could come up with all these schemes on the fly made it clear that they were true professionals. I bet you anything Stellaria was swooning too!

"Good thinking. If that's the plan, I'll meet back up with the rest of you along the way. Vi, you can go ahead—"

“No way! I’m going with you! It’s *my* necklace, so I want to be there to reclaim it!”

“Huh?!”

You want me to head back to the mansion on my own? Fat chance! I promise to stay out of the way, so you’ve got *to take me with you when we get that necklace back! Wait, wasn’t I supposed to be in bad shape, you ask? Hah! I bounced back the second you put the case in front of me!*



*

“I’ll look out for Vi, so Corydalis, just focus on carrying out the operation as planned.”

Seeing as it wasn’t supposed to be a super difficult mission anyway, Mr. Fisalis had ended up folding pretty easily. He’d given me full permission to join them in shadowing the earl.

“Thanks for having us.”

“It was our pleasure! Please come again.”

“This was fun! Thanks for everything.”

“Of course. I only hope we can make the trip by boat next time.”

We thanked the duke, duchess, and the Argenteia siblings, then hit the road home...as far as *they* knew, that is!

According to the proper order of these things, no one would be able to go home until we did (since our family was the highest-ranked there), so we stepped up to be the first to leave. Mother and Father Fisalis left at the same time we did, but they were headed back to their territory of Le Pied rather than Rohze.

Regrettably, we hadn’t had much time to sit down and chat with them; they’d been just as busy with all the socializing as we had, and then *we’d* had all the rest of our time sucked up by the necklace caper. I promised Mother Fisalis that we’d spend some time with them in Le Pied soon—and with that, we went our separate ways.

Their carriage pulled ahead first, and ours followed behind...for part of the trip, that is. Not long after we’d passed through the gates of the Argenteia villa—when we were far enough away that we couldn’t see those gates anymore—we came to a brief stop, and Mr. Fisalis and I alighted from our carriage.

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“You can count on me, sir.”

The maids who would be playing the role of our stunt doubles boarded the

car in our place. The carriage would be heading straight home to the Rohze mansion from here. Drosera was the one subbing in for me...and though her face and build were completely different from mine, that didn't really matter! Nobody could see inside the carriage anyway.

We switched into a disguise of our own...well, in a manner of speaking. All we actually did was put on black cloaks to help keep a low profile, pulling the hoods all the way down over our eyes. That way, nobody would be able to recognize us at a glance.

This was one heck of a quick change we were talking about, since we had to get it over with before the next family rolled into view. As heart-pounding an undertaking as it was, we managed to get it done in the short window of time we had.

Once we'd watched the carriage with our dummy riders disappear into the distance, Mr. Fisalis and I switched our ride to the horse Corydalis's team had prepared for us. They'd picked out a black steed to draw as little attention our way as possible. All the same, it had a silky, beautiful coat.

Mr. Fisalis helped me up onto the horse, and I rode sidesaddle.

"Since we're going to be tailing his carriage, we won't have to go all that fast today."

"I'll still refrain from sitting up front, thank you!"

So went our charming little exchange on the matter. It seemed that he wanted me to sit in front of him, but I firmly refused and opted to ride in the back instead.

"Hang on tight."

"Roger that!"

I slid my arms around Mr. Fisalis's waist and grabbed on as hard as I could...and that's when it finally caught up to me that this was hardly any different from hugging him. I couldn't help feeling a little embarrassed—even if it was more than a little late to be worried about *that*.

While we hid in the bushes and staked out the villa, carriages pulled away

from the mansion one after the other. The guests' departures were spaced out so that there would be minimal overlap; as a result, it wasn't like there was a flood of everyone vacating the premises at once. Everyone left one-by-one, in the order determined by their family's rank.

After we'd waited for a while, Earl Lizardtail's carriage finally rolled onto the road.

For all intents and purposes, Corydalis's squad would be the ones doing the actual job of tailing him, while Mr. Fisalis—with me along as an extra passenger—would be bringing up the rear at a leisurely pace, doing his best not to get spotted.

Our target made it to his home in Lizardtail territory without bothering to make so much as a pit stop along the way. Once we'd passed through the forest on the Argenteia border, we came upon his manor in all its glory. I probably should have seen it coming, what with him being a neighbor and all, but it turned out he lived super close to the villa.

We hid ourselves in the outskirts of the forest—where we had a clear view of the entrance to his manor—and watched to see what he did next.

Boy, was I surprised to hear the conversation Earl Lizardtail and his fiancée had just outside the gate.

"Well, I'll see you around."

"Thanks—you were a big help. I'll be sure to compensate you later."

"Don't you *dare* forget!"

That mega-blasé exchange was all they even said to each other before going their separate ways! I mean, I knew from the preliminary report that they weren't *actually* engaged, but *still*.

"Jeez, what a businesslike relationship!"

"They probably *were* nothing more than business partners. He even said he was going to pay her."

"Couldn't he just have skipped out on bringing a plus one in the first place?"

"That's a good question. Maybe it was an attempt to throw us off our guard."

“Hmm...”

Thanks to the hard work of the knights who had gone ahead of us and done some reconnaissance, we already had both a map of the manor and a way to sneak inside. When the chivalric order got down to business, they were *not* a force to be trifled with.

We waited for the earl to head inside the manor after saying goodbye to his phony fiancée, then slipped out of the woods.

The time has finally come to infiltrate the premises!

Heart a-flutter with excitement, I watched as Corydalis’s crew crept into the manor through the back door, following our scouts’ lead. Unsurprisingly, I wasn’t allowed to go inside, so I was instead waiting in the wings outside along with Mr. Fisalis and a few other lookouts.

We hid next to the door everyone had just gone through, and from there, we tried to listen in on what was going on inside.

“If nothing comes of this today, you and I ought to head home, Vi.”

“Whaaat?”

“We can’t very well stick around and stand watch for days on end.”

“...Fiiine.”

“Stop pouting.”

For the record, my heart totally did *not* skip a beat when he pinched my puffed up cheeks!

“Do you think they’ll catch him in the act?” wondered Angelica, who had stayed behind to serve as a lookout.

“I’d give it fifty-fifty odds,” replied Mr. Fisalis.

The two were speculating among themselves as they strained their ears for any signs of what was happening in there.

I sure hope *we nab him quick and get my necklace back.*

I too listened and waited, praying that all would go smoothly—and before long, there came a ruckus from inside the manor.

“So it begins,” Mr. Fisalis declared.

His subordinate nodded. “Yep.”

We could hear a cacophony of noise: the thud of someone running, the crash of something falling, and the crack of something breaking. Unfortunately, we had no way of knowing exactly what was going on behind the wooden door.

I really wish I could look through that window next to the door...

Right as I was on the edge of my seat wondering if everything was okay in there, the back door abruptly slammed open as someone rushed out of the manor.

“Eek!”

“Vi!”

Though I was lucky enough to dodge the door slamming open, *that* then caused me to lose my balance and trip. Fortunately, Mr. Fisalis caught me in his arms and managed to keep me from getting hurt.

Who the heck threw open the door that hard?! That was dange— Wait a second!

“Wha...?! Duke Fisalis?!”

The one who had flown out the door was none other than Earl Lizardtail himself. He was pointing straight at us with a quivering finger.

From his disheveled clothes and hair, it was clear at a glance that he had put up a fight. He was gripping a sword in one hand. As he glared at us with bloodshot eyes, there wasn’t a trace left of the flirtatious air he’d had back in the villa.

Yikes! So these *are his true colors!*

“Vice Captain!”

“Thanks!”

Shielding me behind him, Mr. Fisalis took the sword Angelica had tossed his way and held it at the ready. Meanwhile, the earl was doing his best to slowly but steadily make a break for it, keeping *his* blade pointed at us all the while.

“He doesn’t have any backup! It’s just him to worry about!” came Corydalis’s voice from the inside the mansion.

“Got it!” was Mr. Fisalis’s gruff reply. He then said to us, “Wait here. This shouldn’t take long. ...Take care of Vi for me.”

“Yes, sir! Nobody’s going to lay a finger on her if I have anything to say about it!”

Upon entrusting Angelica with my safety, he adjusted his grip on his sword and took a step toward the earl.

“How about you return that necklace to us now?”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Now, now, it’s wrong to go around telling lies. We’ve already done our research, I’ll have you know.”

“W-Where’s your proof?! You haven’t got anything on me!”

The tip of his blade locked onto his foe, Mr. Fisalis closed in on him step by step. Scared out of his wits, the earl edged back from his pursuer, yet still insisted on playing dumb.

He’s right that we don’t have any evidence, though.

“If it’s *proof* you want...”

Just as I was watching the scene unfold, wondering how my husband would strike back...

“We got it right here!”

Arriving on the scene with nigh impeccable timing was none other than Corydalis. And held high in his hand was our jeweler’s trademark box!

“How is *that* proof of anything?!” the earl snapped as he glared at Corydalis, still reluctant to accept his fate.

“I mean, just take a look inside. Whatever could the madam’s necklace be doing here?”

“T-That has to be a fake! Someone slipped that in there to frame me!”

“No sirree, this is the real deal! You see, the Viola Eye has a certain *secret* known only to a select few. If we check for that, we’ll know just how genuine this thing is in a heartbeat.”

Grinning, Corydalis opened up the box and showed everyone the necklace inside. He knew all about the seal himself, of course! Though calling it a “secret” was playing it up a little too much, if you asked me.

“Nice try! I already know that the one *I* was wearing was the fake!” I had a few words for him myself!

“Wha...?!”

His eyes flew open in surprise before narrowing into a glare directed my way, but I wasn’t the least bit scared of him! I had Mr. Fisalis by my side!

“Give it up.”

No sooner had Mr. Fisalis said that than he knocked the earl’s sword aside and pressed the tip of his own blade to the man’s throat. Overpowered by the knight’s quick movements and petrified with fear, Earl Lizardtail was swiftly apprehended by Corydalis’s squad and tied up with rope.

*

“His maid accomplice was the first one we caught. She’s in the foyer as we speak. That’s where the rest of our men are waiting for us.”

Given that bit of information, we decided to reconvene in the foyer. The knights who had been the first to infiltrate the premises were there standing watch over the pretty young maid who was apparently his partner-in-crime.

“Here’s your authentic Viola Eye necklace back,” said Corydalis, handing us the box with the accessory inside. He had already inspected the goods earlier, but we were better off double-checking its legitimacy just in case.

Mr. Fisalis took the offered box and examined the jewelry inside. I peeked over from beside him and saw for myself that the seal of authenticity was indeed where it ought to be.

“Good. It’s the real deal.”

“It sure is! Whew, that’s a relief... Whoa!”

“Hey, careful there!”

I was so relieved to know we’d recovered the genuine artifact that my legs gave out and I nearly collapsed on the spot. Mr. Fisalis caught me in his arms at the last second and held me up.

“For a fake, the workmanship was exquisite. How did you figure it out?” the earl demanded, chagrined.

Oh, I guess he really doesn’t *know about the seal.*

“I’m not about to spill my secrets to a criminal like you, but let’s just say we took some measures of our own,” my husband replied, grinning.

In reality, we’d just been lucky that the distinct markings on the Viola Eye and the Viola Sapphire weren’t public knowledge.

“We won’t be going public with this incident, but in exchange, consider yourself permanently removed from the political stage. Though we may have kept this matter a secret from the Argenteias, you’d better believe we’ve relayed every last detail to His Majesty. Look here—we’ve got a royal decree ordering that your rank and territory be confiscated, signed by the king and everything,” said Corydalis, showing the earl the warrant for his arrest, the warrant to search his home, and as he had just explained, a royal decree stripping him of his rank and territory.

The earl stared at the documents, stunned, before his shoulders sagged.

Having given up his futile struggle, he went on to confess the howdunit.

It was when his mounting debt had backed him into a corner that my necklace had just so happened to catch his eye. Since he’d heard that the Viola Eye—a gem of incomparable quality even among the Viola Sapphires—commanded a high enough price to fund an entire mansion (and a big one, at that!), he became determined to somehow get ahold of it and sell it in another country. If he tried to sell it in Flür, the theft would’ve been traced back to him right away, after all.

He lured in his maid with promises to marry her if the plan went smoothly, and thus she became his accomplice.

He'd crafted the fake necklace by bringing a sapphire of his own to our jeweler and asking him to have it made into "exactly the same design as the Viola Eye." Given that countless ladies and madams had been asking for "a design matching Duchess Fisalis" as part of the recent trend, the jeweler had granted his request without a second thought. As an aside, he had made a secret sketch of what the Viola Sapphire seal looked like after a noblewoman who owned a real one had shown him her necklace, then carved it himself using that picture as a reference. Very clever of him.

With the fake stored away inside, he'd handed the box from the jeweler to his maid and ordered her to swap it for the real thing. She'd pulled the switch off exactly the way we'd suspected. That part of the plan had apparently been her own idea.

If there hadn't been a storm that day—if there hadn't been a traffic jam at the entrance—her plan was apparently to sneak into our room and make the switch there. If only things *had* panned out that way, none of this ever would have happened. No way our servants would've given her the chance to pull it off!

It would be fair to say that the weather was the only reason the switcheroo went off without a hitch. There was nothing to chalk it up to but our own awful luck!

The earl had made the clasp easy to undo as a way to shift suspicion onto the other partygoers. The moment I attempted any difficult dance steps or sweeping turns, the necklace was sure to shake from the impact and fall to the floor. Naturally, either I or the person closest to me would pick it up. The more people who touched the accessory, the more suspects there would be. Meanwhile, *he* would only ask me to dance a slow-tempo song, or otherwise take care not to jostle the necklace mid-waltz.

"Why didn't you just get a job instead of wasting time coming up with evil schemes?"

"Now here's an idea: this is pretty well-made for a fake, so why don't you give it to this poor girl here? You told her you'd marry her if she did as you asked, didn't you? Isn't a man supposed to be as good as his word? God, you're the worst."

“It doesn’t matter if it’s cheap—all a girl wants is something from the heart!”

“What a tool.”

“A guy who can’t swallow his pride is *such* a turn-off.”

On and on the Bombshell Trio went. The girls dragged the earl and his accomplice (if you could really call her that) away, taking shots at him all the while.

We had the necklace back, and the culprit had been arrested. That closed the book on this case!

18. After the Dust Settles

Corydalis's knights had carted the apprehended earl and his accomplice off to the royal capital on the down-low. From there, they would work out a suitable punishment.

In the meantime, Mr. Fisalis and I got ready to hit the road home—for real this time.

"Hold on a second! Our carriage went home without us!"

I abruptly snapped back to reality. As part of our plan to throw the earl off his guard, we'd put a decoy rider in our family carriage and sent it home to the manor ages ago. The same went for the other two cars with our luggage and attendants, of course.

All we had now was the black steed we'd switched over to, along with the few knights who had stayed behind to escort us. We had a horse, but no wagon.

"Should we call for another one? We can find some place to rest in the meantime and—"

"I don't know about that," I cut Mr. Fisalis off. "Sending someone on a half day's journey just to call for a carriage would eat up a lot of time. And we can't very well double back to the villa and ask to stay another night."

If we went with his suggestion, the carriage wouldn't get here until after sundown.

I mean, how are we supposed to explain why we were sneaking around running all these secret errands?! We went out of our way to settle everything quietly just to keep the incident from going public; if we spill the beans to the Argenteias, that will have all been for nothing!

"You're right. There's always the option to spend the night elsewhere, but I can't imagine there are any decent inns around here. I suppose we'll just have to head home on horseback. I'll sprint ahead as gently as I can, I promise."

“I don’t think ‘sprinting gently’ is a thing! But we don’t have much of a choice—let’s just do it.”

“Well, even if I take it slow, we ought to make it to Rohze before it gets dark.”

“Good. We don’t want to be out on the road in the dead of night.”

As we happened to be carrying a *très* expensive necklace on us at the moment, we really needed to make it home before the sun went down.

I wasn’t the biggest fan of horseback riding, but considering how dog-tired I was, I did really want to get back to the manor as soon as physically possible. I doubted that Mr. Fisalis was planning to make a mad dash down the road, anyway.

“That reminds me... Since we didn’t get to stop anywhere on the way here, we *did* talk about making a side trip on the way home, didn’t we?” mentioned Mr. Fisalis. “I’m afraid that’s not in the cards at this point.”

“Probably not. Maybe next time.”

“Yes—we’ll leave that for next time! You know, that’s actually a nice thought. It’s almost like we’re making plans for our next date.”

“Oh, stop it, Cercis!”

And so, we decided to make the return trip to the royal capital on horseback.

*

It wasn’t as rough a ride as that one time Mr. Fisalis took me to clear up the whole “mistress” scandal, but I was still getting bounced up and down non-stop. He may have been taking it slower this time around, but we were still galloping ahead pretty fast.

“It’s been a while since we last rode a horse together,” I said, shouting loud enough to keep my voice from getting drowned out by the wind.

“It has. When was the last time...? Oh...”

Just thinking back on that incident had visibly dampened his spirits. To be fair, the whole thing *had* been a total mess, and he’d been pretty desperate to clear his name at the time.

But by now, we should be able to look back on it and laugh!

"Maybe going for a ride every once in a while isn't so bad."

"If you're interested, I'd be happy to take you along on a jaunt whenever you want."

"Thanks."

Taking a carriage was a pretty pretentious means of transportation, and there was only so far you could travel on foot. Considering how many more places it would allow me to go, it was possible that horseback riding was the breath of fresh air I needed. Though if *that* was what I wanted, I really needed to build my tolerance for it first.

Back during the mistress fiasco, not only had we been going at insane speeds, but I'd had no idea what was going on in the first place. Now that I had a little more presence of mind for the ride, I noticed that I wasn't enjoying the up-and-down motion of it so much... Maybe this just wasn't for me? Or was it made worse by the fact that I was so tired?

I already thanked Mr. Fisalis for the offer, but it'd be a waste if I got motion sickness whenever we do *go for that jaunt. Would I be better off learning how to ride a horse myself, perhaps? Could I get Rohtas to teach me the ropes? I'll try asking when we get home.*

"What's wrong? If you're tired, we could always stop for a break," Mr. Fisalis piped up, concern evident in his voice. I must have lapsed into silence for too long.

"I'm fine. If anything, I'd prefer to get home sooner rather than later."

I wanted to make it back to the manor so I could be free of this bouncy hell.

"In that case...want me to kick the speed up a notch?"

"Ugh... That's the ultimate 'would you rather' question right there!"

We opted to pick up the pace a little, not stopping even once on our way home.

*

We managed to make it to Rohze before sundown, but it was dark out by the time we reached the manor itself.

“Welcome home!” our entire staff of servants greeted us, as per usual. Though I was pretty accustomed to the warm welcome by now, today it came as a huge relief. It made me think, *Oh man! We really* are *home!*

Stellaria and Drosera had arrived one step ahead of us, having ridden home as our decoys.

“Thanks. We made it.”

“Maaan, is it good to be back!”

Mr. Fisalis gave the servants a debonair greeting, while I wore my weariness on my sleeve. He dismounted first, then offered a hand to help me down next. Grateful for the assist, I held on tight as I got down from the saddle, but I soon found myself overcome by a sudden dizzy spell and nearly collapsed to the ground.

“Vi?! Are you all right?!”

Mr. Fisalis caught me in his arms, and the servants rushed over to my side.

Hmm... Has a combination of the fatigue and the motion sickness worn me down?

“Yeah. I think it’s just the exhaustion catching up to me.”

“In fairness, we *have* been through quite a lot. Dahlia, ready our room for us!”

“Yes, sir.”

I watched Dahlia and a handful of other maids disappear back into the manor at Mr. Fisalis’s command. Boy, had I ever missed that ultra-comfy bed of ours!

After I’d been gently tucked away in the sheets, I had to contend with overwhelming dizziness and nausea; bedridden and groggy as I was, I ended up skipping out on dinner. I wasn’t about to go anywhere—nor did I feel up to eating, for that matter—so I told Mr. Fisalis to go ahead and have supper all on his lonesome.

“You don’t look so good, Madam. How are you feeling?” Mimosa asked,

concerned. Somehow even Daisy managed to look ill at ease in her mother's arms. *Oh dear. Are* you *worried for me too, Daisy?*

"I'm not used to riding horses, so I think spending hours bouncing up and down like that made me queasy... Not to mention I've been under a lot of stress, what with everything that happened back at the villa. I figure it's all catching up to me now."

Looking back on it, I hadn't been doing too hot back at the villa either.

"You *did* just spend seven days staying in somebody else's home. No wonder you're tired."

"That full-blown socializing marathon was nothing to sneeze at... And if all the partying wasn't enough, we had to deal with a burglary on top of that. That's just adding insult to injury!"

"Everything's been worked out now, at least. You're free to take as much time as you need to recover."

"I will, thanks. It's time to hole up in the mansion for the next long while."

Even looking at my emotional support Daisy isn't helping to stave off the nausea and wooziness, so I'm starting to worry I've come down with something serious... Ugh, just the thought of it is making me break out into a cold sweat.

"Would you care to eat at least a little something, Madam?"

Just as my poor health was sending me into a negative spiral, Stellaria came in with some food on a tray. Based on the steam rising from the white bowl, I took a guess that it was oatmeal.

"Cartham was worried you'd never recover if you don't eat anything at all, so he made a bowl of oatmeal for—"

The closer Stellaria came, the stronger the fragrance of the milk grew...which was bad news! Normally the sweet aroma would have brought a smile to my face, but now wasn't the time!

"Bleeeeh!"

Just a whiff of that milk had pushed my nausea levels to max capacity! I threw my hands over my mouth on reflex and buried my head under the blanket. *I feel*

so gross! I think I'm gonna puke! I very much didn't want to spill my guts all over the bed, however, so I did everything in my power to hold it down.

"Madam?!"

"What's wrong?!"

"Someone call for a doctor!"

"Go get Master Fisalis! Rohtas and Dahlia too!"

My sudden turn for the worse threw the maids into a panic.

I somehow managed to squeeze out: "Sorry... I just feel...*suuuper* sick..."

"It's all right, Madam. Just keep still," Mimosa assured me, finding my back underneath the covers and gently stroking it.

After that, I just listened to the footsteps of the maids scurrying this way and that from underneath my blanket, fighting down my nausea all the while.

*

Throwing up didn't make me feel any better, and the dizziness never went away. All I could do was wait for the doctor to arrive, Mimosa continuing to pat me on the back in the meantime.

Mr. Fisalis had been plenty exhausted himself, yet he'd cut his dinner short to come nestle up next to me. "I hope it's nothing worse than fatigue... I didn't *hear* anything about a bug going around the villa, but you never know."

"It's just motion sickness. It has to be."

"I knew you weren't good with horses, so I ought to have called for that carriage from the start. I really should have been more considerate... I'm sorry, Vi."

Mr. Fisalis seemed to be feeling awful about his poor judgment call, but *I* was the one who had agreed to it. I had no one but myself to blame, so I hoped he wasn't going to beat himself up too hard about it.

Not long after that, Rohtas led the usual doctor to our room. Once the men had been kicked out and only the maids remained behind, he began his check-up.

“I apologize for the wait. How are you feeling?”

The old doctor’s ever-friendly smile both put my heart at ease and made me feel a little less queasy.

He asked me all the usual questions: when I’d started to feel sick, what symptoms I was experiencing, how I’d been feeling yesterday, and so on. He took his interrogation nice and slow so as not to overwhelm me in my less-than-peak condition. But c’mon—was it *really* necessary to ask me when my last monthly was?

After staring long and hard at the notes he’d taken, he suddenly broke into a smile and announced, “You’re in the family way. What you’re experiencing right now is morning sickness.”

“Huh? I’m in the family’s way? Wow... So I’m finally getting thrown out of the manor...?”

I was hit with an enormous wave of gloom and nausea.

I can’t believe it... I’m just in the way...

Hearing it spelled out for me certainly came as a shock.

And here I thought things were going really well with Mr. Fisalis these days. Just when did he decide he didn’t need me anymore?

I just sat there in a daze, unable to process what was happening until Dahlia picked up on what I was thinking and cut in to correct my misunderstanding. “He said you’re in *the* family way, Madam! He means you’re having a baby!”

Bwuh? A baby? That’s *what he meant by “the family way”?!*

“Huuuuh?! Talk about a misleading turn of phrase!”

“Did you finally catch up with what’s happening?”

“Oh, Madam, you silly goose!”

The doctor and the servants around me all had a hearty laugh.

Now that they knew I wasn’t seriously ill *and* I’d made a goof to boot, the maids were practically in stitches. *Jeez, you guys! Can you blame me?! “In the way” would make more sense in my circumstances!*

Mr. Fisalis, who had been waiting outside, was invited back into the room, and the doctor once again explained the cause of my “symptoms.”

“What? Viola is pregnant?”

“Indeed she is. Congratulations.”

“And...you’re sure about that?”

“I’m almost positive. Just to be on the safe side, we’ll have the midwife—*my* wife, that is—come take a look at her tomorrow.”

“A...All right.”

Mr. Fisalis was struggling to process this, if the way he kept glancing back and forth between me and the doctor was any indication. The words “I don’t believe it” were written all over his gorgeous face! Not that I had room to talk—I was feeling so out of it that the reality had yet to fully sink in for me either.

“How far along is she?”

“Let’s see now... Though I can’t say for certain just yet, I’d estimate she’s in the second month of her pregnancy. This is when her morning sickness will be at its peak, so she should take care not to—”

“AHHHHH!”

“Huh? Cercis?!”

“Duke Fisalis?”

“Master Fisalis? What’s wrong?!”

Boy, did he give everyone a scare when he started screaming like a madman right in the middle of the doctor’s explanation! *What’s gotten into* him *all of a sudden?!*

Everyone’s eyes traveled over to Mr. Fisalis, who seemed to be having a miniature meltdown in his corner.

“We rode home on a horse today! Was all that bouncing up and down bad for her body? Will she be okay?” he demanded, nearly jumping down the poor doctor’s throat.

Oh, so that’s *why he started freaking out.*

He had a point—I *had* spent almost half a day getting jerked around on horseback. Though we hadn't been going all that fast, it was still a whole different beast compared to getting jostled around inside a carriage.

Wha—oh no! He's right! Was *that bad for the baby?!* Suddenly feeling a whole lot more worried myself, I cast a glance the doctor's way.

"Ah... Since she's still in the early stages, I don't think it should be an issue. Now, that's not a free pass to overdo it in the future, mind you."

"Thank God!" the two of us cried out in sheer relief.

19. The Worries of a Mother-To-Be

The following day, Doctor Granny stopped by my room when she came to check up on Mimosa. Her diagnosis was almost identical to her husband's: that I was about two months pregnant, and that my queasiness was just a symptom of morning sickness.

Time marched on without notable changes, and before I knew it, I was six months into my pregnancy. The worst of my morning sickness had long since passed, and my appetite was back to normal. I still couldn't handle anything with too strong a smell, but for the most part I was eating as much as I ever had.

The biggest thing to change was definitely my belly—it was jutting out pretty far by this point. It was what you'd call a potbelly. There was something almost strange about putting on weight nowhere but the one spot.

"I'm a regular roly-poly now!"

"You are *not*," Dahlia calmly retorted in the face of my wisecracking.

True. It's not extra meat I've put on my stomach—it's a baby.

Besides, my belly wasn't *all* that had gotten bigger.

"Three cheers for the first and biggest bazongas of my lifetime!"

"...I suppose I can't deny *that*."

Heh heh! I puffed up my chest and owned it with pride! The nearby maids were shooting me deadpan looks, but that was their problem☆

Here I thought I knew my own body better than anyone, and yet it kept undergoing all these rapid changes. I was having a hard time just keeping up with it at all.

I'd outgrown my old maid uniform—I mean, *casual wear*—so these days I was in the habit of wearing the brand new maternity dresses we'd had made for the occasion.

I wasn't having any issues with my physical health, and the excuse to stay out of high society was a boon to my *mental* health, so at one point I even considered the pregnant life to be a dream come true.

How truly naive of me to think things would stay so stress-free to the end.

*

It was the middle of the night, when even the servants were fast asleep.

"Aaahhh!"

My husband's scream echoed through our deathly quiet bedroom, startling me awake.

Whoa nelly! That gave me a scare! What happened to make him yell like that, anyway? Was it a sudden bout of pain?

"What is it, Cercis?" I asked, worried for him.

The man in question only sat up straight in bed, staring off into the distance with unfocused eyes. His shoulders rose and fell with the effort of his wheezing.

What do I do? Should I go get Rohtas?

"Cercis? Hey, Cercis? Are you all right? Does anything hurt? Should I call for Rohtas?" I questioned him, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him back and forth.

"Ah... Viola?"

His chocolate eyes snapped into focus, finally appearing to register my presence. *Oh, good! He's snapped out of it.*

"Yep, that's me—your dear Viola! Are you okay? You're not hurt, are you?" While I asked one more time for good measure, I pressed my hand to his forehead and...nope, no fever! Next, I gave him a light smack to the bod...and his bones seemed to be doing fine too!

As I was in the middle of performing my full health check, worried about what might be wrong, he said, "It's nothing—sorry. I'm just fine. Nothing hurts, and I'm not sick. I had a bad dream, that's all." He laughed, but there was no humor to the sound.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“But how could it be bad enough to make you scream...?”

Had it aggravated a secret ailment of his? Or was the stress of his hectic work life finally taking a toll on him?

I squinted hard at him, determined not to miss the distress signals his body was sending out—but what he said next told me everything.

“How could I *not* scream?! My darling daughter said she was going to become *that prince’s* future queen!”

“Excuse me?”

Uh, Mr. Fisalis? Did you just spill the beans about your secret love child (female)?

*

“Er...ahem. So to sum it up, you have a daughter around the same age as Prince Dianthus, and he’s turned out to be that daughter’s first love? And she told you she wants to be his queen when she grows up? Do I have that right?”

The two of us were sitting on our heels atop the bed, facing one another. I was getting to the bottom of—*I mean*, asking Mr. Fisalis to explain his latest remark (about his darling daughter, etc.).

“Not a single thing you just said was correct! That didn’t even come close to summing up the story!” Mr. Fisalis countered, completely repudiating my listening comprehension skills. *No? Well, I just woke up myself, so I can’t deny that I’m not exactly thinking straight.*

“Then explain it one more time for me. Who’s the mother of your love child?”

“Vi... Could we leave the whole ‘love child’ idea behind?”

“Fine. Go on.”

“Try actually *listening* to me this time. In the dream I just had...”

He told me that in his dream, the little one I was currently carrying had turned out to be a girl (for whatever reason, dubbed “Bitsy” for this explanation), and

when this Bitsy came of age, the grown-up version of Prince Dianthus had asked her to become his crown princess. Bitsy had been secretly pining for the prince for years, and thus had jumped at his proposal. Mr. Fisalis had protested this development, only for his daughter to break into tears screaming, “I hate you, Daddy!” and for me to brandish a whip against him(!) shouting, “Stay out of our daughter’s love life!”

Or so the story went.

There were a whole lot of comments I could make about that, but first I had to get one thing out of the way.

“Yeah, I’m not the type to whip anyone.”

“*That’s* all you have to say about this?!”

I politely ignored the way Mr. Fisalis deflated.

“So this ‘Bitsy’ isn’t a secret love child, but this one right here?” I confirmed, stroking my plump belly.

“Why would I have a love child?! Of course this is who I meant,” he retorted, likewise giving my stomach a rub.

“I mean... It’s not like we *know* this is a girl. If the child turns out to be a boy, he isn’t about to become anyone’s princess.”

“That’s a good point.”

And now my husband was desperately attempting to convince himself that “we don’t know it’s a girl yet.” Did he really find the idea of our kid becoming the crown princess *that* abhorrent? Just how much did he hate that little prince’s guts?

“So there you have it—I’m neither sick nor otherwise indisposed, and I *certainly* don’t have any secret love children. I’m sorry I woke you up in the middle of the night. You must be sleepy, no? Even I’m feeling a bit groggy now that I’ve calmed down, so let’s get back to bed.”

“Good plan.”

I’d been perpetually exhausted ever since I found out I was pregnant. I was confident that the moment I laid down, I’d fall right back asleep.

Once I crawled back under the covers, it was only a matter of time before I drifted off into dreamland. I started to doze off almost immediately, but that didn't seem to be the case for Mr. Fisalis.

"You know, I didn't mind seeing you with that whip..."

"Save the nonsense for when you're sleep-talking."

Stop trying to open strange new doors and go to bed!

*

The next day dawned.

It seemed Mr. Fisalis really *hadn't* been feeling particularly under the weather, seeing as he got up at his usual hour and left for work.

As I watched my husband head out in good health and high spirits, Rohtas mentioned, "It sounded like Master Fisalis woke up in the middle of the night."

"He sure did! It was some kind of nightmare, he said. Are we *sure* there isn't something more serious wrong with him, though?"

"To my eyes he seemed to be doing fine, so I doubt we have anything to worry about. But if you're that concerned, perhaps we should have the doctor drop by for a surprise check-up?"

"Oh, good idea. Sounds like a plan."

"Still, what kind of nightmare could have been so bad that he woke up screaming?" the butler asked with a curious tilt of his head.

"Well, you see... Apparently he dreamed that our baby was a girl, and that when she grew up, she announced that she was going to marry the crown prince," I explained, rubbing my belly as I did. "And he was dead against it, of course."

Rohtas chuckled. "So his child turned out to be a daughter, and the crown princess at that...? That's not outside the realm of possibility."

Aha... So that scenario's "not outside the realm of possibility," huh? I guess that makes sense—the Fisalis line is a prestigious ducal family and all. That's a perfectly respectable pedigree for the future king's wife. Or more like, that's

about as good as it gets.

Hm? Wait a second.

If our baby really is a girl...what are we going to do about a Fisalis heir?!

*

The looming issues of our baby's gender and the family heir situation continued to weigh on me. I couldn't bring myself to consult anyone about my worries, however, so I spent the next few days down in the dumps.

That was when we suddenly received word that Mother and Father Fisalis would be visiting Rohze.

"Do they have some business here in the capital? Another summons from the royal palace, perhaps?" I wondered, curious as to why they would uproot themselves from their life of leisure in Le Pied.

"They just want to see you again. It's been a while," Mr. Fisalis explained, scanning through his work materials beside me.

"I find it hard to believe that getting a look at *me* would be worth the trip."

"Oh, do you now? It should go without saying they'd want to see for themselves how you're holding up. I mean, they love you even more than their own son."

"Uh...sorry for stealing your thunder."

And so it was that my in-laws would be coming to our manor for the first time in a while.

*

Mother and Father Fisalis were typically pretty laid-back about their visits, but things were different this time around. In addition to the carriage they'd rode in on, they'd brought along a second car just for all their luggage.

"It's good to see you, Mother. Father," I greeted them. Since Mr. Fisalis was away at work, the servants and I had come outside to welcome them instead.

"It's been too long, Vi! I was worried to death when I heard how bad your morning sickness had gotten! Are you doing better now?" Mother Fisalis asked,

rushing up to me and inspecting my complexion.

"Sorry to give you a scare. I'm feeling much better these days."

"We wanted to come sooner—why, the very second we heard you were expecting—but Cercis told us not to! He said you already had enough on your plate without us here," she went on, puffing up her cheeks. As childish as the behavior was, my mother-in-law somehow managed to make it look cute. That was the magic of a pretty face for you.

True enough—if Mother and Father Fisalis had been around, I would've had to stay on my best behavior, so I was glad Mr. Fisalis had held them back. *Good judgment call, dearest!*

"Oh, I didn't realize."

"We packed our bags the moment we got the okay to come see you!"

"We heard your morning sickness was so bad that you weren't eating much of anything but fruit, so we brought you a mountain of fresh produce from our territory," added Father Fisalis, pointing to the extra carriage I'd mentioned. *Ah, I see that was the car for souvenirs.*

"Wow! Thank you so much! The worst of it has passed, so I'm slowly but surely getting back into the habit of eating normal foods. I'm still delighted to have all this fruit, though!"

I loved the fruit from our territory; it was always mouth-wateringly tasty. Back when my morning sickness had been at its peak, I'd even asked Cartham to order some for me. I was beyond thrilled to have so much of it now!

*

"The servants were concerned that your morning sickness was keeping you from eating enough, which had *us* worried in turn. I'm glad you seem to be doing so much better now."

"You're already such a skinny little thing—we weren't sure what might happen if you hollowed out any further!"

"Sorry to worry you."

"Don't be! Anyhow, I see you're really starting to show now."

“The doctor said that me and the baby are both in good health.”

I was chatting with my in-laws in the parlor, nibbling away at the fruit Cartham had so beautifully arranged on a plate for us.

“I was lucky that my morning sickness never got all that bad. It sounds like a rough time.” Mother Fisalis reflected back on her own pregnancy and frowned, perhaps imagining how it might have gone if her symptoms had been worse.

“You’ve got that right. I never thought the day would come when I’d see so many of my favorite foods as the enemy... It certainly was a trying time.”

“Oh, you poor thing! Cartham’s food is so scrumptious—it’s heartbreaking just to *imagine* not being able to stomach it!”

“Exactly! But at least he’s been mostly making easy-to-eat, healthy foods for me these days.”

“I’m glad you’re having less trouble now. Nothing’s more important to us than your well-being!” Mother Fisalis smiled at me.

And then, Father Fisalis followed that up with: “That’s right. It doesn’t matter if it’s a boy or a girl—all you need to worry about is giving birth to a healthy child.”

It doesn’t matter if it’s a boy or a girl? Who told them what I was so worried about?! I never said a word about it to anyone, did I?! So how did they figure it out?!

But now was not the time to be worrying about who had read my mind.

Does Father really mean that? Or is he just saying that to be polite? Deep down, he has *to want an heir (a.k.a. a boy), right?*

I gazed into my in-laws’ faces, unable to discern what they were thinking...but given the way they were smiling at me, it sure didn’t *look* like they were lying through their teeth.



Sheepishly, I voiced the concern I'd been holding inside for a few days now. "But we *do* need an heir to the family line, so I'm a little worried about what will happen if I do have a girl..."

"Oh, believe me—I've had my fair share of thoughts like that in the past! It's an easy dilemma to find yourself obsessing over. It doesn't help that emotions tend to run high when you're carrying a child," Mother Fisalis replied matter-of-factly.

She was *so* blasé about it that I wasn't sure how to react.

"Really?"

"Absolutely! It used to be so easy to waste my time with worries about producing an heir or a son-in-law or what have you."

"...Yeah. I've been thinking about those things a lot."

What you said, mom. Except in the present tense.

"I was the same way, but my husband and mother-in-law both just laughed it off and said, 'We'll make it work no matter where the chips fall. You just focus on giving birth to a healthy child.' It's thanks to their support that I pushed past all of that and decided it wasn't that important after all."

"Oh, what a nice story."

"Isn't it? So I want *you* to relax and have yourself a healthy baby too! That's all you need to think about," she said, a lovely smile rising to her face.

So that's all there is to it, huh?

"Okay! Thank you so much!"

There were still a few months left until my expected delivery date. I was getting more and more eager to meet our little Bitsy (the name was a work-in-progress) by the day.

*** Bonus Scene ***

"Still, I can't believe how well-timed that piece of advice was... Did one of you read my mind?!"

"Oh, there's a simple explanation for that: we got a letter from Cercis and

Rohtas asking us to help you grapple with your little heir dilemma."

"*Cercis* wrote that?! And Rohtas too?!"

So what—did everyone see right through me all along...?

"No surprise there. It *was* written all over your face."

"For real?"

Epilogue

“That reminds me—when you were still in your mother’s belly, I’d always tell you, ‘Make sure you’re born when Daddy is home.’ How come you didn’t wait for me like I asked?” Mr. Fisalis asked Violet, reminiscing back to the day she was born.

Oh, that’s right! Mr. Fisalis was off at work the day I actually gave birth. He’d hurried home as soon as he got our message, but he ended up missing it by a hair.

“Hmm... Cuz I wanted to meet Mommy and Daddy right away!”

Unable to resist that innocent look on her face, Mr. Fisalis was so overcome with emotion that he pulled his daughter into a tight hug. “Okay, you’re forgiven!”

“But you didn’t get to the part where I was bown.”

“Oh, that’s a good point. Hmm... Let’s save the rest of the story for another day. For now, I have a present for you for being such a good girl today.”

“A pwesent? What is it?”

“Flowers! Rohtas, tell Bellis to bring in the flowers I gave him.”

“Yes, sir,” Rohtas replied before slipping away to carry out his orders.

“What flowers?” I asked. Whenever a rare specimen of flower caught Mr. Fisalis’s eye, he’d bring it home as a gift; I was curious as to where he’d found one today.

“While I was out on some business, I happened to spot a flower I was sure the two of you would love. I asked if I could bring a handful of them home with me.”

“I see! That was sweet of you.”

That was when Bellis walked in with a tray of flowers in hand.

“Wow! Look, Mommy! It’s so pwetty!”

“It’s beautiful! You think so too, Lettie?”

“Uh-huh!”

It was a small white flower—perfectly suited to both my taste and Lettie’s. We were practically jumping for joy.

“I say they’d make a good fit for Vi’s garden *or* the greenhouse. We should ask Bellis what he thinks. It’s getting pretty late, so Lettie, why don’t you and I plant these tomorrow?”

Violet gave a big, delighted nod. “Yeah!”

Truth be told, I wanted to join them—but when I saw how happy they looked, I decided to let it slide. Mr. Fisalis could have this one.

After that exchange, Violet went back to showering my husband with her usual questions of “what’s this” and “why that.”

“Jeez, I feel like I might as well have answered all of life’s questions today!” Mr. Fisalis cried. It seemed he was finally ready to throw in the towel.

“Wow, done already? Rohtas and Dahlia have been a lot more patient with her, you know.”

“Grrr... Fine, I’ll keep at it.”

As entertaining as it was to watch Mr. Fisalis grow competitive over something so silly, time was up for the day. It was Violet’s bedtime.

“Hee hee. Come on, Lettie, it’s time to get you to bed.”

“Okay!”

It was beyond precious what a good little girl she was being. I could see the hearts in Mr. Fisalis’s eyes too.

“Want to go beddy-bye with Daddy tonight?” he asked.

“Yeah! You come too, Mommy!”

“Sure thing, sweetie.”

Mr. Fisalis carried Violet off in his arms, while she pulled me along by the

hand. Tonight the three of us were going to be sleeping together.

*

Our marriage had begun with a completely passionless contract. Whoever could have guessed that such a happy ending awaited us?

If anyone can explain this to me, then please—be my guest!

Side Story: Viola's Adventures in Cookie Baking

"Uhh... Where was the flour, again? Not the white flour—the whole wheat."

"Over here, *Madame*!"

"Thanks! Next up, I need, uh...sugar...and eggs..."

"Here you go. Have at it."

There I was, cooking for you live from the Fisalis manor kitchen! Well, I say "cooking," but I wasn't making any *real* food—just baking cookies. Cartham was the one setting out the ingredients for me on command.

"The recipe calls for candied camellia fruit too...but my mother used to make that herself, so there's no way we'd have it here."

Now this was a problem.

Though our kitchen had just about anything you could name, it was nothing but luxury ingredients. Seeing as *my* family had been deep in the depths of poverty, all our foodstuffs had been commoner-tier, and we'd provided for ourselves however we could. Our candied fruit, for example, had been homemade with the pickings from our garden trees.

"If we don't have something, there's not much to be done about it. Why don't you substitute something we *do* have?" Cartham suggested, fishing out some dried fruit from the stock. Top-of-the-line dried fruit, naturally.

"That's not a bad idea, but it might taste different if I do that."

I wanted to follow the recipe as closely as possible to replicate the taste of my mother's cooking—and that meant making some things from scratch.

What exactly was I trying to make, you might be wondering?

"Cookies" was the short version, but these weren't just *any* cookies; I was specifically attempting to reproduce a treat that my mother used to make back home. The Euphorbia household wasn't exactly loaded with cash, so whipping up all our meals and snacks herself had been par for the course.

One of her favorite treats to bake for me had been the cookies I just mentioned.

Back when I lived with my parents, I used to watch my mother make them all the time. It had been a while since then, however, so my recollection of the ratios was a little fuzzy. Though I *did* remember the ingredient list, if nothing else.

“The recipe calls for flour, butter, eggs, sugar, and dried fruit. We’ve got everything set out, but now the question is how much of each to put in.” I stared daggers at the ingredients lined up on the counter, doing my darndest to remember how this went.

“*Madame*! You’ll get wrinkles on your forehead! Such a waste of beauty!”

“Oh, whoops. Was I frowning that hard? I just can’t seem to remember the proper ratios for everything, that’s all.”

“Then why don’t you try basing it off a similar recipe?” he suggested, letting me have a look at his own version. *Ooh, this is valuable information! Thanks a bunch!*

Grateful for the help, I was officially pumped to give this thing a try. “All right, it’s time to make a test batch!”

So why did I decide to make these cookies in the first place, you ask? Well, it all goes back to something that adorable daughter of mine said...

*

Rewind to a few days earlier.

Mr. Fisalis was going to be on a business trip for a couple days, so Violet and I went to stay with my parents at the Euphorbia manor.

Violet may have been the star of the Fisalis manor, but that was nothing compared to how much the Euphorbias adored her. My little brother, Thistle; my little sister, Freesia; and even my frequently absent father had all been eagerly awaiting her arrival.

“Grandpa! Granny! Thistle! Freesia! Hi!”

Seeing our little Violet grown-up enough to greet the family brought a smile

to everyone's faces.

My father threw open his arms in welcome, and Violet flung herself right at him.

"Thanks for coming, kiddo! What do you feel like playing today?" Father lifted her up in his arms, totally gaga over her already! He sure did love to spoil that girl rotten.

My contract—*ahem*! I mean, my *marriage* had managed to free my family from rock-bottom poverty. The bridewealth alone had been enough to wipe their debts clean, and between that and the aid they'd continued to receive from the Fisalis family afterwards, they were far from destitute. Why, they even had a little money to spare these days!

Father, Thistle, and Freesia played with Violet in the living room. The only ones around to watch over this heartwarming scene were our butler, Orchis, and the same old family maid. Hardly anything had changed since I'd left home to get married.

"Now that you can afford it, you should hire a few more servants," I said to my mother. "Isn't it hard for you and the one maid to handle all this work by yourselves?"

"Goodness, no! This is all we need. I have much more fun staying active than I would living the leisurely life of a countess."

Wow, Mom, that's the most relatable thing I've ever heard.

So there you have it—as usual, it was just my mother and our small handful of servants running the Euphorbia manor.

"Lettie, Thistle, Freesia! It's snack time!" Mother announced, bringing in a basket from the kitchen. Inside was a small batch of cookies hot from the oven.

"Oh, wow! Hooray!"

"I'll grab one for you, Lettie."

"Thank you, Freesia."

My parents and I got a case of the warm fuzzies as we watched the three kids happily chow down on their treats. These freshly baked, fragrant cookies were

my mother's homemade specialty.

Violet soon came over to me with a cookie in hand, insisting, "Here, Mommy! You have one too!" The moment I took a bite, a nostalgic flavor exploded in my mouth.

"Mmm, this is so good! The taste is as great as ever! Man, the camellia skin gives it such a nice flavor."

"I made sure to candy plenty of camellia fruits this year. It's a handy way to preserve them."

Yep, you heard me—this recipe called for camellia fruit skins.

Cleaning may be the first thing to come to mind at the mention of a camellia fruit, but it's perfectly edible too! It has a tart but refreshing flavor. Back at the Fisalis manor, we always used the juice in our cooking, then kept the leftover skins for cleaning. Here at the Euphorbias', however, we would get even further use out of those fruits by zesting them for flavoring or preserving thin slices of the outermost skin in sugar.

The aforementioned candied peels were a key ingredient in these cookies.

"Talking about camellias sure takes me back. I remember how you used to send me out into the garden to pick some so I could peel and candy them."

"What, you don't do that anymore?"

"I couldn't even if I wanted to!"

"Oh, fair point."

Two days later, Mr. Fisalis came to pick us up on his way home from his business trip, which marked the end of our homecoming. The three of us went back to the Fisalis manor together.

And that brings us to today.

"I want to eat Granny's cookies," Violet announced.

"Granny's not here, sweetie. She can make some the next time we go visit. I'll be sure to mention it to her."

"But I want them *now*!"

“Hmm... What to do...?”

Violet was usually pretty good about listening to what I said, but this was bad timing. With how close it was getting to her naptime, her sleepiness was turning her into a little terror. And if I told her “no” too harshly, it’d just make her burst into tears.

Oh, I know!

“I’ll make you a batch myself! Does that sound good?”

“Yeah!”

“While you’re napping like a good little girl, I’ll be doing my best to make you those cookies.”

“Okay! I’ll have a nappy-nap like a good little girl.”

It looked like I’d succeeded in winning her favor.

“Why don’t you take your nappy-nap with Daddy?” Mr. Fisalis, who had been listening in on our conversation thus far, scooped Violet up in his arms and assumed bedtime duty. “I’ll go put her to sleep, so you just worry about making those cookies, Vi.”

“Please and thank you!”

Leaving my husband and daughter behind in the parlor, I hurried off to the kitchen.

And that brings us back to the beginning of our story.

*

To get the ball rolling, I gave it a try using Cartham’s recipe.

“It’s not *bad*... In fact, these are perfectly tasty. But something’s just not right.”

That was one of Cartham’s recipe for you—even with a bit of my own spin on it, it still came out great. Was he some kind of wizard or what?

“Not right how?” Cartham asked, taste-testing one of the cookies.

“It should be, I dunno...a little more tart? Or like...a refreshing camellia

fragrance is supposed to fill your mouth...”

“Hmm... Then your recipe must have included grated camellia fruit peel, *non*?”

Good old Cartham! He knew exactly what I was missing based on my explanation alone.

“Oh, you’re right! Mother used to put camellia fruit zest in the cookies! Gosh, how could I have forgotten that? Do we have any camellia skins here now?”

“Sorry, *Madame*, but no dice! We’re all out.”

“Too bad.”

We had some camellia fruit growing in the manor garden, so whenever we needed them for something, we’d take the opportunity to pick them fresh off the trees.

“Okay! Then I’ll go pick some now!”

“What?! *Madame*?!”

I flew out of the kitchen before he could stop me. If we didn’t have the ingredients I needed, I’d go acquire them myself!

Luckily, I could find those camellia trees with my eyes closed. I made a straight dash for where I knew they were. If I dilly-dallied too long, Violet would wake up from her nap!

I made my way to the camellia tree closest to the manor. Thinking back, this was exactly where I’d fallen on my back way back when.

The fruits were growing a little high up today. If Mr. Fisalis were there, he would have been able to reach up and pick them for me, but I was a little too short to make it work. It seemed my only option was reverting to my old tree-climbing days.

Then, just as I oh-so-stealthily crept over to the tree and placed my hands around the trunk...

“Weren’t you banned from tree-climbing?”

“Eek! It’s the Demon King!”

Out of nowhere, Bellis's voice rang out from behind me. I thought my heart was going to leap out of my chest!

"Oy vey. You want to earn yourself another crash-landing?"

"Come on, it's not like I was *trying* to fall out of the tree that one time! Oh, but you came at just the right time, Bellis! See those fruits up there? Those are what I'm looking for. Now if only someone could pick them for me, I wouldn't *have* to climb this tree..."

"Wait here."

The moment I turned my puppy eyes on Bellis, he went ahead and picked the fruit for me.

"Thanks so much! Once the cookies are done, I'll bring a few of them to the greenhouse!"

As soon as I'd taken the fruits off Bellis's hands, I turned on my heels and hurried back to the manor.

When I made it back to the kitchen, Cartham had a menacing look on his face.

"Oh, *Madame*...? You didn't go climbing any trees, now, did you?"

"Don't worry! Bellis went ahead and picked them for me, so I kept both feet firmly on the ground!"

"*C'est bien*!" The moment he knew I hadn't broken the rules, he flipped right back to his usual, smiling self.



“Okay, now it’s time to zest these fruits!”

“It’ll turn out bitter if you add *too* much, so moderation is key here.”

“Got it!”

Getting advice from Cartham on the side, I once again went to work making the cookie dough.

“All done!”

“My, what a simple but flavorful cookie!”

“Isn’t it just?! It’s a little different from the taste of my mother’s cooking, but I think this’ll do!”

The camellia flavor was stronger than in the last batch, giving the cookies a much crisper taste. Since I’d followed Cartham’s advice and held back on adding too much zest, it wasn’t particularly bitter either.

It was close—but not identical—to the taste of home.

“Do you think this will be enough to satisfy Lettie?”

She did *say she wanted to eat “Granny’s” cookies...*

Just as I let my head hang, starting to lose my confidence, Cartham stepped in to give me the encouragement I needed. “Even if it’s not the exact taste of *your* mother’s cooking, to little Lettie, it *will* be the taste of *her* mother’s cooking. I’m sure she’ll be delighted!”

“So it’s my own version of ‘mom’s home cooking,’ huh?”

“Precisely. Just call it a Viola Original!”

“Good thinking!”

A Viola Original, eh? Yeah, let’s run with that!

*

As soon as Violet woke up from her nap, I treated her and Mr. Fisalis to my cookies.

What will they think? I wondered as I watched their expressions closely, my heart pounding with anticipation. And then...

“Yummy! Did you make this, Mommy?” Violet asked, her face lighting up like a sunbeam.

The look on her face tells me everything I need to know!

“That’s right! Your mommy did her very best to make you happy, Lettie!”

“Yay! Thanks, Mommy!”

“Let’s have Granny’s cookies the next time we go to her house, okay?”

“Okay!”

Whew, I’m glad that worked out. My mother’s cooking was her own, and *my* cooking was *my* own—and so we closed the case by counting these cookies as my own spin on an old favorite.



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Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?! Volume 8

by Tsuredurebana

Translated by Tara Quinn Edited by Sarah Tilson

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